Lionheart

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How Draco Malfoy met a girl on a train, ruined his life, started a war, and ended one.

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The Last Malfoy

Chapter 1: The Last Malfoy

Under a black sky, through a curtain of errant midsummer rain, they buried Lucius Malfoy in the same family crypt where fourteen generations of his ancestors had been laid before him.

Everyone agreed that his widow comported herself well. She wore a high-collared black gown with gloves and a black umbrella, showing as little skin as an abbess, and when she lifted the veil from her face to give the eulogy, not one tear crossed her pale cheek. A blond eight-year-old stood at her side throughout.

Draco did not speak during the ceremony. He was wet and cold, and his father was dead, and he didn't want to talk to people.

"Such a shame," said one of the mourners, an aged and skeletal dandy clad in a waistcoat of black-and-white checks. He fingered the short white triangle of his beard. "In his prime. And from such a great house…"

As if Brutus Travers wouldn't have burned Malfoy Manor to rubble in exchange for one galleon and a firm handshake.

"Thank you, Travers," said Narcissa. "Your kindness is as boundless as your generosity."

Draco snorted. He had heard his parents speak about Brutus Travers before, and so happened to know this was an insult, but it was still true.

"I only hope it can do some good. Have they found Lestrange?"

Narcissa lowered her head. Travers shook his head, taking her silence as an answer.

“A terrible thing,” he said. “I could not conceive of it. It’s shocking, simply shocking.”

She pursed her lips and looked away across the graveyard. Rows of dead Malfoys rose like a silent battalion from the dark green earth, their white tombs pressing ghostly and pale through the fog.

Draco realized that one day he would lie there, too, in that cold silent earth beside his father, and it frightened him. He squeezed his mother’s hand.

“We are assured that the Aurors are doing everything in their power,” said Narcissa.

“Yes, and what powers they are,” drawled Travers.

“I fail to take your meaning.”

“My meaning? Nothing, nothing at all. Only that, if you forgive my presumption, sometimes I wonder if the Ministry’s politics do not favor… what shall we say? Men of your late husband’s disposition.”

Narcissa said dully, “We trust that the Ministry is doing everything it can. You must excuse us; my son is tired.”

He bowed. “Certainly. But my dear lady, please, if there is anything I can do, any comfort I can provide… Rest assured there is no favor too great, no request too extraordinary, that you can make of me. It would honor me most profoundly to be of any service to the heavenly Narcissa Black.”

She smiled without teeth. “I fear you are many years too late for that, Travers,” she said. “But if the same offer extends to Narcissa Malfoy, she will gratefully accept. Come, Draco.”

They drew away from the mourners. The fog was creeping over the black hills in long, ghostly fingers that reminded him of his father. It crowned the treetops and clustered around the parapets of the

Manor, leaving a gilding of droplets on the windows and dripping condensation from the eaves. The cuffs of his trousers were dark and spotted with dew, and he wished that he were old enough to have a wand, so that he could cast a Scouring Charm, or better yet, a Disillusionment Charm, to make them invisible. Years in the future, he would still remember how he had fretted for his trouser-cuffs, even as they laid fresh dirt on his father's coffin ten meters away.

He hadn't really considered the fact that his father was dead. It was too big of a thing to think about. He could not take it all at once, but had to approach it gradually, skittishly, from the sides and in pieces, rushing in and catching little bits of it unawares — like the absence of a place setting to head the table at dinner, or the newfound silence that emanated from his mother's study in the evenings, or the missing shadow over Draco's shoulder while he worked at his Latin. These were the things that Draco understood. He was only eight, and he had never thought about death except in books.

He wished he could ask his father about it. Lucius would have said something arch and dismissive and yet utterly practical to comfort him, like: "Don't be so *pedestrian,* Draco," or "I do not intend to die; I have no intention of leaving my home vulnerable to that pack of vultures at Inland Revenue and their estate tax." And then Draco would have felt better, and he would have asked his father for a game of chess, which his father might have granted if he felt like it; and they might have spent the evening that way, in a cool but somehow companionable silence, until Dobby came to put him to bed.

"Mother," he said quietly. Narcissa continued to lead them away from the mourners.

"Yes?"

"When Mister Travers—"

"Speak softly, Draco," she said, *sotto voce.* "Voices carry on the glen."

“Sorry, Mother.” He lowered his voice. “What did Mister Travers mean? About Lestrange?”

Narcissa squeezed his hand tightly. So tightly, in fact, that he balked and grimaced, tugging fruitlessly at her grip.

“Damn him,” she said absentmindedly. Then, turning to Draco: “My darling, do you know where your father is?”

“He’s dead.”

“Yes. He’s dead. And someday you and I shall speak together, as grownups, about why that is; but that day is not today. Can you be patient for me, my sweet one?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Thank you.” She glanced back at the party, and then knelt, which so shocked Draco that he repressed a gasp: she would get grass stains on her skirts.

“Now, I know I have only just asked you a favor,” she whispered, “but I need one more.”

“Of course, Mother. Anything.”

“Your father is dead now—”

“This has been established.”

“—which means you are the Lord Malfoy. His house is your house; his name is your name. You are his heir. The last Malfoy, do you understand? The last real Malfoy left alive.”

“But you—”

“Are a Malfoy’s wife,” she said. “But not his blood. Do you understand the importance of blood, sweet one? You know that it matters? How *much* it matters? And why?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“And you know,” she said, drawing him into her arms, “what you have to do now, don’t you?”

He felt her hands close around his shoulders and squeeze tightly. Her voice rasped low in his ear, with a sudden coldness that reminded him of nothing so much as Lucius.

“You must be brave,” hissed Narcissa, her fingers digging bruises into his shoulders. “Because the vultures are coming. They will scrape the flesh from this great house, and they will eat its bones. They will eat you. They will *eat you.* They will gobble you up and swallow you, if you give them the chance. You must eat them first.”

Draco nodded into her shoulder. He felt tears welling in his eyes and bit them back, sniffing angrily. It wouldn’t do for his first action as the Lord Malfoy to break down blubbering like a thankless child.

“Good. Here.” She took his hand and placed something small in his palm. He lifted it to the light: it was polished stone ring, inset with a black garnet, upon which was etched a double-headed snake, joined at the middle, entwined with an elaborate letter ‘M.’

“This is Father’s.”

She pressed his fingers closed around it. “It is Lord Malfoy’s,” she said, her voice suddenly clear and strong. “It *was* your father’s.” In a lower voice, she said, “Draco, they are watching.”

He looked across the lawn and noticed that the mourners had begun to drift away from the crypt, and were gliding slowly toward the Manor, their dark robes rustling over dew-silvered grass like tongues of smoke. He felt, rather than saw, that his mother was right, and their eyes grew hot on the back of his neck.

He looked at his mother, nodded silently, and put the ring in his pocket.

“Good boy,” she said, and if her voice trembled, then the tremor was gone by the time she spoke again. She said, “Shall we go on, my darling?”

Draco understood from her tone that there was no alternative.

His father was dead. He was the last Malfoy alive. And he would be brave.

Wordlessly, he turned away from his mother’s outstretched hand, and led the crowd of mourners out of the graveyard.

September, 1991

Chapter 2: September, 1991

It's a nice day to start again.

—Billy Idol, “White Wedding”

Draco waited dolefully for Narcissa to stop fussing with his collar. The humiliation of the ordeal was somewhat made up for by the fact that across the platform, countless eleven-year-olds suffered the same fate with equally dour expressions. Over by the luggage carts, Goyle’s mother was festooning his cheeks with kisses, and the idea of Narcissa doing this to him in public turned his stomach so violently that he felt a rush of appreciation for his mother, who was after all a woman of great dignity and poise, and knew better than to disgrace them both with such fretting.

It was September first. He was eleven years old. He carried a trunk of dragonhide leather with silver finishing, and a cage for Ulysses, which he had covered with his cloak, both to quiet the owl and let him sleep on the train. He wore his robes and dress trousers, his uniform pressed, unwrinkled, and perfect. In his pocket was his wand: ten inches, hawthorn wood and unicorn hair, as-yet unused.

The scarlet steam engine howled and belched smoke, which gave him an excuse to extract himself.

“Mother, please. I don’t want to miss the train.”

“You won’t miss it, my love. They’ll hardly leave with all these people still on the platform.”

“That’s the second bell, and the engine’s making all that steam, I really don’t want to take chances—”

She laughed and wiped a (wholly imaginary! He had checked the mirror, *thrice*) smudge from his cheek. She stage-whispered, “Alas, I think you’re right. Look! It’s starting to move! Hurry!”

He spun around, even though some part of him knew he was being made fun of, because — well, one didn’t like to take chances. His reflection in the shining and motionless side of the traincar stared back at him: irritated and embarrassed.

Narcissa’s laugh sounded behind him like a passel of silver bells. She reached out to fidget with his robes again, and he stepped out of her reach.

“Unsporting of me,” she admitted. “But you really needn’t worry. If you *do* miss it, we can always Floo you in through Snape’s office.”

“But I don’t *want* to go in through Snape’s office. I want to go in on the boats like everyone else.”

“Then you shall have your boats, darling.”

“And I don’t want to be late.”

“Very wise of you. A prudent wizard is punctual.” She bent and kissed the air above his right cheek, and then presented her cheek for the same honor, which he obediently gave. With a short sharp breath, she straightened. “All right. I won’t make you stand here squirming any longer.”

Overwhelmed by a sudden wave of affection, commingled with fear, Draco seized her hand. She wrapped it in both of her own, lifted it to her mouth, and kissed each of his knuckles, including the one where the signet ring sat, though it was far too large for his small finger. Then she dropped it and said, in a voice full of iron and dignity,

“Goodbye, Draco,” which was his way of knowing that he was dismissed; other people had heard her.

He hauled his trunk down the narrow alley between compartments, ignoring the bustle and clamor around him. He passed a round-faced boy who was moaning about his toad, and a glance at the recipient of this moaning clocked her as Augusta Longbottom. He nodded to her and kept moving, hoping that she wouldn’t recognize him. The Longbottoms were good stock, but word had it the boy was a squib. The pureblood community had been broadly surprised to hear he’d received a Hogwarts letter at all, but rumor had it Augusta bullied his way in with a strongly worded letter to Albus Dumbledore.

A pair of boys with bright red hair were languishing by the doorway to another compartment, helping first years with their luggage. “Come on up! One at a time! There you go, mate, hop on. I’ve got it, leggo. All right. That’ll be twelve galleons. What, you’ve never heard of tips? Stingy, aren’t we? Oh, never mind, I’m only joking. You’re fine. Welcome to Hogwarts, I’m Fred.”

As Draco approached, the other boy stepped into his way. “Hullo, Ickle Firstie,” he chirped. “Help you with your trunk?”

“No, thank you.”

“You sure? You’re none too big, my friend, and that trolley’s heavier than you are.” The redhead paused and gave him a studious look. “Oi. Do I know you from somewhere?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You sure? You never been in the papers or nothing? I swear I’ve seen that face before.” The boy squinted at him, and his expression cleared. “Oh! *I* know you! Fred, c’mere, look! It’s the Malfoy brat.”

“No way,” said Fred, craning his neck. The twins leaned against the wall with identical and somewhat uncanny poses. “Looks just like his Dad, dun’ee?”

“I thought so. Got a face I’d seen in the papers.”

“Didn’t realize he was in Ron’s year.”

“Small for his age, now you mention it.”

“Don’t his house elves feed him enough?”

“Seems not.”

“Don’t say much, does he?”

“No. Strong and silent type.”

“Knowing his father, maybe that’s for the best.”

Draco cleared his throat. “Excuse me,” he said, as calmly as he could. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to sit down.”

He half expected them to refuse, but to his relief, they let him pass. “Hey,” called Fred, sounding almost apologetic. “Do you want help with that trunk? Seriously, it’s no charge.”

“No, thank you.”

“I’m Fred,” he called. “That’s George. If you need anything, you can holler for us — or our brother, Percy. He’s the Gryffindor prefect, can’t miss him, just look for the big freckly git with a ‘P’ on his chest.”

“I said *no thank you,* Weasley, is there something wrong with your ears?” he snapped. Fred and George exchanged a balking glance.

After a moment, hearing his mother’s voice nagging in his ear, he swallowed and said coldly, “Please accept my apologies.”

Then he hauled his trunk past them and — finally landing upon an empty compartment — he wrestled his trunk inside, slammed the door, and shut the blinds.

The train gave a great bellow and began to move. Draco sat by the window and watched the houses flash past, first at a crawl, then at a sprint, and finally flying so quickly that they bled together and turned into a ruddy smear of brick and stone and fog, the colors of London in its brute industrial glory.

Watching the landscape fly away, a cold wave of loneliness crested over his head. The panic and paranoia of one's first solitary venture away from home seized him, as it always does, at the very moment it becomes impossible to turn back, and it occurred to Draco that for the first time in his life, he was going to a place where not one person loved him, because he was leaving behind the only person in the world who already did.

A tap came on the door of the compartment. He ignored it. He wasn't in the mood to be disturbed.

The tap came again. Then, to his alarm, the door slid open, revealing a girl with crooked teeth and absolutely astonishing amounts of hair.

"Hello," she said breathlessly. "I'm Hermione Granger. Is anyone sitting here?"

He stared. He didn't know her, which meant she wasn't from Society. She wore her Hogwarts robes, sans tie, which meant she was a First Year, like him. The name *Granger* was British, though it could've been French, which didn't rule out any of the noble bloodlines. Frankly, she could have been anybody, except that she had the tone of someone very much used to getting her own way, either by hook or ingenious crook. Draco knew this tone well, because it also happened to be his.

She waited for him to speak, and when he didn't, she bit her lip. "I'm sorry to bother," she said, "but it's packed full everywhere else and I've been walking around for ages and I *don't* want to sit in a car full of strangers. I thought this was empty when I found it. If you'd rather not be disturbed that's fine, I don't even hardly want to talk, I just want somewhere to sit and read my book."

She held up a worn and threadbare copy of *Hogwarts: A History.* It was so beat-up that Draco could barely read the title, and something appeared to have taken a bite out of the spine.

Unable to think of a reason to refuse her, he shrugged. “Fine.” He waved rudely at the seat across from him and turned back to the window.

“Thank you,” she said fervently, and hopped onto the seat. He heard her rustling around, arranging herself, and then the rustling of pages.

She cleared her throat a little, and gave an actual happy sigh of contentment, like the mere act of opening a book gave her so much joy she couldn’t contain herself.

He snuck a glance at her and found her already engrossed in the volume. She was cross-legged, with the book splayed open in her lap, and with one finger she scanned each line, her eyes flying across the pages with remarkable speed. A strand of hair drifted into her face (with that much hair, it was surely impossible for some of it not to end up there) and absentmindedly, she ran it between her lips. Draco found this gross, ill-bred, and excellent evidence as to why he should refrain from the charitable impulse to share his compartment in the future.

Still, she was already here, so it wasn’t like he could very well remove her. He leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes, hoping that he could escape the girl’s various irritations with a nap.

This was not to be, however. Not two minutes had passed before the girl lifted her head and said, “Excuse me?”

He breathed deeply, pretending to be asleep.

“Excuse me?” She could not (or chose not to) take the hint. “Sorry. Um… you, there?”

Without opening his eyes, he muttered: “Yes?”

“Are you… I mean, not are *you,* but does your family…” She tapped her finger on her mouth, frowning. “Are your parents wizards?”

He lifted his head and stared at her.

“Sorry if that’s a rude question,” she said hastily. “I don’t know. I’m sort of new to all this. I just —”

“Yes,” he said slowly, wondering if she had been raised these eleven years under the surface of an actual rock, or was perhaps merely deranged. “I come from a… large… wizarding family.”

“Oh, good!” She beamed. “Then can I ask you a question?”

“You haven’t seemed to need my permission so far.”

“Could you tell me what this word means?” She flipped the book around and held it out to him, pointing to a line on the browned and moth-eaten page. “I have a copy of *Metaxia’s Marvelous Magical Dictionary* in my luggage, but it’s buried under my robes. It’s funny, reading this is sort of like reading Latin. I need a lexicon to work through it.”

“Most of it *is* Latin,” he said, and without meaning to, he glanced down at the word her finger indicated. “You might as well get a lexicon, it’ll help. Move your finger, I can’t read the word.”

“Oh, sorry.” She shifted her grip, revealing that she had indicated the word ‘quidditch.’

“Quidditch?” he repeated. “You don’t know what quidditch is?”

She bristled. “There’s no need to take that tone,” she said. “I’ve never been to Hogwarts before, and the book doesn’t explain what it is.”

“I’ve never been there either, but — you’ve never heard of quidditch? Really? The biggest sport in the world?” At her uncomprehending gaze, he continued, “It’s on brooms? With balls? And hoops? Honestly, didn’t your parents ever take you to a game?”

“I doubt I’d have liked it if they did,” she said haughtily. “I hate sports.”

He ignored this toothless riposte for the diversion it was. “So does my mum. But she knows what quidditch is.”

“And now I do, too.” She cleared her throat to disguise her obvious embarrassment. “Thank you. I appreciate your enlightening me, Mister…” She trailed off meaningfully.

“Malfoy,” he sighed. “Draco Malfoy.”

“Thank you, Draco,” she said, in a tone so full of superiority and cool, inscrutable primness that it would have had Narcissa clapping in approval.

He rolled his eyes and turned back to the window. She gave a short huff and returned to her book.

Five minutes later, she cleared her throat again. He suppressed a sigh.

“Yes?”

She was pointing at another word, now, although he noticed she’d moved through a remarkable number of pages in the time since their last exchange. “I *really* am sorry to bother,” she said, though she sounded less sorry than she’d been the first time. “But do you know what a ‘remem-brall’ is? I’ve looked in the appendix, and it doesn’t explain anything.”

At least that one made sense. A remembrall was relatively advanced magic, and Draco wouldn’t have known what it was, either, if his

grandmother hadn’t used to wear one in a pouch around her neck. “It’s a magical item,” he explained. “It’s this little glass ball full of fog. You rub it, and it turns red when you’ve forgotten something.”

Her brow furrowed. “Oh,” she said. “But that’s not very useful, is it?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, does it tell you what you’ve forgotten?”

“I — well — no,” he said, slightly aggrieved. “I imagine once you know you’ve forgotten, you’re more likely to remember.”

“Yes, but, if the rembrall—”

“Remembrall.”

“—if the rememberall—”

“Remembrall.”

“If the *object,”* the girl said forcefully, “can already tell that you’ve forgotten something, then presumably it knows what thing you’ve forgotten, right? So why can’t it just show you a picture of the thing you’ve forgot?”

He rubbed his chin, puzzling.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I haven’t read much about them.”

“Oh. I see. Well, thanks, anyway.”

This time he did not bother to try for sleep. He put his head against the window and waited, brooding, as he felt (rather than saw) her curiosity mount. It manifested in physical signs: her knee bounced. Her fingers fidgeted with the corner of the page. She gave long sighs that were probably meant to make him ask what she wanted.

But Draco had trained in passive aggression at the feet of Narcissa Malfoy, and he would not be outdone by anyone less than that master herself.

“Okay, one more question and that’s all I *promise—”*

“Granger.”

“I promise! I’m very sorry to bother you, but honestly I’ve already read the book twice through and I’ve been wondering about these things for *ages* only there’s been nobody to ask—”

“And you happen to be on a train to the best wizarding school in the world, so why don’t you, I don’t know, ask a teacher?”

“You’re very sour about this for someone who wasn’t even doing anything. I mean it’d be one thing if you were reading or talking to friends or what-have-you,” she said matter-of-factly, “but you’re just sitting here alone.”

“I was trying to sleep,” muttered Draco.

She sniffed and withdrew further into her corner of the compartment, cradling the book like an injured pet. “You sleep with your eyes open?” she muttered. “That’s remarkable. Wish I could do that, then I could read and sleep at the same time.”

Draco folded his arms and crossed his legs, feigning indifference, though his irritation was mounting and it was taking an increasing amount of effort not to snap at her. His mother had told him to be polite to everybody, but it seemed to him that Narcissa failed to take into account just how annoying ‘everybody’ could be.

From Granger’s side of the compartment there came a small, short sigh. It sounded slightly hurt.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and massaged it with deep, swift strokes. “Listen,” he said. “You’re obviously not from around here—”

“I’m from Hampstead Garden.”

“Yes, the middle of nowhere, like I said. Anyway, even though your parents decided not to raise you in Society, for whatever idiotic reason, you’re obviously trying to make up for it, and I respect that you’re trying. Annoying as it is. It’s not very easy, cutting your way in from the outside.” He regretted this as soon as he said it. He regretted it not least because she swelled up with pride and pleasure and all sorts of horrible saccharine emotions that probably made her think she should keep talking to him.

“Thank you, Draco,” she said. Then, possibly as a reward for having paid her a compliment, she fell quiet and returned to her book.

While they had been talking, the train had carried them out of London. Now they were speeding past full-bodied swells of grass and sheep, split here and there by low stone walls and dilapidated fences. Silence reigned for a while, Granger engrossed in Bagshot’s magnum opus and Draco in the landscape outside. Aside from the occasional flutter of a turning page, she kept her promise of being unobtrusive, and after a while he ceased to find it bothersome. In fact (though he would rather snog a grindylow than admit it), it was somewhat nice to have another presence in the compartment, another set of breaths, the occasional movement to remind him that he was not the only First Year on the train.

At half past twelve, there was a clattering in the corridor, and a plump, matronly woman slid back their door. “Anything off the cart, dears?” she inquired.

Draco, who had a packed lunch from Dobby in his satchel, shook his head. But Granger’s head snapped up, and with childish delight, she said, “Do you have any chocolates?”

“Plenty, love,” said the trolley woman cheerfully. “What’ll you have? Chocolate Frogs? Cauldron Cakes? Fudge Flies?”

“Oh, er… do you have Cadbury?”

Draco frowned. He wondered if that was one of those foreign sweets that his mother imported. It would explain a lot if the girl grew up abroad. There was a junior boarding school in Switzerland, as he recalled, with a good reputation; the Greengrasses sent their girls there.

The trolley woman shook her head. “Don’t think so, m’afraid.”

“That’s all right. I’ll try the, er… chocolate frogs, then.”

“Good choice, m’love, those are a crowd-pleaser. You might try some Cauldron Cakes, too, if you’re new to them. Bit easier to get down.” She winked.

“I’ll take two.” Granger pulled out a beaded coinpurse and poked around for change. “Do you want anything?” she asked Draco.

His lip curled. “I’m perfectly capable of buying my own candy.”

“I didn’t say you weren’t,” she exclaimed. “I just thought I’d offer. My mum always told me to share my candy with my friends.”

He suddenly felt silly for snapping. Sulking, he folded his arms and leaned further into the window. “I have my own lunch, thank you.”

“Suit yourself,” she said, after a moment, and turned back to the trolley. “That’ll be all, then.”

“Very good, dearie. Four sickles and seven knuts.”

There was a long pause.

“Sickles?”

“Yes, four sickles, seven knuts, please and thank you.”

There was a jingle of coins. Granger said doubtfully, “And — and how many quid is that, exactly?”

“Quid, dearie?”

“Quid? As in, pounds sterling?” A beat passed. “The national currency of Britain?”

Incapable of bearing any more excruciation, Draco stood up. “Good Lord,” he snapped. “Here.” Shouldering Granger out of the way, he dug into his pocket and pulled out a handful of sickles, which he emptied into the trolley woman’s waiting palm without counting them. “Take it and leave us alone,” he said.

“Heavens,” said the trolley woman mildly. “Have it your way. Meant no offense.” She trundled off, mumbling something about uppity children under her breath.

Granger said, “Draco—”

He rounded on her. “Are you really that much of a twit, or have you never heard of money before?”

The guilt and gratitude melted out of her eyes with remarkable speed. “I know what money is, thank you,” she snapped. “My parents gave me five pounds to get lunch on the train, and I was trying to pay her.”

“Pounds of what?”

“‘Pounds of what’? Are you having me on?”

“I was going to ask you the same question.”

She thrust out her coinpurse, her hand trembling slightly in indignation. “Look,” she said hotly. “I know that I’m not very good at all this yet, and I have a lot to learn, and that you just did something nice for me even though I’ve been in here bothering and pestering you all afternoon and you probably wish I’d sat somewhere else. But I do want to learn and I do want to pay you back and I don’t want you to have to pay just because I didn’t know something and happened

to sit with you, that's not fair and that's not right. So why don't you just take however many pence the candy cost out of my purse, and we'll call it even."

Draco wrinkled his nose at the proffered purse. "It was four sickles," he said, in the same way he might have said, *It was four pieces of lint.* "You don't have to pay that back."

"I don't care how much it was. Just take it." She shook the bag and added, "Please."

He sighed, and in the hopes that it would get her to drop the subject, he reached into the coinpurse. What he withdrew were coins like none he'd ever seen before in his life: silver and heptagonal, engraved with the profile of some random old bint in a crown. The lettering on top read 'ELIZABETH II / D.G. REG F.D. / 1987,' which might as well have been Ancient Runes for all the good it did him.

"Who's Elizabeth the Second?" he asked.

Her jaw dropped.

"Elizabeth Windsor?" she said, in the same way he'd said 'quidditch.' *"Queen* Elizabeth?"

He paused. "Right, the muggle queen," he said slowly. "But I'm assuming this is someone different."

"Why would it be? It's muggle money."

He almost dropped the coinpurse, fingering it as if it burned him. "Why are you carrying muggle money?" he spat, shoving it back at her.

"I didn't think it'd be a problem! The shops in Diagon Alley all took it!"

"That's because they can trade it in at Gringotts," he said, "and because Diagon Alley's gone to the dogs, the only classy shops left are up Knockturn Alley. Where'd you even get muggle money?"

“I told you, my parents gave it to me.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Your parents.”

“Yes.”

“Who are… wizards.”

“No, normal people,” she said automatically.

“You’re a mudblood!” His voice cracked in dismay.

She cocked her head to one side, utterly untouched by the insult. Of course she wouldn’t be, she didn’t know what it meant. And he shouldn’t have been so loud. His mother would have been upset with him. *Not in public,* she would have scolded. *Give them no reason to suspect you. Be polite; feign whatever creeds you must in order to access to the storerooms of power.*

“What’s that?” asked Granger.

He chose each word as if he might someday have to repeat it on record. “It means your parents are muggles,” he said. “That’s what some people call it.”

“Oh. Yes. Then I’m a mudblood.”

He winced. “No, n–not exactly.”

“What do you mean? It’s like you said. A mudblood is a person whose parents are muggles, and my parents are muggles. Therefore —”

“Yes, but that’s not the word for it.”

“Why?” Her head tipped even further to one side, like an inquisitive bird. Her tongue probed the inside of her cheek, and suddenly, understanding ignited behind her eyes. “Is it a mean word for it?”

“Yes.”

“But you used it on me.”

“Yes. It slipped out. I’m sorry.”

“Why? Is it a word you use often?”

“I try not to.”

“Because it’s mean?”

“Yes, because it’s mean,” he lied.

“Oh. Well, if you’re trying,” she said, matter-of-factly, “then I’m not going to be angry at you for slipping up. And you did buy me candy, so.” She mulled over this balancing of the moral scale, and judged it in his favor. “I won’t yell at you for it, I suppose. But mind, if you do it again, I will yell at you. And Mum says I’m quite terrible when I yell.”

“Noted.”

She looked down at the coinpurse in his hand. “I don’t suppose you have any use for the money, then,” she said.

“No, not really.”

“That’s a shame. I did want to pay you back. Maybe you could have some candy? That way I wouldn’t feel like you weren’t getting anything out of it.”

He returned her coinpurse, pinched distastefully between two fingers. “I don’t really care. It’s four sickles. You’ve hardly bankrupted me.”

“But it matters to me,” she said, and to his surprise, she sounded like she meant it. “Fair is fair.”

It occurred to him that he and this girl did not understand each other on any number of levels, one of them financial, most of them moral, and at least three of them spiritual.

“All right. How’s this? You give me one of those Cauldron Cakes, and keep the other two, as compensatory damages for emotional injury.”

“You mean, for calling me a mudblood.”

“Yes. That. So we’ll be square. And —” He hesitated. “And you’ll promise not to tell any teachers about it.”

She considered this and deemed it acceptable. “Very well,” she said crisply, and handed over her side of the settlement. “Deal.”

He set the Cauldron Cake on the seat next to him and, deciding that he should eat something substantive before his sweets, dug out his lunch.

Dobby had outdone himself: in one compartment of the lunch tin sat a gridded diamond of sandwiches, with layers of grilled ham, gouda, arugula, and caramelized onions stacked between generous slices of country bread. Beside that another compartment was filled with potato wedges, baked to crisp golden brown and encrusted with salt, and roasted carrots glazed with a balsamic vinaigrette, and for dessert, a bowl of fresh blackberries, crowned with a single dollop of thick whipped cream.

In the center of the box there was a card. It read: *wishng master Draco a very gud first day and hopping the ellvs at hogwarts well be feeding him rightly. but not too rightly so he remembers to com home once in every whiles. love dobby.*

There was a hotness behind his eyes. He blinked furiously and tried not to think of home, or the warm brassy kitchens of Malfoy Manor, or the single place setting Dobby would be laying out tonight for his mother’s supper.

Granger snapped him out of his moping with a mighty yelp. She had ripped open the Chocolate Frog, and the creature — an unusually spry member of its species, to her misfortune — had made a desperate bid for its freedom, landing in her hair.

“It’s alive!” she shrieked. “Get it off! Get it off! Get it off!”

Draco let out a wheezing guffaw before he could stop himself. “Merlin,” he said, “it’s a Chocolate Frog, what did you expect?”

“Nothing, obviously! I come from the muggle world! Our chocolate isn’t *alive!* It doesn’t *move!* Most things we eat aren’t still *moving* when we eat them! Oh, oh, oh, it’s in my *hair* —”

“Calm down, would you, it’s just a bit of chocolate.”

“I can feel it wriggling around!” She swatted frantically at her hair, trying to claw it out. The frog, tiring of the volatile environment around it, made a leap for the window. Draco moved quickly and caught it. Once in his grip, it froze and became inert, as they all did.

“That was horrible,” she whined. He offered it back to her, and she shook her head vehemently. “No. I’m never touching one of those again. That’s a foul trick to play on somebody who just wanted some chocolate.”

“It’s candy. It’s not going to hurt you.”

“I can’t stand creepy-crawlies,” she said passionately. “Bugs and rats and newts and toads. I don’t like them.”

It occurred to him that she was going to loathe Care of Magical Creatures. Then again, she wasn’t alone in that. Draco had never cared for animal handling. If he ever found himself in a situation where his life depended on being liked by a beast, he had already made too many mistakes to be worth saving.

Granger had discovered the Chocolate Frog card. She held it away from her face, as if suspicious that it might try to jump her, too. “Oh, I recognize these. They’re like the cards you can get for baseball players. Let’s see who I’ve got. ‘Bartemius Crouch’? Well, gosh. He’s not a very friendly-looking fellow.”

Draco swallowed hard around a bit of sandwich, and it settled unpleasantly in his stomach.

“Not sure who that is, though I’m sure you know. Oh, there’s an inscription. ‘Former head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Crouch is well-known and widely well-regarded for his efforts in the capture and prosecution of Death Eaters after the end of the Wizarding War.’ I read about that! It came up in *Modern Magical History* and *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*. You’d have to be pretty impressive to show up in two different books, if you ask me. ‘Crouch’s unorthodox style of interrogation and relentless commitment to the cause earned him a reputation as one of the finest and most ruthless Aurors of his generation. A hero of the Wizarding War, he was awarded the Order of Merlin, Second Class. Alongside Albus Dumbledore and Cornelius Fudge, he may be considered one of the most politically significant wizards alive.’ Would you agree with that?”

He felt vaguely sick. He nodded.

“Draco?” She looked up. “I said, do you think he’s—”

“I heard you. He is.”

“Really? Because I’ve read a lot of books about the Wizarding War and Harry Potter and everything, and he didn’t come up once.”

“He wouldn’t,” he said. He pushed aside his lunch tin, appetite gone. “His career collapsed after a scandal. Or so I’ve heard.”

“Oh, wow. They don’t mention that at all here. Which I guess they wouldn’t. It’s a trading card, not a tabloid. Oh, but there’s a note

here, at the bottom. ‘Coming in slightly below Alastor ‘Mad-Eye’ Moody’ — do all wizards have such funny names? I used to think ‘Hermione’ was bad, honestly — ‘Bartemius Crouch holds the second-place record for largest number of Death Eaters killed in or out of wartime.’ Hm. I’m not sure that’s the sort of appetizing information you ought to put on a trading card.”

“It’s true,” mumbled Draco.

“Even so. Death Eaters were horrible murderous people and I suppose I’m very glad that once upon a time this man was out there killing them like mad, but that doesn’t exactly make him the kind of man I’d like to have dinner with.”

Draco shrugged. He wished Granger would drop the subject.

She flipped the card over. “He’s gone!”

“Of course he is. He’s hardly going to sit there all day.”

“Your pictures move?”

“Don’t yours?”

“No. Well, except for movies. But those aren’t really pictures, they’re special *moving* pictures. That’s we we call them movies. Because—”

“I get the idea.”

She flipped the card over once or twice more, experimentally, to see if Crouch returned. Then she stuck it between the pages of *Hogwarts: A History,* to use as a bookmark.

The countryside beyond the windowpane contorted and darkened, as did the sky, for late afternoon had come and gone, leaving behind it a dusky and overcast evening. The sheep-studded hills had given way to coarse thickets and emerald fens, rivers that snaked back and forth along ravines, where the train thundered across great bridges made of mossy stone.

Granger (who did better with her Cauldron Cake than she did with the Chocolate Frog) scooted to sit across from Draco so she could see out the window. “It’s beautiful,” she said. “I suppose you’re used to it, though.”

He ignored her.

Having failed to bait him, she tried a more direct approach. “Did your parents go to Hogwarts?”

“Yes. All British wizards do.”

“So you know all about it, then.”

He shrugged.

“What houses were they in? Your parents.”

“Slytherin,” he said flatly.

Her eyes widened. “Oh,” she said.

He hated how her voice changed. As if she knew anything about it. As if a mudblood could possibly understand.

She said, “That’s the house…” But she did not finish.

“The house that what?” he said coldly, enjoying how she flinched. “What did you read about it? Did it come up in your little books?”

“It said that most Death Eaters came from Slytherin,” she said quietly.

“That’s true.”

“And Voldemort,” she said.

“Oh, yes. And Grindelwald, don’t forget him.”

“Right,” she said, trailing off. Then: “I expect you want to end up there, because of your parents, then.”

He shrugged.

“I mean, I would. If my parents went to Hogwarts, I’d want to go where they did. And I’m sure not all Slytherins are bad. You hear about the bad ones because they do bad things, and people like to write about bad things. But I think most Slytherins are probably quite normal, wouldn’t you agree? I mean you were raised by Slytherins, and you don’t seem like,” she swallowed, “an evil human being.”

“Cheers.”

She sniffed. “All the same, I don’t think I’d want to be in Slytherin. I hope I’m in Gryffindor, it sounds by far the best; I hear Dumbledore himself was in it. But I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn’t be too bad.”

“You’ll be in Ravenclaw,” he said, without even having to think about it.

“Really? You think so? I thought so too, but then I worried because it sounded like a lot of bookish folk, which would be ever so much fun but it seems like it churns out a lot of scholars and teachers, thinkers instead of doers. I intend to be a thinker and a doer, you know. I’d like to make some positive change in the world.”

“That’s beautiful. They’ll put that on your trading card.”

“Are you being sarcastic? You are.”

“What tipped you off?”

“Well, your mouth was moving, for one,” she said primly, and he gave a short chirp of laughter which he concealed by turning into a cough.

The compartment door slid open, and two thickset boys shouldered inside. The taller had a buzzcut and a rather furry-looking mole

perched on the point of his chin, while the shorter was wider by far and had a stain of something yellow on his robes. Both had the habitual scowl of the bad-tempered, but Draco happened to know they were simply in a state of perpetual indigestion.

“There you are, Malfoy,” said Goyle. “Been looking for you all day. Why ain’t you sitting with us?”

“Aren’t,” said Draco.

“I knows you aren’t, that’s what I’m askin’.”

Granger giggled. This brought her to the attention of the boys, who appeared not to have realized she existed. Draco frankly did not think they were capable of sustaining attention to more than one proper noun at a time.

“Who’re you?” Crabbe said rudely.

She stood up, smiled bracingly, and stuck out her hand. “I’m Hermione Granger. Nice to meet you.”

“Vince Crabbe.” He enveloped her tiny fingers in his fist and pumped it. Draco briefly worried that he might tear her arm off.

“Greg Goyle,” said Goyle, doing the same.

“Pleasure. Are you friends of Draco’s?”

“Yeah, could say so,” said Goyle, eyeing Draco furtively, as if to say: *Do we like this one?* “Our dads worked together.”

“Part of the same social movement,” said Crabbe, and snickered. Granger frowned, not understanding.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand. Your families know each other?”

“A long time ago,” Draco said curtly.

“Long,” said Goyle, offended. “It was four years ago, mate. You came over for New Years’ when we was seven.”

“Were.”

Goyle ignored him. “I dunno what happened. We was friends. Then your mum up and vanishes off the face of the earth—”

“Oi, lay off him,” Crabbe grunted. “Ain’t his fault his mum went nutters when his dad died.”

Granger gave a sharp inhale.

Draco stood up and slipped his right hand into his pocket. “Say that again,” he said. He felt very cold. He knew, in some part of his mind, that this was a bad idea, and that he should politely disengage without offending them. He also knew with every part of his mind that he did not give a single solitary damn.

“Hey, now,” Goyle said. “He don’t mean it in the rude way, Malfoy. He only means that it ain’t your fault your mum wasn’t right in the head — I mean everyone says so, even the Ministry—”

“Why, don’t be rude,” Granger exclaimed.

Crabbe and Goyle both goggled at her. “What?”

“I said, don’t be rude.” She stood up, which put her shoulder-to-shoulder with Draco, as they were about the same height. “That’s a terrible thing to say about someone’s mother, even if you do think it’s true, and you should speak more sensitively when someone’s had a death in the family.”

“Hark at her, telling me what to do,” Crabbe leered. “Little snaggle-toothed brat, aren’t you? I bet we could toss you out that window.”

Goyle said, “Might do, too, if it wasn’t wrong to hit a girl.”

“Weren’t,” said Granger, remarkably unintimidated by this very credible threat of physical violence. “And don’t make me laugh. I know types like you. You’re all bark and no bite. You’ll bluster and cuss and spit at people, but really I expect you’ve never had a real fight in his life.”

Draco could have corrected her — Crabbe in particular had been expelled from three preparatory schools for violence against a fellow student — but he was too busy trying to remember what it felt like to see colors other than red.

“Bet on it, wouldja?” sneered Crabbe.

“I could. I’m not afraid of you.”

“Crabbe,” Draco said tightly. “Goyle. You should leave.”

“We don’t feel like leaving, maybe,” said Crabbe, flicking the lock on the door behind him. “Maybe we want to catch up with our friend. Maybe we’ve been missing you, Malfoy.”

Goyle rolled back his sleeve. Crabbe moved forward, forcing Draco to step back, and his shoulders collided with the window. He felt the rattling side of the carriage under his back.

“Maybe you’re the one who wants to leave,” Crabbe said, and he reached forward for the hem of Draco’s robe.

And in a blink, he found himself staggering back, as the point of Draco’s wand drove into the soft flesh of his neck. Goyle leapt back with a cry, and Granger, who had been watching in mixed horror and confusion, cried out: “No, Draco, *don’t,* you’ll get in trouble!”

“Sod off, Granger, this doesn’t concern you.”

“You will! You’re not supposed to do magic off school grounds, and it’s not safe—”

“You’re bluffing,” blurted Goyle, though he had retreated back to the compartment door. “You don’t know any spells. We ain’t even been to school yet. You don’t know how to use that thing.”

Draco jabbed the point of his wand even further into Crabbe’s neck, and felt a surge of satisfaction in how Crabbe whimpered. “Don’t I? Say another word about my mother, you’ll find out.”

“Don’t you dare! I’ll tell!” shrilled Granger. “I’ll get a prefect! I’ll go find Percy Weasley, and he'll sort all three of you out.”

The invocation of a prefect had a chilling effect on tensions in the compartment. Draco’s grip on his wand slackened slightly, and it gave Crabbe enough leeway to wriggle out from it. Goyle followed him, and though they were fleeing, they stood in the hallway for a moment, as if waiting for Draco to make the last move.

He flicked his wand between them. “Keep my mother’s name out of your mouths,” he said coldly. “Or next time, I’ll let Granger and Weasley deal with what’s left of you.”

The boys fled, and the compartment door slid closed with a final snap.

Granger gave a long exhale, smoothing down her hair. “That was very dramatic,” she said finally. “They’re certainly a pair of unpleasant characters. Was that serious, by the way? Do you actually know how to use any spells?”

He snorted, slipping his wand back into his pocket. “No. Of course not.”

“You were bluffing?”

“Obviously. You?”

“Me? Bluffing about what?”

“Telling the prefect.”

She paused to think about it. “No,” she said. “I would have gone to get Percy, if there was a fight.”

“Tattle-tale, are you?”

“If there’s trouble, of course. But I mightn’t have — told him *all* the facts.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You’d have lied to him?”

“I wouldn’t have *lied.* I’d say something like, ‘Come at once, these two big bullies are scrapping with Draco.’ Which would be true.”

“Even if I started it.”

“You didn’t start it,” she said, lifting her nose disdainfully. “They came into our compartment and tried to make a commotion. And they said very rude things about your mother and father, and they weren’t too nice to me, either. So I wouldn’t go out of my way to get you in trouble for it, no.” She paused. “I can’t stand bullies.”

He said, “So it seems.”

A tinny voice echoed through the train. “We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes’ time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately.”

Draco took a steadying breath. He glanced out the window and saw that it was nearly night, and the woods flashing past the carriage were shrouded in darkness. He straightened his robes and followed Granger into the crowd thronging the corridor.

The train slowed to a halt. On the platform, Draco found himself sandwiched next to Granger, a position which left much to be desired, since it meant he was frequently swatted by a cloud of bushy hair. Granger did not seem to notice, and kept standing up on her tiptoes to try and see over the crowd. “What’s up front?” she

demanded anxiously. “Where are we going? What’s happening? Draco, can you see?”

“I can’t see anything through your dreadful hair.”

“Rude! Oh, where’s a prefect when you need one? They could tell us what to do.”

“Lord. We’re disembarking from a train. You don’t need an instruction manual.”

“In the wizarding world,” she said decisively, *“everything* should come with an instruction manual.”

A lamp bobbed over the heads of the students, dangling from a dizzying height, and a deep voice boomed above the din. “Firs’ years! Firs’ years over here!”

“Who’s *that?”* said Granger, yanking on Draco’s sleeve. He wrenched it free of her.

“I don’t know! I can’t see him, either! Why are you asking me?”

“He’s a giant! I mean, have you ever seen a man that tall in your life!”

“I can’t *see* anything now,” he said irritably. “Refer to, again, the hair.”

She ignored this, and whirled on him, eyes glowing like little brown lanterns. “Isn’t this exciting?” she whispered. “We’re going to *magic school!”*

He rolled his eyes. Undeterred by his lack of enthusiasm, she hurried after Hagrid, practically skipping with every step.

The First Years trickled down a steep, narrow path between walls of trees. The crowd thinned into a line, since the pathway only permitted two or three at a time to descend safely, without falling off the trail. Passing around the bend, they came upon a wide lake, and perched atop a mountain across the other side was the castle, its

windows blazing gold against the night, its spires breaching the clouds. It dwarfed the mountain beneath it, with so many turrets and towers that it ought to have defied the laws of physical space.

A fleet of boats waited on the beaches. Draco lost track of Granger in the hubbub as students scrambled into the dinghies, which, Draco was dismayed to learn, were cramped, wet, and carried a thin layer of lakewater at the bottom. The scummy water splashed on his shoes and lapped at his cuffs as he clambered into the first available boat and sat, hunched and miserable, as far away from the other occupants as was possible.

Across the beach, he caught sight of Granger again — it was easy to pick out the mop of hair — and saw that she had found her way into a boat. She was sitting next to a scrawny boy with black hair and a tall redhead whose gangly limbs and freckles marked his allegiance to the same clan as the Gryffindor prefect. When she caught his eye, she smiled and waved. He nodded back at her reluctantly.

The fleet of boats moved off all at once from shore, gliding across the lake in a motion as smooth and seamless as flying. The other children in Draco's boat starting whispering at once, clutching each other and pointing at the castle as it loomed before them.

"...oldest manmade structure in the Wizarding World, older than Durmstrang, twice as old as Ilvermorny…"

"...made as a fortress, people say it's impregnable, it's never been taken, not once… More secure than Gringotts…"

"... hear about Gringotts? It's been all over the Daily Prophet, someone tried to rob a high security vault."

Draco turned his head. "What did you say?"

The student who'd spoken, a mousy-haired boy with a square face and a brogue you couldn't cut with a cleaver, grinned with satisfaction at the curiosity in Draco's voice. "Someone broke into

Gringotts," he said. "My dad got a call because of the security breach. They still don't know who it was."

"And what did they take?" said Draco. He was alarmed on his own behalf, since the Malfoys had several vaults of considerable value, but he would have known already if anything of theirs had been taken.

"Nothing. That's the plot twist. The goblins did a full inventory, and I mean a full, put-it-in-lockdown, nobody-leaves-for-a-fortnight kind of inventory, but nothing was taken. People say it must have been a powerful Dark wizard, but my dad says that's fearmongering nonsense."

"And why's that?" drawled Draco.

"He says there hasn't been a Dark wizard strong enough to crack Gringotts in ten years."

"Ten?"

The boy smirked. "Eleven, to be precise," he said. Then, ostensibly at random, he said, "Did you know Harry Potter's in our year? Wish I could get a look at him. They say he's still got the scar. Love to ask him what he's been doing all these years. My dad says he's been hiding out with Dumbledore, getting private lessons in magic."

"Your dad seems to know an awful lot about all this."

The boy shrugged. "He likes to talk, my dad does. 'Specially when he gets some drinks in him."

"Most do, I suppose."

The boy stuck out his hand. "Name's Theodore," he said.

Draco glanced at it, and resigned himself to what was about to happen.

“Draco Malfoy.”

Recognition flashed across the boy’s face — but nothing more; there was no instinctive sneer, no apprehension, no leer of knowing or disdain. It was simply recognition; that was all. “Ah,” he said. “Yeah. My dad mentioned your dad once or twice.”

Draco set his jaw. “Did he,” he said. “Anything of note?”

“Yeah,” said Theodore. “Said he was filthy brilliant at Transfiguration and couldn’t dance for shite. And it shocked everybody when he pulled your mum.”

The corner of Draco’s mouth tugged up. He flattened it sternly.

“And that he was sorry to hear he’d died,” added Theodore belatedly, in a more somber tone.

Draco dipped his head in acknowledgement. The silence in the boat stretched on for a while as they drifted into a small cove beneath the cliff face, and the moonlight retreated, leaving them only the small lantern in the front of the boat to see by.

“You’re Theodore Nott, aren’t you?” he said. His voice echoed against wet rock.

“Aye.”

“I thought so. Your mother…”

Theodore gave a jagged little smile. “Yes,” he said.

“My sympathies,” said Draco. Theodore’s expression turned brittle and sour and painstakingly polite in a way that Draco recognized perfectly.

“Let’s make a deal, you and I, Malfoy, seeing as we’re trapped in this wretched boat together,” said Theodore. “I won’t say anything about your terribly tragic super-young dead daddy, and you won’t say

anything about my terribly tragic super-young murdered mummy. And that way, you and I will turn out to be thick as thieves."

Draco stuck out his hand. Theodore shook it.

They sailed the rest of the way in complete, but not uncomfortable, silence.

The boats dredged up on a pebble beach, and the First Years clambered up a passageway of smooth, wet rock, guided by the bobbing flare of the giant's lamp. Draco and Theodore ended up towards the back of the line, since they refused to partake in the full-body crush of overeager Firsties who salivated at the chance to get a glimpse of the castle. At the end of the passageway, they emerged onto a grassy lawn, and passed through a pair of vast oaken doors into the Great Hall.

He had seen it described before in books — Granger was not, in fact, the only First Year to have read *Hogwarts: A History* — but nevertheless, it knocked some of the breath from Draco's lungs to see the glistening folds of stars and moon-dusted clouds rising over the four long tables. A chorus of gasps erupted from the other first years, and he found himself falling begrudgingly victim to a sense of wonderment.

The faculty sat at the high table, and Draco scanned this to see if there were any surprises. Since his mother had given away his father's Board seat, they didn't get news about faculty appointments any more, and so it was somewhat intriguing to see the reedy man in a purple turban perched in the D.A.D.A professor's seat. Next to him sat Snape, sneering regally at the babbling crowds. As his eyes swept over the flock, they landed on Draco.

His expression softened slightly, and he inclined his head a fraction of an inch.

Draco ignored the speeches and songs. They were useless and insipid, respectively, and he was far too busy trying to master his

stomach, which had discovered a newfound passion for backflips. Before he had time to register that the song was over, however, he was being herded into a line near the center dais, and steely-haired, green-robed McGonagall was brandishing the ratty old hat in the air.

“Abbott, Hannah!”

“Alphabetically, figures,” muttered Theodore. “And they don’t let us sit down, I suppose. My feet are killing me already.”

Draco ignored him and tried to focus on pinning each face to the name McGonagall read out. It was important to start building an idea of who was who in their year. His family had been withdrawn from Society too long for him to know these names instinctively, as he otherwise might have, and he didn’t want to miss the chance to collect intelligence.

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Shocker,” said Theodore.

“Bones, Susan!”

The aforementioned Ms. Bones tried to smooth her hair and almost swept the hat off her head. Some people gave a titter.

“HUFFLEPUFF!” cried the disgruntled hat, once it had been righted.

“Double shocker,” said Theodore.

Thereafter, in quick succession, Terry Boot went to Ravenclaw (“Nerd,” said Theodore) Mandy Brocklehurst to Ravenclaw (“Shame, she’s quite pretty”) and Lavender Brown to Gryffindor, which was, predictably, greeted by obnoxious cheering from the left-most table (Draco and Theodore exchanged a look). Millicent Bulstrode became the first Slytherin (“There we go, about time”), the unfortunately surnamed Justin Finch-Fletchley joined Hufflepuff, and Seamus

Finnigan (“You think his folks considered calling him ‘Irish McIrish’?”) gave Gryffindor its second full-throated roar of the night.

Then McGonagall, consulting her scroll, barked: “Granger, Hermione!”

Draco stood up straight and watched the girl skip, so hastily she tripped over her feet, to the stool. She sat with her ankles crossed and her hands clutched in her lap, beaming, while McGonagall lowered the hat onto her head.

He found himself thinking: *Ravenclaw. Come on, you stupid old hat, give her Ravenclaw. You know she’d love it. Let her live happily ever after with all her little boffin pals.*

“GRYFFINDOR!”

He exhaled through his nose. Granger whipped the hat off her head, her beam becoming impossibly wider, and she dashed down the stairs. The red-clad mob of brawny goons howled and hooted and beat thunderously on the table to welcome her. As well they should, Draco thought spitefully. She’d probably raised the house’s average I.Q. by twenty points. Nevertheless, he did feel sorry for her. She deserved a house that would have made better use of her talents — even when her chief talent, apparently, consisted in an utter inability to know when to leave well enough alone.

More names came and went. Conscious that they were getting closer to his own, Draco stopped paying attention to the comments Theodore made under his breath. Goyle joined Crabbe at the Slytherin table, which compensated in enthusiasm for the lack of support from the others.

“Malfoy, Draco!”

He startled. Theodore slapped him on the back. “See you at dinner,” he whispered, and gave him a helpful shove out of the crowd. Draco hadn’t even noticed the last of the L’s trickling by, and now he found

himself tottering forth on numb legs, conscious of the curious stares from every table, the susurrus of whispers that erupted at the sound of his name. He kept his expression neutral. As he passed Professor McGonagall, he risked a glance at her, and found her expression devoid of either pity or warmth. She regarded him with the dispassionate curiosity of a scholar encountering a new and colorful kind of beetle.

He lowered himself slowly onto the stool, trying to prolong the time it took for the hat to descend.

Something soft and dense landed on his head. In an effort to remain calm, he closed his eyes and thought of his mother. He thought of her arranging flowers in the sitting-room and playing harp in the drawing room. He thought of her holding his head in his lap and reading to him while the rain came down like arrows on the glen.

“Interesting,” crooned a small, froggy voice in the back of his head. “Now there’s a face I haven’t seen in a while. Narcissa Black, isn’t it? Your mother? Very interesting... She begged, you know, for Slytherin.”

Draco opened his mouth and then snapped it closed. He’d forgotten that no one else could hear.

“Of course, she hardly needed to beg. They could have sorted that witch with a deerstalker, she would’ve ended up in the right place. Anyone could see it, same as your father. But you… what to do with you, Draco Malfoy?”

He swallowed and tried to make his mind blank.

“Now, you’ve got your father’s wit, which is and was a dangerous weapon… you’d excel in Ravenclaw, oh, yes. But what use is there in a scholar’s house for one so desperate to climb? No, you have Slytherin dreams, Slytherin longings… you want to carve your name in history. Am I wrong?”

Slytherin. Give me Slytherin, you shabby sack of felt.

“And you get your arrogance from Lucius,” said the hat, sounding delighted. “Such drama. Such *righteousness.* Almost not Slytherin at all.”

Draco opened his eyes. A sea of curious faces stared back at him.

Whatever you think, he thought tightly, *think faster. I’m getting funny looks.*

“Hubris, thy name is Malfoy. I will not be rushed. I could put you where you wanted, yes, but should I? Some would say I have cursed your family for generations by giving them altogether too much of their own way.”

There are worse things than tradition.

“There are also better things. Tell me this, Draco Malfoy, and I will send you to your dinner: of what, in your heart of hearts, do you dream?”

Draco swallowed hard. *I want power,* he thought. *Money. Influence. I want people to obey me.*

“Pah. Dull! Is that it?”

No, I want — I want people to like me — I want acclaim, respect—

“Respect? Love? Is that what you want?”

Yes — no — I want to be like my father — strong like he was, smart like he was—

“That’s it? The sum of your dreams? To live forever in the minds of men as Draco, son of Lucius?”

No — better — I want to be better than my father was, smarter, stronger, more powerful—

“Good. And why?”

I don’t — I don’t know, I just — I want it. I want it because I want it. There’s no other reason.

The hat was silent, emanating disapproval. Draco opened his eyes. Almost by accident, he caught sight of Granger at the Gryffindor table, staring at him with a hopeful expression. She gave a reassuring smile and some kind of hand gesture that involved making a fist with her thumb pointing at the ceiling. He didn’t know what it meant.

Glory, he thought. *I want glory. I want to be the greatest Malfoy that ever was.*

In his mind, the hat said, “Interesting.”

Then it roared: “GRYFFINDOR!”

Gryffindor

Chapter 3: Gryffindor

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Draco's heart skipped. It stuttered. It almost stopped altogether, and he would have preferred if it stayed that way, because when it started again, the world he returned to was far from pleasant.

The hall was perfectly silent. Neither the Gryffindors nor the Slytherins made a sound. Even Professor McGonagall's mouth parted, and she did not attempt to remove the hat from his head.

His breaths came quickly. His chest heaved. He thought about running. He might be able to make it to Snape's office, and Floo home from there, and he could — he could — he didn't know what he'd do—

A single clap broke open the silence, like shattering the ice on the surface of the lake. It came from behind him.

Professor Snape slowly drew his hands apart and clapped again, lazily, as if he were so bored by the proceedings that he couldn't muster the enthusiasm to applaud properly. He glanced at Draco, lifted his eyebrows, and sent a meaningful glance at the Gryffindor table.

Draco understood the message being communicated. It was neither sympathetic nor cruel, disappointed nor approving. It said, *If you want them to stop staring, take off the damn hat.*

It was just the sort of practical Slytherin wisdom that he badly needed, and he felt a pang of affection for his godfather so strong that it overwhelmed him. Draco made a mental note to send Snape a box of ridiculously expensive cigars, if he didn't end up flinging himself from Gryffindor Tower that night.

He rose, removed the hat himself, and with all possible dignity, he handed it to Professor McGonagall. Then, twitching back his robes and slipping his hands in his pockets, he swaggered casually and deliberately over to the Gryffindor side of the room. His footsteps echoed loudly on the stone floor. The eyes of hundreds remained glued to his back.

He didn't sweat. He didn't flinch. He thought, *Go ahead and watch me, you feckless nobodies. Just go ahead and look your fill. You'll be staring for the next seven years, might as well start now.*

When he was about halfway from the podium to the table, Fred Weasley — shaking himself out of a dazed and slack-jawed stupor — stood up and let out a wolfish howl. He started clapping. George joined him instantly. A cheerful-looking boy with dreadlocks came after them, and in a belated explosion of glee, Gryffindor issued a bold, if somewhat confused, explosion of cheers for its newest member.

Percy Weasley stood up and waved him over, bulldozing a few Fourth Years out of the way to clear a seat. "Good show, Malfoy," he said incredulously. "Good show — wouldn't have expected it of you — but well done, well done, well done—"

Draco grunted and sat down.

"Yes, welcome, welcome, welcome, that's all I can say! Percy Weasley, I don't know if we've met, I think you ran into my brothers earlier. Fred and George? They're twins, it's hard to miss. And of course, you might know my brother Bill, he's a cursebreaker at Gringotts, he's done some work with your family before…"

Wordlessly, Draco turned his back to Percy. He hadn't a moment's peace before Granger came bounding over and squeezed her way in beside him, wedging herself into a gap less than half her size and forcing him to shimmy over to avoid bearing the brunt of her weight on his lap.

“Congratulations!” she cried, eyes shining. “I had no idea — I never thought — but this is fantastic! We’ll have all our classes together!”

Draco let out a groan that was mostly lost under the cheering. He wondered if he slammed his head very hard into the table whether he mightn’t wake up in an empty compartment on the Hogwarts Express, or better yet, in his bed back home.

There weren’t many people left now. Theodore Nott strutted forward when his name was called, and the hat had barely touched his head when it howled, “SLYTHERIN!” He trotted down to the Slytherin table, carrying the full weight of Draco’s envy with him.

“Paisley,” “Patil,” and “Patil” came and went (“Splitting up twins, that’s rare,” mused Percy), then “Perks,” and finally: “Potter, Harry!”

It was the only Sorting so far that matched Draco’s in terms of whisper volume. A small, shaggy-haired boy with a dark, slender face climbed the stairs to the podium, his robes trailing behind him. He was quite skinny. His limbs were short and birdlike, and there were hollows under his cheeks where puppy fat ought to have been. Across his forehead ran a series of pale raised lines, almost like lace or netting, which Draco realized in a nauseating jolt were actually one huge scar.

“They oughtn’t all be whispering like this,” hissed Granger, also whispering. “It’s nerve-wracking enough without everyone gossiping.”

Potter received the hat with a trepidatious expression, clinging tightly to the edge of the stool. It sat on his head for almost as long as it had been on Draco’s before belting, “GRYFFINDOR!”

Predictably, the house went wild. Draco was knocked about by a sea of flailing elbows and caught a stray wallop to the back of his head. Granger, for her part, stood up and gave a hearty cheer — though not any louder, he noted with satisfaction, than she’d cheered for him. Potter disappeared into the cheering crowd down the table,

followed by another Weasley (Draco wondered wildly how many of them there could possibly be) and after a few more names, the Sorting was over.

The food appeared, and it looked delicious, but Draco had lost his appetite. He halfheartedly piled a few slices of roast beef on his plate and pushed them around until the feast wrapped up. Every time he closed his eyes, he could see his father's face, drawn with shock and disappointment. It was enough to turn his stomach.

At the High Table, McGonagall and Snape were leaning their heads together and talking about something. Draco tried to catch Snape's eye, but he couldn't. He *did* manage to catch the eye of Theodore Nott, whom he glimpsed across the hallway at the Slytherin table. The boy cocked his head and somewhat bemusedly raised his cup. Draco dropped his gaze to his plate.

After the meal, Percy Weasley led the first years out of the Great Hall. While they waited for everyone to congregate, Weasley seized the chance to launch into a historical lecture: "And that's a portrait of Wilhelmina Swallow, Headmistress of Hogwarts in 1296, pioneer of the Disillusionment Charm… and that's the Great Bell, it rings on the hour-mark and for meals… bequeathed to Hogwarts as a gift from Beauxbatons, to celebrate the allied British and French victory in 1919…"

True to form, Granger greeted every dull detail of this tour with coos of interest and awe. This was sweet at first, but quickly became annoying, and Draco wished she would go stand by someone else.

As they were milling around in the Great Hall, waiting for the last few first years to trickle out, Draco heard someone call his name. Crabbe and Goyle came slinking out of the shadows near the passageway that led to the dungeons.

Draco — after casting a quick glance at Weasley, to make sure he wouldn't notice — ducked into the corridor with them.

“What do you want?”

“Oi,” said Crabbe. “You haven’t been very nice to us, you know, Malfoy.”

“Yeah,” added Goyle. “We feel like we deserve a proper apology. For what happened on the train.”

“An apology?”

“Right. An apology. Especially since you’re not even a proper Slytherin, now, you’re a numpty Gryffindor.”

Draco drew himself upright, which put him about eye level with Goyle’s sternum and Crabbe’s chin. “I’m not apologizing to either of you,” he said evenly. “And I’m not a Gryffindor.”

Crabbe giggled stupidly. “Hat says you were, though.”

“Well, the hat was wrong. I’m going to go talk to McGonagall tomorrow, and if she doesn’t help me, I’m talking to the Headmaster. But I’m not staying in this wretched house, you can believe that.”

“No, really,” Goyle said, grinning. “Wait until my dad hears about this! I’ll hear him laughing all the way from me house. And my mum was always on about how smart the Malfoys were, too. But you ended up in the dumb house, an’ we’re in the smart one, so *there.”*

“That’s Ravenclaw, you idiot.”

“Naw. Ravenclaw’s just for the skinny drips what can’t do nuffin but read books. We’ve got the real smarts, Slytherins.”

“Certainly seems like it,” Draco muttered.

Goyle seized a handful of his collar and shoved him against the wall. Draco’s head smacked on the marble, and he let out a yelp of pain.

“What was that?” Goyle said lowly, leering. His sour breath washed over Draco’s face. “Did you wanna say somefin’ about our house?”

“Let me go, you turd, there are people watching.”

“Make me.”

“You think I can’t? See what happens when I tell my mother about this.”

This was a wild bluff, and one that failed to touch sides. Crabbe and Goyle both snickered at the empty threat. Crabbe, sensing the ripe opportunity for violence, threw a punch into his gut, and Draco groaned, doubling over.

“You ain’t nobody’s boss, Malfoy,” sneered Crabbe. “We ain’t got to listen to you. Your family ain’t *nuffin* anymore, not nuffin at all. We was going to be nice and all because we felt bad about your daddy, but you’re a git, and some proper purebloods ought to teach you how a Slytherin minds his manners.”

“Yeah,” said Goyle. “And figure this, Malfoy: we ain’t even need our wands to do it. Guess that makes us stronger than you.” He hefted his meaty fist and leered.

Draco grit his teeth and braced himself for pain. *Not the face,* he thought. He didn’t want evidence for others that he was a target.

“Oi!”

A new voice rang out from the mouth of the corridor. It stalled Goyle’s hand long enough for Draco to wriggle himself free of his grip.

Two boys, one dark-haired and one redhead, came striding out of the Great Hall. The latter was tall, freckly, and wore robes several sizes too small for him, showing off much of his ankles and wrists. The other was small and birdlike, and had so much hair he and

Granger ought to start a club. He had piercing green eyes that occasionally hid behind his fringe, and without being told, Draco knew his name.

“You two leave him alone,” said Harry Potter.

“Yeah, sod off,” barked his ginger companion. “I’d say pick on someone your own size, but I dunno where you’d even find a troll around here.”

Crabbe and Goyle let out grunts of irritation, but they did amble away from Draco, giving him a bit of space to breathe.

“Aw, look, Greg,” Crabbe said. “Three widdle Gwyffindors, sticking together.”

Potter planted himself in front of Crabbe. The size difference between them was comical. Draco almost laughed, feeling vaguely hysterical.

“Have you got a problem?” Potter said.

“Yeah, what’s got up your trousers?” the redhead demanded. “Get lost on your way to the dungeons? Doesn’t surprise me, you look like you need a map of your own bathroom.”

Goyle sneered at Malfoy. “We’ll come find you sometime,” he promised darkly. “When your pals aren’t around to watch your back.”

“I hope you do,” said Draco coldly. “Find out what happens.”

Crabbe and Goyle retreated down the corridor, flashing sour stares over their shoulders. Draco watched them go until they rounded the corner, fighting the itch to grab his wand and go after them.

“Blimey,” said the redhead, scratching his neck. “Those two sure aren’t missing meals, are they?”

“Nah,” said Potter. “Like to see them go ten rounds with my cousin. Hey, are you all right?”

Draco straightened his robe where Goyle had twisted it askew with a sharp tug, and glanced at them. “I suppose you expect me to thank you,” he said.

The dark-haired boy blinked at him. “Only if you feel like it,” he said. “Didn’t have much choice, really. Everyone’s waiting for you to go upstairs, and Hermione said she’d seen you wander off this way, so we thought we might as well check.” He stuck out his hand. “Harry Potter. Nice to meet you.”

Draco glanced at the pale waiting face of his outstretched palm. Reluctantly, he clasped it. Harry Potter shook his hand.

The ginger said, “Looked like you took a knock on the head, there, mate. You need the infirmary?”

“No. I’ll be fine.”

“Bang on. I’m Ron, by the way. Ron Weasley. And you are?”

He suppressed a sigh. Rescued by a Weasley: would indignities never cease? “Draco Malfoy.”

Weasley sniggered.

“Oh, think my name’s funny, do you?”

“Yeah, a bit, to be honest,” he said. “My mum said that the old pureblood families had batty names, but I never met one before.”

Draco rounded on him. “Did she? Mine told me that every Weasley has a dozen brats and names them all after muggles.”

“Oi!”

Potter stepped forward. “Hey. Lay off him, he was only joking.”

“Yeah? I’m sure he’s told you all about my family. I don’t suppose you know anything about wizarding families, but in case you were wondering, mine and Weasley’s here are about as far apart as you can get.”

“Oh, really?” snapped Weasley.

Potter folded his arms. “I think I can tell for myself which families are worth what,” he said coolly.

“Right. Well, good luck. I’d offer my help, but obviously you’ve already made up your mind.” Draco added spitefully, “I suppose when the whole Wizarding World’s in love with you, you can afford to run around with riffraff.”

“I don’t know what your problem is, but you ought to be careful what you say about Ron,” Potter said angrily.

“I’ll say what I please. I don’t owe you anything.”

“No, but you might try some manners, seeing as we just stopped your nose from being caved in,” Weasley said indignantly.

“Potter! Weasley!”

Weasley (Prefect Weasley, the fussy one; it dawned on Draco with disgust that if he was going to live in Gryffindor Tower, he would need to learn to tell them apart) appeared in the mouth of the corridor, his face pink with exertion. “Malfoy! There you are! We’ve been looking for you!”

They herded back into the Great Hall while the prefects did a final headcount. Draco traded a cold stare with Potter and Rude Weasley as they disappeared into the crowd. He glimpsed the Slytherin first years being led off down a flight of stairs into the dungeons, and wondered longingly where they were going. The Slytherin commons couldn’t be underground, could it? That seemed unfair.

Perhaps more unfair, however, were the number of sodding stairs that Gryffindors were apparently expected to climb. The first three flights Draco weathered without complaint, but by the sixth or seventh, his legs had turned to jelly, and it was downright pathetic how Weasley kept trying to rally them with exhortations of “There you go, one more now!” or “Almost there! Worth it, I promise you!”

Granger, who was flushed ruddy pink and well out of breath, mumbled: “You’d think they’d consider putting in an lift.”

“Gryffindors,” muttered Draco disdainfully. “Probably never thought of it.”

“You’re a Gryffindor.”

“Under protest.”

A bundle of walking sticks was floating in midair ahead of them, and as Percy took a step toward them they started throwing themselves at him. “Peeves,” Percy whispered to the First Years. “A poltergeist.”

“What’s a poltergeist?” said one round-faced boy fearfully.

Granger twisted around. “It’s a mischievous magical spirit,” she announced loudly, ignoring the fact that they were several steps above the boy who’d spoken and that the question had not been addressed to her. “It’s bound to a particular location, and the longer it dwells there, the harder it is to banish. The Hogwarts poltergeist is named Peeves. I read about it in—”

Draco mouthed along when she said it: *Hogwarts, a History.*

“Oh, no,” fretted the round-faced boy. “Is it scary?”

“Not if you’re older than five,” muttered Draco. “So for you, maybe.”

But he must have said this too loudly, for Peeves contorted in midair, folded his legs into a pretzel, and zoomed headfirst toward Draco.

Draco forced himself to hold still as Peeves made a swooping pass over his head, ruffling his hair.

“My toad!” shouted the round-faced boy. “Where’s my toad? I’ve dropped him!”

“See, that’s why I didn’t get a toad,” said Granger matter-of-factly. “It just seems impractical. You’d have to worry about people stepping on it all the time.”

“An owl’s more useful anyway,” said Draco absently.

“Yes, that’s what I thought. But I couldn’t convince my parents to let me get one. I told them and told them, Mum, Dad, it’s normal, it’s how wizards send letters and things, everybody has one, but they said if I couldn’t take care of a gerbil there was no way they were buying me a bird of prey.”

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. “What happened to your gerbil?”

“Nothing!” she said shrilly, and he made a mental note never to loan her his owl.

At the stratospheric top of the staircase hung a portrait of a rubenesque lady in a pink silk dress. “Caput Draconis,” said Percy, and the portrait swung forward to reveal a round hole in the wall. They climbed through, and found themselves in a round, stone room, paneled with tapestries and dark wood bookshelves, covered in a patchwork quilt of dark red rugs and crammed full of old soft-looking leather armchairs. Half-melted candles and abandoned teacups sat here and there amongst stacks of parchment, ghostly white busts of strangers’ heads (famous Gryffindors, Draco presumed), oil portraits, red wool jumpers, fluffy throw pillows, and shaggy wool blankets draped thickly over the back of each chair. Near one end of the common room, a giant fireplace roared behind a wrought-iron grate, and covered the room in its golden light.

At the top of a spiral staircase, a series of doors lead off to little suites, and behind the furthest door stood five empty four-poster beds, each hung with thick red curtains and gold tassels.

His last hopes that there had been a mistake were dashed when he saw his trunk and owl had been brought up and laid at the foot of one bed.

Potter and Weasley were already unpacking. They ignored him, which was fine by Draco, and in fact preferable. The round-faced boy with the toad was rifling through his own trunk, tossing books and pairs of underwear left and right.

“I can’t find him! My gran will *kill* me! I promised her I could take care of him...”

“...not a surprise, but still nice,” one of the other boys was saying. “Six generations, all Gryffindors. Me mum’ll be pleased…”

“...s’pose I can borrow some pajamas? I buried mine and can’t be arsed to unpack—”

“Got you, mate, catch—”

Draco ducked as a clutch of soft red fabric went sailing across the room.

“Thanks!”

“Don’t mention it.”

“...called ‘ceedees,’ they are, me dad showed ’em to me. You pop ’em in the player an’ it spins ’em real fast, an’ somehow that makes music. Muggles came up with it. Bloody brilliant if you ask me.”

“Sod off. And you’re telling me there’s no magic involved at all…?”

“Get *off,* Scabbers! He’s chewing my sheets.”

“...called a ‘deejay,’ an’ he plays ceedees for a living.”

“Muggles can make money doing that? Playing other people’s music? You’re joking!”

“Hey, you.”

“Am not. An’ here’s something else. You ever heard of a band called ‘R.E.M.’?”

“You there,” someone said loudly. “Pale bloke. Here.”

Draco realized he was being spoken to. An unfamiliar prefect held out a bundle of something red and gold.

“What’s that?” he said, though a pit in his stomach told him he knew.

“Your house ties,” said the boy. “Last part of the uniform. They’re mandatory for classes, school events, and any meetings with professors that take place on school grounds.”

When Draco did not take them, the prefect set them on his bedside table. “Failure to comply with dress code will lose you house points. If you need help tying them, you can ask me or Percy.”

He stared at the prefect like he’d grown a second head.

“What?”

“I know how to tie them,” he said indignantly.

The prefect shrugged. “No need to sound uppity about it. There’s lots of first years who can’t.”

This, perhaps more than any other facet of Gryffindor culture, was appalling. Any self-respecting pureblood who could not, at the age of eleven, tie his own full Windsor, would have been deemed unacceptable for introduction to polite society. He doubted very much that any Slytherin prefects needed to make such offers of help.

In the privacy of his bed, with the hangings drawn, Draco changed into his pajamas and crawled beneath the covers. He could hear the various murmurs and stirs of the dormitory as the other boys went about their nightly routines. Remembering belatedly that Dobby wasn't there to do it, and muttering a curse, he crawled out of bed again and fed Ulysses, sprinkling a few food pellets through the bars of his cage. Ulysses snapped them up and hooted at him balefully, obviously resenting his entrapment. Draco felt a great deal of sympathy.

He swaddled himself in the covers and indulged in some good old-fashioned wallowing. As if everything else weren't enough, Weasley had started snoring, great honking snores that seemed to rattle the bedposts, and rain had started coming down on the windows outside. Draco tried to think of Malfoy Manor, its wide silent rooms, and his soft goosefeather mattress with a hot bedpan at the foot. But this was in the way of a mistake, because thinking of home only reminded him of his mother, and the letter he would have to write, explaining himself. *Dear Mother. The quest to restore the family name is going splendidly. I have started by humiliating the family and shaming us forever by breaking a centuries-old tradition…*

He was interrupted in his moping by one of Weasley's ear-shattering snores. It was a reflection on his sorry state that he actually felt grateful toward Weasley in that moment, if only for distracting him from his misery.

At some point he must have fallen asleep, because he found himself in a long, dark hallway surrounded by green doors. He was walking toward the big door at the end of the hallway, but the faster he walked, the further away the door drew, so that with each step the distance became farther and farther, until he was sprinting after a door no larger than a speck of green on the horizon. Panic gripped him, and he knew at once, with the certainty that only exists in dreams, that if he didn't reach the door, something horrible would happen to him. Somewhere, someone was laughing, a raspy woman's laugh that grated in his ears.

Someone shouted, and Draco shot up in bed, sweating.

He snatched back the hangings and found himself staring at Harry Potter, who was sitting bolt upright in his own bed, wide-eyed and trembling, obviously just surfaced from a nightmare. Sweat had slicked his mop of hair down to his head.

The two boys regarded each other. A clock on the wall said it was nearly three in the morning. The other boys were all fast asleep.

Slowly, Draco lifted a finger to his lips.

Potter nodded.

They both drew back the respective hangings of their beds, and they went back to sleep.

Life began its strange, militant lockstep onwards. As Granger intimated, first years took their classes together as a house, which meant there was no escaping the brigoon of boisterous, noisome tweens that were Draco's housemates. Luckily, the number of students in their year required most professors to teach double-blocks. They shared Transfiguration, History of Magic, and Herbology with the Hufflepuffs, Charms and Astronomy with the Ravenclaws, and Defense Against the Dark Arts with one or the other twice a week. Potions they took with the Slytherins, under the blissfully competent instruction of Severus Snape, whose lessons were such a relief from the puerile hand-holding of Flitwick and Sprout that Draco went to McGonagall at the end of the first week to ask if he could take Potions II instead of Herbology.

"Mr. Malfoy," she said, "although I'm sure Professor Snape will be flattered to hear of your passion for the subject, you must be aware that we do not allow first years to transfer out of any core class."

"Yes, I read the handbook. But if I got a special permission slip from Professor Snape—?"

“He assuredly would not give it, and in the hypothetical event that he did, I as your head of house would have to approve your study list,” said McGonagall severely, looking down at him over her spectacles. They were ensconced in her office, a warm, sunny room off the Transfiguration classroom, full of old books with metal-studded spines, and plush leather furniture. She said, “May I ask if you have something against Herbology?”

He scowled. “Sprout never makes us *do* anything. She spent half the first lesson talking about the proper way to wear gloves.”

“You don’t consider your own safety a valuable educational priority?”

“I don’t see why we’re being made to muck around in the dirt for a letter-grade.”

McGonagall steepled her fingers on her desk. “Herbology is admittedly not my specialty, but it has always been my understanding that dirt is where the plants tend to be.”

Draco threw up his hands. “It’s not dignified,” he said passionately. “We get out all filthy and sweaty after an hour in that sweltering greenhouse, hauling around henbane planters, and then it’s straight into Charms, so there’s no time to bathe or change our clothes, and I’ve had dirt under my fingernails for about a week, and she has us carrying these giant watering cans that she could just as easily levitate if she wanted to—”

“You think it’s beneath you,” said McGonagall calmly.

“It *is* beneath me. It’s beneath any pur— any wizard.”

The elderly witch arched her eyebrow, but said nothing. Nevertheless, he knew he’d lost her. She rose and waved her wand, and the door to her office swung open. “Your request to transfer is denied,” she said. “If you do well on your end-of-term exams, you may submit yourself to be considered for advanced placement in Second Year. Until then, I suggest you find some way to cope with

dirt under your fingernails; I am personally partial to a good Scouring Charm."

Thereafter, Potions remained the sole point of light in his schedule. Defense Against the Dark Arts was passably interesting, though Quirrell had no great surfeit of teaching talent, and after a few days of Transfiguration he began to harbor a begrudging respect for McGonagall, who gave no quarter and suffered no fools. He excelled in Charms, though he complained to anyone that would listen that the work was mind-blisteringly easy. History of Magic bored him to tears, and he couldn't even complain to Granger about it, because the daft witch spent the whole class in rapt attention, hanging on Binns' every word.

"They don't teach it the right way," he told her later.

She dropped the book she was reading and frowned at him. Her hair was ineffectually roped back into a ponytail and there was a smudge of jam on her chin. "What do you mean?"

He thumbed his jaw meaningfully, and she pinked and grabbed a napkin. "They don't start at the beginning," he complained. "They have us reading Bagshot's *A History of Magic,* which starts in the Golden Age of Athens, with Atlantis as the first Wizarding community, but it's established archeological consensus that magic existed in the Mediterranean prior to the Bronze Age Collapse."

"Well, you have to start somewhere."

"Yes, but it's wrong."

"It's not wrong, it's just incomplete," she pointed out. "And I expect we'll go back and study the more complicated historical questions when we're older. After all, they have to catch up all of us muggle-borns who've never learned any magical history before."

"Then they ought to put you lot in a different class," Draco said irritably.

She set down her fork. “You don’t mean that,” she said, stung.

“It’d be for your benefit, if anything. It’s not fair for them to grade us on the same curve when you’re coming in already at a disadvantage.”

“I don’t mind it,” she said, after a pause. “I’d like to be graded the same way as everyone else. I don’t want anyone to make special exceptions for me because I’m a muggle-born.”

They already have, Draco thought nastily. *That’s why you’re here.*

But he merely shrugged, and said, “Albus Dumbledore agrees with you.”

He and Granger were developing something of a rivalry. She was, predictably, a ruthlessly hard worker, much more so than he, but he had an instinctive edge to even the score. Granger, after all, had rarely *seen* anybody do the spells they were learning. He instinctively mimicked parts of wand-posture and hand movement that the professors didn’t think to explain, and which Granger had to figure out for herself. To her credit, she didn’t let this deter her. Whenever he got something before she did, the witch would descend on him like an inquisitorial squad unto herself, demanding to know how he did it and what technique he used and what she wasn’t doing right.

(He thought about refusing to help her; it would probably boost his class rank. But one day, after he fell asleep in History of Magic, Granger elbowed him awake with a hiss of: “Wake up, or you’ll miss the chance to turn in the homework!”, thereby sparing him from a zero on the assignment, and after that, he felt it would be unsporting to begrudge her the precious few hints she asked for).

She had him by a nose in Transfiguration and D.A.D.A., while he led by a hairsbreadth in History and Charms, and neither of them cared much for Herbology.

In Potions, however, it wasn't even close. Snape rarely even came over to check on his table anymore, so rare was it for Draco to require instruction. His homework was so frequently used as a model for the class that he might as well have been credited in the curriculum. Once, he put up his hand to ask a question about the chemical properties of boomslang venom, and it turned into a twenty-minute conversation between himself and Snape on the various uses of snakeskin in potioneering. It was the most interesting conversation Draco had with anyone since entering the castle. Of course, he'd always known his godfather was talented, but not until now did he realize that Snape was a proper genius, and it made his status as pet-prodigy into a source of personal pride.

This made him beloved by nobody. In fact there were few things, aside from dropping his pants and shooting a Dark Mark over the Astronomy Tower, which could have generated more animus from his peers. The result was acute inflammation of the ego combined with chronic hatred of the self, a combination whose symptoms included confusion, misery, and a lack of friends to whom he could complain about it.

It also helped that Snape utterly disdained Harry Potter, and did not labor to conceal that fact. The dungeon became the one place that Draco could hide from the school's obnoxious fawning over Saint Potter and his trashy friends.

"I don't get what you have against them," Granger sighed at dinner, flouncing down so forcefully it lost him a spoonful of tomato soup. It was not an excellent tomato soup, so he was not cross with her. True to Dobby's wish, none of the cooking at Hogwarts rivaled anything from home. "They're not my *best* friends either, but they haven't done anything wrong. Harry tries to be nice to everybody."

"Oh, please."

"He does!"

“Of course he does. He struts around this school like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth.” Draco became aggressive in his treatment of the soup, which failed to achieve anything: the soup, being soup, was unintimidated. “And the professors let him. They coo and fawn and try to get him to like them, it’s obvious. I think Flitwick would let him teach the class, if he asked.”

“But that’s not his fault,” Granger objected, ladling herself a bowl.

“And he doesn’t try.”

That clouded over her open, earnest features. “Well,” she said, “no, maybe, not exactly, he doesn’t.”

“Not at all. Don’t get me started on Weasley. And they cost you house points like you wouldn’t believe. Example!” He indicated his own (perfectly knotted) Gryffindor tie. “Weasley’s inability to master the intricate theorems of the full Windsor has cost Gryffindor fifteen points in the last week.”

“Us,” she chided, in a tone that was positively McGonagallesque.

“What?”

“You said ‘cost you house points,’” she said. And because he had nothing to say to that but indiscriminate grumbling, he buried himself in mediocre soup.

Draco did not consider himself a Gryffindor.

He did not attend house events. He did not linger in the common room after classes. He came and went directly from his bedroom in the morning and evening, and spent any free hours roaming the castle. He did not like the Gryffindor ghost, a pompous knight with a cervical problem. He did not like the house colors, which clashed with his complexion. He did not like the one hundred and twenty-four stairs that laid between his bed and his breakfast. He did not like that whenever he passed a group of Slytherins, they could be relied upon

to break into a chorus of hissing. He did not like that unless Granger decided to inflict her presence upon him, he would sit alone at meals, in classes, and anywhere he chose to sit in between. He liked least of all the fact that his mother still had yet to write back to him, three weeks into the term.

On September 23rd, in addition to his daily edition of the *Daily Prophet,* Draco received a large package in the post, wrapped in dark green paper and tied in silver string. It was far larger than anything anyone else had received, and he ignored several jealous stares as he picked it up, left the table, and marched into the nearest empty classroom.

Inside lay a careful matrix of smaller boxes, all fit together, individually wrapped, and carefully insulated with tissue paper. He pried them out one by one and shredded the wrapping paper greedily. There was a box of assorted chocolate caramel truffles, dusted in sea salt and a snowy crown of powdered sugar, which had been his favorites since he was four. There was a small bottle of cognac (this was crammed underneath a large wad of tissue paper, as if the person packing the box had attempted to hide it) and a travel-size bottle of his mother's perfume. A spherical package the size of his fist turned out to be a pack of gardenia-scented bath salts, and the last was a tall green candle with golden marbling, which the label promised would smell like "wherever the witch or wizard who lights it considers home."

At the very bottom of the box lay a note, folded into quarters. He unfolded it.

wishng mester Draco al the best and hopping he is having a good tim at skool. we is missing him gretly but we no he is becomng a very gret wizard and are proud of him but still we are wishng always he is coming home soon. love dobby

And it was still not this — not this stroke of unsolicited kindness, not this cruel reminder of a distant home, not this devastating blow to any red-blooded wizard's stiff upper lip — which undid him. No, the

thing that broke Draco was the realization that, beneath his gratitude, his affection for Dobby, and beneath even his animal pleasure at receiving presents, there was a pit of disappointment as wide as the Atlantic opening at the bottom of his stomach: for he had hoped until the very last word that the note would bear his mother's name.

It was for this reason that he spoke little in Potions that afternoon, despite knowing the answer to every question, and despite Snape offering him several opportunities (summarily refusing to call on Gryffindors who already had their hands raised). He fiddled with his quill and remained silent, forcing Snape to call on Granger not once, not twice, but thrice, each time finding less and less to criticize in her answer. After class, as everyone shuffled around collecting their books, Snape swooped over to his table and loomed over him while he packed his bag.

"A word, Mr. Malfoy," he said.

"Yes, sir."

This was not unusual. He often hung back after Potions. What was unusual was that Snape, instead of striking up a conversation about lacewing flies, escorted him into his office and shut the door behind him.

"Is this about my class schedule, sir?"

"Sit," said Snape, pointing to the chair.

Draco sat. "Because I spoke to Professor McGonagall about it, and she told me I couldn't take Potions II as a first year. But I thought, if you spoke to her, then maybe—"

"You cannot."

"Oh," he said, deflated.

Snape swept over to his desk and “I was disappointed by your performance today in Potions. You were ill-tempered and uncooperative, and you did not conduct yourself in accordance with your considerable talents. It will not happen again.”

“I’m sorry, sir.” This was the second blow in a day against his bruised pride. It was a special misery to disappoint the one teacher whose opinion he actually cared about.

“I understand you are unhappy with your house.” Snape settled behind his desk, his robes billowing like vast bat wings.

Draco fidgeted in his seat and gave no answer.

“You would have preferred to be in Slytherin.”

“Of course I would have,” he said bitterly. “That’s where everyone respectable is.”

“You do not consider Professor McGonagall respectable.”

He rolled his eyes. “Except Professor McGonagall.”

“You do not consider Albus Dumbledore respectable.”

“I’ve never met him personally. I couldn’t say.”

“Whom do you consider respectable?”

This was an example of what a Slytherin might call ‘free lunch.’

“Well, you, sir,” Draco said immediately. “Obviously.”

Snape did not appear moved by the flattery. “Indeed.”

“And… and my father. He was a respectable man.”

“Indeed so. Dead, also.”

Draco flinched. “Yes, sir,” he said tightly. “As I have been made aware, my father is, in fact, dead.”

“There is no need for that tone of voice. I am merely reminding you of the salient facts.” Snape opened a drawer in his desk and rummaged in it. “It is my understanding that you have not heard from your mother yet this term.”

“Who told you that?”

“Irrelevant. That is my understanding. Is it incorrect?”

Sulkily, Draco muttered, “No, it’s not.”

“Speak up, I can’t hear remarks addressed to the floor.”

“No, it’s not incorrect.”

“Good. And you have not been in contact with anyone else by post?”

Draco frowned. “No, I haven’t.”

“You have not sent any letters from the Hogwarts owlery, nor received any?”

“No. I mean yes. I sent one the first night, to my mother. I told her… well, I told her.”

“And after that?”

“No. I don’t get letters. I get the *Prophet* in the morning. That’s all.” Draco wracked his brain. “And a package from home, earlier today, I suppose. Trinkets, candy, things like that. But not correspondence.”

“Good.” Snape withdrew a letter from his desk and shut the drawer. He held it out to Draco. “This is from your mother. It is for you.”

Draco gaped at him for a moment. Then he lunged forward and snatched it. Snape sprawled back in his chair and watched,

expressionless, as Draco tore open the wax seal and ripped open the envelope, shaking out a single sheaf of creamy paper covered with elegant black script.

Dear Draco,

Hello, my sweet one. I was very sorry to get your letter; sorry not because I am ashamed but sorry because you sounded so dreadfully unhappy. Please know that I could not be disappointed in you if I tried and though I am dismayed, I admit, at this rupture in a grand and admirable family tradition, I cannot be cross at you for a failure of the Sorting Hat to do its job. We will write to Dumbledore and see if you can be reassigned somewhere more suited to your talents and heritage. In the meantime, hold fast, and be strong, my darling. I know that it is hard to be in a strange place but I believe that you above all others have the power to bear it. You are the son of a man whose great virtue was the ability to bear anything for his family and I know this power lies with you also.

Please forgive me for not writing sooner. It was difficult to get ahold of Severus, for he is busy and does not often have time to come visit. For reasons which he will hopefully explain, it was not possible to contact you by owl, and so I apologize for any distress I have caused you by waiting. Know that it was not my intention and that I have been suffering far more than you these long weeks, for anyone can agree that it is far worse for a mother not to hear word of her son than a son not to hear word of his mother. I remember when I went to Hogwarts it was a source of private joy that my mother knew so little about my life.

As to my health and happiness, do not worry. I am occupied with the maintenance of the estate and the accounts, and of course, the gardens. I have been thinking of putting in a new species of flower to replace the jasmines — what do you think of yellow roses? I know it may be an overreaction to suggest such a dramatic change, but with my son gone, I am prone to restlessness.

Remember what that greatest of all magicians, Homer, once wrote: Be strong, saith my heart; I am a soldier, I have seen worse sights than this.

And remember also what that silliest of all witches, your mother, once told you: I love you more than sunlight and moonlight and wine and music, all the pleasures of the world put together.

All my heart,

Mummy

Draco read it twice, and then a third time, for good measure. When he was finished, he folded it and slid it into the breast pocket of his robes, where it pressed against his heart. He murmured, “Thank you, Uncle Severus.”

“Inside the walls of this castle,” said Snape, “you will refer to me as ‘sir,’ or ‘professor.’ And you are welcome.”

The Potion Master’s face was veined and sallow, lined with wrinkles that foretold premature age, and a furred brow cast a long shadow over eyes of shineless black. They were unreadable, even to Draco, who had known them for the better part of his life.

“Sir,” he said, “permission to speak freely. As family.”

“Granted.”

“Why is my mother using you as a go-between?”

“Safety,” he answered. “I do not know what your mother wrote to you, but whatever she wrote, I imagine she would prefer that it remained between you and herself. She solicited my help in ensuring that fact.”

“Ensuring… are you saying someone’s spying on my mother?” A hot tongue of anger licked up his throat. “Who would *dare—”*

“I did not say that,” said Snape tonelessly.

“But then what do you mean?”

“Precisely what I said. I did *not* say,” drawled Snape, examining his fingernails, “that someone was spying on your mother.”

He looked at Draco.

It took a moment for the implication to sink in.

“On *me?”*

“You will refrain from raising your voice in this office.”

“But who would want to spy on *me?”* Draco demanded. “I’ve not done anything to anybody! I’m innocent! I’ve never even had a detention! I’m ELEVEN!”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Draco, I detest tedium.”

Draco gripped the armrests of his chair for strength and grounding. “But,” he struggled, “but, but. But.”

“You sound like a parrot. If you have nothing intelligent nor novel to say, say nothing.”

This stung. Nevertheless, out of respect for his godfather, he swallowed his words and his pride. After a moment, he managed, “I don’t understand. Who’s spying on me?”

“That’s better,” said Snape, in a somewhat softer tone. “It’s an apt question. Consider, then, another question: who would benefit from knowing the substance of private conversations between you, Draco Malfoy, and your mother?”

It was hard to imagine anyone wanting to know much about Draco's life, considering how wretched it was. He took a flying guess. "Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore has more sophisticated ways of acquiring information about you. You live under his roof. Think harder."

"...The actuaries?"

"No. You're thinking simplistically."

This rankled. He furrowed his brow and stared out the window, deep in thought.

"If one were to think in terms of means," Snape suggested, "who, of anybody, possesses both the motive and capability to conduct surveillance of owl post?"

"...The Ministry?"

"Better. It is usually best practice to deal in specifics."

"The Department of Magical Law Enforcement," he said, leaning forward. "They keep tabs on former Death Eaters, don't they? Even exonerated ones? I know they had the Trace on you for years—"

"Careful," said Snape, and his voice was as dark and cold as the bottom of the lake. Draco paled and fell silent, quelled by the glimmer of anger in his godfather's eyes.

The silence turned brittle, cracked, and passed them by. "My past," murmured Snape, with a touch of regret, "does not concern us today."

"Yes, sir."

"I have summoned you here, and ferried your mother's correspondence, and offered you what guidance I can, out of respect and gratitude for the generosity your mother has shown me over the

years. I have done this, also, in fulfillment of the obligations I undertook freely to owe you as my godson. I will continue to assist her, as I am able, in your stewardship and defense. But all her efforts and mine will be wasted if you do not exercise judgment in when to hold your tongue."

Draco nodded so hard his neck hurt. "Yes, sir."

"Do you understand the significance of what you've learned here?"

"Yes, sir." In truth, he didn't. Supposedly the Ministry was watching his owls, but how and why they were doing that he didn't have a clue. Perhaps they were monitoring his mother, but he couldn't think what their suspicions would be; Narcissa hadn't been a Death Eater. She'd had a stake in the fight, and she certainly didn't get in her husband's way, but she'd never touched the mask.

Anyway, what did the Ministry even suspect her of? Voldemort had been dead for eleven years. The Death Eaters were all dead, imprisoned, or living under heavy supervision, like Snape.

Like his father would have been, if he had lived.

Shortly before he died, Lucius had testified before the Wizengamot. Under the baleful sneer of Bartemius Crouch, he had dutifully offered up a complete registry of names: every man, woman, and creature he had ever glimpsed under the mask, every contact he ever made, every safehouse and bunker they ever used in the war. He gave a complete dossier of Voldemort's arsenal, including what magical artifacts he had seen used and where he had gone to recruit the magical creatures who fought alongside him in the war. He spoke for six hours. (Narcissa, years later, had told Draco all this.) When he was done, Crouch signed his name and dropped the Ministry stamp on a government pardon, and sent him on his way with the Trace hanging from his neck.

Within a year, Lucius was dead.

“That is all I have to say,” Snape said abruptly. He stood, loosing a tidal ripple of black cloth. “If you wish to send your mother a reply, you may enclose it with your next homework submission for my class. I will see that it is delivered to her, although I make no promises as to expediency; I am not your owl.”

“No, sir. Thank you, sir.” Hearing his dismissal, Draco scrambled up and hurried to the door.

As he was leaving, Snape called his name.

“Oh, and Draco?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Your housemate, Neville Longbottom, is abysmal at Potions,” said Snape carelessly. He leaned back in his chair, flicked his wand at the quill on his desk, and it began to scrawl busily over what Draco suspected were student papers. “A hippogriff holds more talent for brewing in one feather than he holds in his body entire. I have no desire to reward poor performance with special treatment, but if he continues in this manner he will hurt himself, and most probably others.”

Draco, who thought this was both amusing and true, agreed.

“You will help him.”

This was far less amusing. He stared at Snape in horror.

“Sir,” he began desperately. “He’s a lost cause. I can’t… I won’t…”

“You can, and you will. A student of your skill should not find it difficult to instruct Longbottom on the fundamentals of potion-making, and in so doing, you will find an outlet for your time and energy beyond badgering Professor McGonagall to let you drop a class — who, incidentally, is convinced that it was *my* nefarious doing to put the idea of dropping Herbology into your head, when

even the most execrable potioneer alive could tell you how absolutely essential herbological knowledge is to all that we do.”

This was not to be borne. Draco wondered, with all possible lucidity, whether Snape didn’t actually want him dead. If he did, putting him in a room near Longbottom and a cauldron for any amount of time was a sure way to achieve it. “Yes, sir,” he managed. “Absolutely. I understand. But really, I mean, *Longbottom* —”

“An hour every week, I think,” said Snape silkily, and if Draco didn’t know better, he’d say a trace of mirth gleamed in his godfather’s coal-black gaze. “That should do, to start. We’ll see how Longbottom is progressing after that. Dismissed.”

I write full "seasons" (a.k.a. one academic year) of this fic at a time, and then release the chapters on a schedule, so there will be regular updates so long as a particular "season" is in progress.

NEXT CHAPTER: 9/2/22

CURRENT BOOK: 1

Halloween

Chapter 4: Halloween

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

On Halloween morning, the castle awoke to the scent of baking pumpkin and cinnamon, sweet apples and brown sugar. A cascade of red leaves descended past the window panes, carried on the back of a fine silver fog, and the first blades of frost appeared on the grass. In Gryffindor Tower, the fireplaces kept the dorms toasty and warm, despite the cool weather outside, and in the night the house-elves had come to decorate the dorms with paper garlands of bats and jack-o-lanterns. When he drifted awake, there was a split second where Draco felt so content that he actually forgot where he was, and he burrowed into his pillows, relishing the toasty, sweet confines of his bed, unimpeded by the cruel bite of reality.

Naturally, reality would not suffer this kind of arrogance for long. He heard, rather than saw, someone peel back the hangings of his four-poster, and light flooded his eyes.

He gave a disgruntled honk and rolled over, tugging his pillow over his head.

“Er, Malfoy?”

He held still and said nothing, feigning sleep.

“Malfoy?” Someone gingerly prodded at his arm. “Malfoy, are you awake?”

“No,” he said into the bedspread.

“Oh, good,” chirped the voice, which he now recognized. “I’m sorry to wake you. I didn’t know whether, um, you had forgotten? What you

said? About helping me with my Potions homework? Before Charms?”

Draco gave another long, plaintive honk, and sealed the pillow tighter over his head. If he suffocated, he reflected, he couldn’t be liable for whatever Longbottom did.

This cheered him up enough to open his eyes. Unfortunately, this meant he got an eyeful of Neville Longbottom, snaggle-toothed, round-faced, and freckled like a painter’s smock, already dressed for school and carrying both of their satchels.

“I’ll meet you in the common room?” Longbottom said hopefully.

In response he received only a muffled groan.

It was his own fault for scheduling their lesson in the morning. He’d originally proposed it for Thursday evening, but he’d forgotten it was Halloween, and so there’d be a feast in the Great Hall, followed by parties in each of the dorms. Not that Draco expected to be invited to any festivities, but he didn’t want to be trapped in a room with Longbottom while everybody else ate candy and danced to music. Even if he wouldn’t have been there anyway, there was something particularly dispiriting about the idea.

The Charms classroom was bitterly cold in the mornings, as Flitwick hadn’t been in to light the grate yet. Draco set up the cauldron, lit the burner with a muttered spell that Snape had taught him, and set the water boiling, just to give Longbottom the best possible starting odds. He really did hope that he would succeed, if only because it would let him off the hook as a tutor.

“All right, Longbottom,” he barked, hauling out the chair and pointing at it. “Sit.”

Longbottom sat.

Draco thunked his copy of *Magical Drafts and Potions (79th Edition)* on the desk. “We’re doing a Cure for Boils. Should be a motivating exercise, since it’ll come in handy for you.”

The boy flushed and rolled back his sleeves. With shaking hands, he began to grind his snake fangs. He was doing it wrong, Draco observed — employing short, choppy strokes of the pestle like he was churning butter, instead of grinding them properly on the side of the bowl — but he held his tongue, since he wanted to see how far Longbottom could go without an outright error.

The answer was, apparently, seventy-four seconds. “Stop,” he snapped, seizing Longbottom’s wrist. The boy froze, his fistful of crushed snake fang suspended over the bubbling cauldron. “What are you doing wrong?”

Longbottom flinched. “I’m… doing something wrong?”

“I suppose that answers one question. I’ll start simpler, so you can understand: what are you *doing?”*

“I’m adding my snake fangs to the cauldron, like it says in the book.”

“And what were you going to do after that?”

He read doubtfully from the book. “Stir,” he said.

“Yes, I meant after that. The next step.”

“Finely slice my Pungeous Onions,” he read, “and place them in the mixture.”

“And the fifth step?”

“Add a sprinkle of powdered ginger…”

“Do you have powdered ginger?”

Longbottom looked around, as if the powdered ginger might be lurking under his armpit.

“No. You don’t. You have ginger root, which you’ll need to grind in order to get powder. But you can’t grind it at Step Five, because you’re supposed to be stirring vigorously from steps four through six.”

“Oh. Right you are, Malfoy.”

“Of course I’m right. Read the recipe all the way through before you start brewing,” said Draco curtly, extinguishing the burner. “It’s thirty seconds of up-front work that’ll save your skin. And prep your ingredients in advance. Even if it’s only measuring.”

“That makes sense,” said Longbottom brightly. “Gee, thank you, Malfoy. I really appreciate—”

“There’s no need for us to talk unless I’ve asked you a question. Start over, try the potion again.”

It took the better part of an hour for the pair of them, working jointly, to wrestle together a passable interpretation of a Cure for Boils. Draco had to stop Longbottom from melting his cauldron not once but twice, usually by shouting at him, and though his intervention had saved the other boy a lot of pain, Longbottom still had the nerve to act like a girl about it.

“D-d-d-don’t yell at me,” he moaned. “I’m d-d-d-doing my b-b-best—”

“I didn’t *yell,”* said Draco tartly. “I *told* you not to add porcupine quills while it’s over heat, you daft baby. And you should be grateful, because if I hadn’t, we’d both be on our way to the Hospital Wing.”

“But you d-d-d-didn’t need to sh-sh-sh-shout…”

“Merlin, are you weeping?”

Longbottom scrubbed at his cheeks, sniffling.

Draco curled his lip. “Well, don’t get any tears in the potion, salt water ruins a brew.”

By the time they had bottled and stoppered the homework assignment, other Gryffindors were trickling into the Charms classroom, and the Great Bell was tolling nine. Draco was hot and damp from working over a cauldron all morning, and peevish, because he hadn’t gotten any breakfast. Dealing with the other boy had burnt out the lion’s share of his patience, which was far from plentiful to begin with, and he stomped over to his desk in the early stages of a stormy mood.

Today in Charms they were making objects fly, an announcement which brightened him somewhat. This was a tremendously useful spell, and it marked a departure from weeks of shooting colored sparks out of their wands. They were put in pairs to practice, and to Draco’s relief, he got Granger. It wasn’t so much that it was pleasant to work with Granger as it was that everyone else would have been intolerable: Potter and Weasley would annoy him, Seamus Finnigan would blow something up, and if he got Longbottom, he would end up leaping out the window.

True to form, most Gryffindors found the swish-and-flick motion bafflingly difficult to comprehend. Weasley seemed to think that volume of incantation corresponded to strength of spell, and kept bellowing *“WINGARD-EUM LEVIO-SA!”* while windmilling his arms.

“He’s saying it wrong,” Granger sighed, and though she might have said it more quietly — Weasley shot a nasty look over his shoulder, he’d definitely heard — Draco didn’t disagree.

“Wrong emphasis,” he remarked, catching his own feather on its descent.

“And movement. It’s Wing-gar-dium Levi-OH-sa, not—”

“Levio *SOIR.”* It was a somewhat unsporting imitation of a West Country accent, but he could see her repressing a smile.

“Well, quite.”

“You do it, then, if you’re so clever,” snarled Weasley.

Draco smirked and sat back, gesturing to her in invitation.

Granger did not disappoint. She twitched up the sleeves of her gown, flicked her wand, and said, *“Wingardium Leviosa.”* The feather climbed neatly into the air, guided by the tip of her wand, and hovered at a respectable height of four feet.

Flitwick burst into applause. “Miss Granger!” he squeaked. “Miss Granger, very well done! And Mister Malfoy, is that your feather? Very good, very good! Ten points to Gryffindor!”

By the end of class, no one but Draco and Granger had managed to get their feathers over a foot in the air. As they were pushing their way into the corridor, they ended up stuck behind Weasley and Potter, who had barely gotten theirs off the desk. This was a source of comfort to Draco. The natural expectation of most teachers seemed to be that Potter would excel in everything, and watching them slowly become disabused of that notion had been among the few pleasures of his time in Gryffindor House.

Granger, to nobody’s surprise, was yapping his ear off. “I wish I could hang back and ask him about the theory,” she enthused. “It’s so interesting. I’d like to know how it’s different from other charms of movement. Is it the level force applied? Or is it where the energy is coming from? My dad says there are these things called Newton’s Laws…”

“What, like Scamander?”

Potter and Weasley were talking about something. A tall Hufflepuff knocked into Granger, and she bumped into Draco, who shrugged her off and set her upright with an irritated sound. They were practically on top of Potter and Weasley, now.

“It’s no wonder no one can stand her,” Weasley was saying, “she’s a nightmare, honestly.”

Granger stiffened.

Potter had the decency to look uncomfortable about this. “I dunno,” he said. “She tries—”

“What, you’re dying to be friends with her, are you?” said Weasley.

“No, but—”

Now Granger was blinking very quickly. “Excuse me,” she mumbled, and shoved past Weasley and Potter. Draco watched, surprised, as she elbowed Weasley on her way through and ran out of the corridor, her shoulders shaking.

Weasley and Potter turned around, wearing guilty expressions. Draco glowered at them.

“I think she heard you,” said Potter, and he had the decency to be ashamed. Weasley couldn’t even muster that much.

“So? She must’ve noticed she’s got no friends.”

Which might have been true, insofar as Draco didn’t really consider himself Granger’s *friend* — if anything, he was her class partner, which in his mind was a strictly strategic alignment, borne of mutual refusal to tolerate incompetence — but even so, no one besides himself should be permitted to make such remarks about her. It was demeaning to both of them. His father wouldn’t have tolerated an insult to one of his associates, no matter how he felt about them personally.

He called, “Embarrassed, Weasley?”

“Go away, Malfoy.”

He shouldered between them, knocking Weasley to the side. “Bet you wish you had her brains,” he said. “Then maybe your mummy would pay attention to you.”

This was a shot in the dark — large family, youngest son, it didn’t take a genius — but it landed square and true. Weasley started at him, held back only by Potter’s outflung arm. “Shut up!”

“Yeah? Oh, you felt that, didn’t you? At least Granger’s parents are proud of her. I doubt your mum even noticed when she gave birth to you.”

“That’s enough, Malfoy,” Potter said quietly.

Draco smiled nastily. “As for you, Potter,” he said, “you may have the others fooled, but not me. You’re a middling wizard who’s only here because of a freak accident eleven years ago. You’re hardly any better than a muggle-born.”

“Yeah?” said Potter calmly. He stepped into Draco’s face. “Something wrong with muggle-borns?”

He shrugged. “You don’t have me fooled,” he repeated. Then he shoved past Weasley and hurried into the crowd before either of them could hit back.

Granger didn’t turn up for the next class and wasn’t seen all afternoon. This was at first a pleasant reprieve and then a less pleasant one. Draco enjoyed, on one hand, the newfound peace with which he could take his lessons, and the absence of botheration in the hallways between classes. He did not lament the loss of always being the second hand in the air. But he discovered that this silence, once enjoyed, continued well after one stopped enjoying it. No one besides Granger talked to Draco. She was the only Gryffindor immune to his stony looks and sullish, unsociable demeanor. (That, or she simply didn’t notice, which was highly possible: Hermione Granger had the people skills of a sea sponge.)

At the feast, his morale reached an all-time low. The hall was magnificently decorated: thousands of conjured bats swarmed the walls, spiderwebs the size of parachutes swabbed the windows, and hovering jack-o-lanterns cast flickering shadows on the tables below. It smelled of pumpkin and squash and roasted hazelnuts, and down the center of each house table, trays of candy and colorfully frosted cakes rose in pyramids taller than Draco's head. Some of the students were wearing mummer's costumes. Several of the students at the Slytherin table in particular were wearing cow skull masks in observance of Samhain, and Draco wondered if there would be a bonfire later that night for the purebloods. He had gone to one of his cousin's Samhain bonfires when he was very young, four or five maybe, and he remembered it indistinctly as a blur of bright lights, woodsmoke, and enough candy to give Dobby a heart attack.

Granger didn't turn up for supper, either. Draco sat by himself, picking at a bit of baked potato, while all around him Gryffindor house roared with laughter and camaraderie. By and by he got to feeling so sorry for himself that he became irritated at her. Surely she'd known that if she didn't come, it would force him to sit alone. Surely she knew it would embarrass him. Didn't she care for his feelings? Wasn't he important to her at all?

Parvati Patil, a dark-haired girl with a knack for Transfiguration, asked him to pass the potatoes. She resumed talking to her friend, Lavender Brown, at once. "First-floor bathroom," she murmured. "Yes, I know, poor thing. She's been crying for hours… I asked if she'd like me to bring her some food, but she said she wanted to be left alone."

"Oh, well. You tried," said Brown, yawning.

"I felt so bad. She keeps to herself, but I never thought she was lonely…"

"She's just stuck-up. You can tell she thinks she's too good for us — Ron only said what we were all thinking…"

The suggestion that Weasley had been elected the *vox populi* of this wretched assembly, however frivolous, was the last straw. Draco made a snap decision.

“Hey. You two. Are you talking about Granger?”

The two girls broke off, stunned that he was talking to them. Credit to her, Patil nodded.

“First floor bathroom, you said?” He stood up, slinging his bag over his shoulder.

“Ye-es,” said Patil uncertainly, watching him clamber out of the table. “But you might… I’m only warning you, she said she doesn’t want to be disturbed.”

“Bully for her. I don’t care.” He grabbed a pear and a chicken salad sandwich from the table, bundled them in a napkin, and shoved them into his bag. As an afterthought, he snapped: “And Weasley didn’t say what we were *all* thinking, Brown, but thank you for that particularly revealing remark.” He turned on his heel and marched out of the hallway.

There was no one around the girls’ bathroom when he arrived, which was convenient, because he had no desire to be seen skulking around it. He rapped on the door. “Granger,” he barked. “It’s Malfoy. Come out of there.”

There was no answer. “I know you’re in there,” he added. “Patil told me. This is ridiculous. It’s far too much whinging for one day, and it’s undignified.”

Still, no answer. He banged on the door. “Answer me, Granger. Or I’m coming in. I don’t care if it’s the girls’.”

When this, too, received nothing, he rolled his eyes and kicked open the door.

The bathroom was empty, or at least seemed so upon first glance. A faint sniffling came from one of the stalls, echoing on the tile. When he poked open the door, he found Granger hunched over on the toilet seat, her arms around her knees. Upon seeing him, she knuckled her eyes dry and took a sharp breath.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded. “This is the girls’ loo.”

He folded his arms. “So you’ve been sulking in here all day, have you.”

“You’re one to talk about sulking.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that, and I’m going to ignore it. Granger, get up. Weasley can’t have hurt you that badly.”

She shrank into herself.

“Oh, come on.”

“You didn’t have to come,” she said in a small voice. “You can go back to the Feast. I’ll be fine. I’d like to be alone for a while, that’s all.”

“The Feast is dull,” he said. “Our house is all gossips and idiots. I’d rather be bored by you than by a hundred Gryffindors.”

Her face peeked through a gap in her arms. “What?”

“You heard me. Don’t fish.”

“You don’t think I’m a horrid know-it-all?”

“You’re absolutely a horrid know-it-all. What’s more, you’re stuffy, stuck-up, holier-than-thou, moralistic, and you think you’re better than everyone else.”

Her lower lip trembled. “Go away!” she cried. “You don’t have to tell me like I don’t know! I know I’m awful and nobody likes me, I know I

haven’t got any friends—”

“I didn’t say that. Calm down.” He leaned against the stall. “Why do you care if nobody likes you? There’s nothing wrong with being stuffy and stuck-up and holier-than-thou, I should know. And the moralizing is annoying, but at least you’re not a hypocrite about it. I’d be far more embarrassed by the fact that you’ve spent this much time crying over Rolf Weasley.”

“His name’s Ronald,” she sniffled, though she wasn’t crying anymore.

“I’m not going to remember that.”

He gave her the bundle of food from the feast. “There. It’s chicken salad. I chose the nastiest sandwich I could find to punish you for not coming to dinner.”

She took it, tentatively, and then crammed it in her mouth with the haste of someone who hadn’t eaten since breakfast. “Thank you,” she mumbled, chewing.

His *tsked* and kicked her lightly in the shin. “Chew and then swallow, Granger, were you raised in a barn? Oh, right. Muggles. Don’t answer that.”

“You really are a prejudiced person,” she said reflectively, finishing the sandwich and starting on the pear. He found himself more at peace now that she’d stopped crying, and his morale was a great improvement on the state of things at the feast. “At first I thought it was ironic, but no. You really do think muggles are worth less than wizards, don’t you?”

“Oh, please.”

“You do!”

“Because they are.”

“You’re wrong. They’re people, like you and me.”

“But — oh, that’s ridiculous,” he said crossly. “They can’t do magic! What kind of person can’t do magic?”

“There’s nothing about magic that makes you a person,” she said matter-of-factly. “My parents can’t do magic. But they’re still people.”

“The less you mention your parents, the better we’re going to get along.”

“But they’re my parents,” she pointed out, and he hated how reasonable she sounded. “I’m not going to pretend they don’t exist just because you have a problem with them. Listen to you, you don’t even have a reason to dislike them. Have you ever met a muggle in your life?”

“Of course I haven’t. Don’t be absurd.”

“You’ve never been to the supermarket? Or a park? You’ve never gone out in London, just to see what it’s like?” She blinked. “Gosh, you are sheltered.”

“The word you’re looking for is ‘cultured,’” he said loftily. “And of course I’m not going to trounce around muggle London, getting mud and muggle all over my clothes. I’m a pureblood.”

“I don’t like the way you say that word,” she said suddenly, staring at him. “It feels unclean.”

“We don’t have to talk about this.”

“All right, but you started it.”

“Very mature.”

The door swung open. Draco, realizing belatedly that he was still inside the girls’ bathroom, spent a wild half-second casting around for a way to exit, and spent far too long considering the toilet.

A lumbering footstep shuddered the walls. Something made a deafening growl, like an avalanche of stone.

Draco and Granger stared at each other, wide-eyed. Then they moved as one: Granger scrambled to her feet, and Draco slammed the stall door shut, snapping in the lock. He braced his weight against it and drew his wand, though he realized with a terrible jolt that he didn't know any helpful spells. He might as well pitch his wand at the creature, for all the good it'd do.

The shuffling footfalls of giant legs sent tiles clattering across the floor. The stall shook. There was an explosion of ceramic and metal, and water burst from the remains of what was surely a mangled sink. Granger gave a high whimper, and he clapped his hand over her mouth.

A shadow loomed over the stall. A foul scent washed over them, so thick and putrid that Draco fought the urge to vomit.

He looked up.

It was a horrible sight. Twelve feet tall, its skin was a dull, granite gray, its great lumpy body like a boulder with its small bald head perched on top like a coconut. It had short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet. It was holding a huge wooden club, which dragged along the floor because its arms were so long.

Draco's insides turned to ice. Granger threw herself behind him, which he might have been irritated about if he weren't busy trying to remember which bits of the brain controlled motor function in the legs.

It ripped the door off the stall and tossed it at the window. Glass shattered. The floor was littered with shards of ceramic and broken pipe.

"Draco, do something!"

If he had use of his throat, he might have shouted, *Do what! You do something, you're the real Gryffindor!*

What came out of his throat, however, was a much less dignified noise. He could not believe that he, Draco Malfoy, was going to die in a girls' bathroom with Hermione Granger.

"Hermione!"

Like the world's least inspiring pair of guardian angels, Potter and Weasley came skidding into the bathroom, armed with nothing but their wits and wands — which was to say, nothing. Draco could have laughed.

The boys took in the scene at a glance. Weasley, without so much as pausing to think, snatched a broken tap and threw it as hard as he could against the wall. It cracked loudly against the plaster, freezing the troll in its tracks. Draco noted (deliriously, it must have been) that with an arm like that, Weasley would make a half-decent Chaser.

The troll swung around and noticed the two newcomers, blinking stupidly. It hefted its club and lumbered forward, leaving Draco and Granger clustered in the warped remains of the stalls.

Weasley wasn't finished. While Potter cast around frantically for something to throw, Weasley picked up a metal pipe, hefted it, and with a warlike yell, he hurled it directly at the troll. It soared across the room and smacked the troll on the shoulder. In terms of damage this did not much, but the troll heard the sound and shifted directions, converging on the ginger. "Want some more, pea-brain?" roared Weasley, grabbing another tap from the rubble. "That's right! Over here, you bloody big git!"

There, in the shattered wreckage of the girls' bathroom, Draco had an epiphany. He found himself, to his anguish, suddenly capable of seeing the virtue in Ron Weasley: that either from bravery, stupidity, or sheer force of will (or perhaps a tremendous combination of all

three) Weasley simply *did not* freeze in the face of danger. He could stare down twelve feet of ugly and still think three steps ahead.

Potter, perhaps thinking the same thing, got ahold of himself and darted forward. He grabbed Draco and Granger each by the arm and hauled with all his might, dragging them toward the exit. “Come on!” he yelled. “Both of you! Run!”

But Draco’s legs were still jellied with fear. On the way to the door he tripped over loose tiles, and Potter’s grip wasn’t strong enough to keep him upright. He went down on his knees, kneecaps smacking against hard floor. Granger skidded to a halt, yanking Potter back in the doing, and shrieked “Draco!”

She hurried back for him. Potter groaned and followed her. Grabbing one of Draco’s arms apiece, they wrenched him upright.

Meanwhile, Weasley was giving a performance to rival the great Spanish matadors. He scattered shrapnel against the walls and the mirrors, distracting the troll with sounds from different locations, having identified — cleverly, Draco thought — that the troll had stronger hearing than it did eyesight. He scampered this way and that around its legs, forcing it to turn around in the confined space, giving it little room to wind up or swing with its club. When Draco fell, the noise made the troll spin around, and its club took out a row of sinks. Weasley threw himself to the side to avoid getting hit by shrapnel, but this put him in a corner, and when the troll swung around again, he was trapped.

“Come on,” Draco urged, herding Granger and Potter toward the door. “We’ve got an opening, it’s distracted! Let’s go!”

Granger gasped, “But Ron—”

“Yes, we’ll get a teacher and come back for him, let’s hurry!”

“We’re not leaving him,” snapped Potter, and he dropped Draco’s arm. Spinning around, he took out his wand — looked at it —

probably came to the same realization about spells that Draco did earlier — and tossed it aside. Then, with a yell, he took a running jump and vaulted onto the troll's back.

"Oh my *God,"* cried Draco hysterically.

"Harry!" screamed Granger.

Draco couldn't believe he was going to watch Harry Potter die. To his surprise, he felt rather melancholy about it. Of course, he hadn't liked the boy, but there was something vaguely depressing about someone surviving the Killing Curse from Lord Voldemort only to get knocked off by a mountain troll.

Oh, well.

He dove for the doorway. He made it about one step before he was hauled back by the scruff of his robes.

"We have to help them!" Granger shouted, wrenching him to heel. "Do something! Throw something! Cast a spell!"

He shook his head, despairing. The poor witch, he thought. The panic had driven her mad.

The troll roared, twisting and flailing its club. Potter was beating the troll's head ineffectually with his fists, while Weasley shouted and scrabbled his legs on the tile, trying to drive himself further into the corner. The Boy Who Lived was clinging on for dear life, and any second, the troll was going to rip him off or catch him with the club. He had perhaps ten seconds before his luck ran out.

Granger drew her wand. "W-w-wingardium," she said, but her voice was thin, and her grip was weak. "W-ingardium l-l-l—"

He suddenly saw what she was trying to do. The club made a wide arc and shattered one of the ceiling lights, raining glass and filament on them. He ducked, shielding himself with his arms, and she did the

same. The troll gave a mighty shake, and Potter's legs were thrown free — they wheeled in the air while the troll spun, kicking — but then he found his grip again. The club swung low and almost decapitated Weasley. Granger shrieked.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," moaned Draco.

He ripped out his wand, aimed it at the beast, and executed the same gesture his mother had used to hang Christmas garlands for eleven years: *"Wingardium Leviosa!"*

The club flew suddenly out of the troll's hand, rose high, high up into the air, turned slowly over — and dropped, with a sickening crack, onto its owner's head. The troll swayed on the spot and then fell flat on its face, with a thud that made the whole room tremble.

Potter staggered to his feet. He wiped his nose with his sleeve and sniffed, shaking himself off. He looked for all the world like he'd just come back from a hard Quidditch match.

Weasley shoved himself upright, staring at what they had done. He looked at Draco, and it was he who spoke first. "All right then, Malfoy," he said, and his voice was remarkably steady. "Good aim, mate."

Granger let out a shaking breath. "Is it dead?"

Potter stooped over the head, getting far closer than Draco would have liked, and shook his head. "Knocked out," he said. He glanced around, patting his pockets. "Any of you see where my wand went?"

Wordlessly, Granger bent and retrieved it from the rubble.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome," she said, so quiet it was almost soundless.

"You, too, Malfoy," Potter added, and he patted Draco on the shoulder. "Good thinking, with that spell."

Draco, whose jaw was still locked shut from fear and adrenaline, gave him a small, jerking nod.

Footsteps clattered from the hall, and the door burst open. (Granger jumped.) Professor McGonagall swept in, closely followed by Snape — walking with a slight limp, it appeared — with Quirrell bringing up the rear. Quirrell took one look at the troll, let out a faint whimper, and sat quickly down on a toilet, clutching his heart. When Snape saw Draco, he did a double-take.

Professor McGonagall swept over them, white-lipped. “Explain yourselves,” she said, in tones colder than a Scottish Yuletide.

Potter brushed a bit of rubble from his robes, suddenly shy.

Weasley looked behind him at the troll, then at McGonagall, like: *You’re joking, right?*

“It appears one can always trust Mr. Potter to locate himself at the center of attention,” Snape purred. “Nevertheless, if you cannot explain yourself, we will have no choice but to punish—”

“They came to find me,” blurted Granger. “I was here, in the bathroom, during the feast. I didn’t hear the alarm. So they came to get me. Harry, and Ron, and—” She glanced at him, and hesitated. “Draco.”

The fact that this was a lie was not lost on any of the first years, least of all Draco, who exchanged an eyebrow-raise with Potter.

“All three of them?” asked Snape, his expression neutral. His eyes flit between Potter and Draco. “Together?”

Granger swallowed. Then she nodded. “I owe them my life,” she said. “Harry and Ron distracted it. Ron threw rocks, and Harry jumped on its back. And Draco cast a spell that knocked it out.”

“Makes it sound more impressive than what we did,” muttered Weasley, and Potter stepped on his foot.

“You should have found a teacher! What you did was exceedingly stupid and profoundly irresponsible!”

“Respectfully, professor,” said Potter, “we didn’t exactly know that the troll was going to be in here.”

“Yeah,” chimed in Weasley. “We were just trying to get Hermione and go. Honestly, I could’ve lived a long, happy life without ever seeing a mountain troll.”

McGonagall did not find this amusing, but the combined weight of their excuses appeared to move her. “Five points from Gryffindor,” she said. “Each.”

“Each?” cried Weasley.

For Draco, too, this seemed an injustice. He exclaimed, “Professor, excuse me, but how many First Years could take on a mountain troll?”

Weasley pointed at him. “He’s right!” he said, as if he couldn’t believe it.

“And — excuse me, professor, really, but — it’s not Granger’s fault she was in the bathroom, and we didn’t know the troll would be here, and we would’ve gone to get a professor, but we assumed they were all busy, mostly because of the aforementioned troll.”

Weasley was nodding vigorously. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah. Yeah.”

“And really, professor, when you think about it—”

“Harry and Ron were *tremendously* brave,” Granger piped up.

Draco suffered this slight out of common cause with her. “Right, and nobody got hurt, which is remarkable, since Potter got all the way up

on its back—”

“Except for the troll, which is rather a good thing, if you think about it —”

“At the very least we oughtn’t lose points for doing a bit of pest control.”

“And Draco was *ever* so clever with the spell, you’d never know that we only learned it this morning!”

“Well, but it was really Granger’s idea—”

“Enough,” cut in Professor McGonagall, but her eyes were soft.

Snape was staring at Draco and Granger, his lips parted, a very strange expression on his face.

“Five points from Gryffindor each, for Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, and Mr. Malfoy, given your failure to follow instructions and return to the common room,” said McGonagall. “And five points apiece for all four of you, for an admirable performance in the face of danger… does that seem fair to you, Severus?”

Snape closed his mouth and nodded.

“Very good. You may go.”

They hurried out of the chamber and didn’t speak at all until they had climbed two floors up. It was a relief to be away from the smell of the troll, quite apart from anything else.

“We should have gotten more than five points each,” Weasley grumbled.“A mountain troll! I’ll be washing that smell off for weeks. For five measly points!” He elbowed Granger. “You all right, then? Not still shaken up?”

She nodded. “It didn’t hurt me.”

“Not what I meant,” said Weasley, glancing at Draco. Draco arched an eyebrow and said nothing.

“Oh,” she said. “That.”

“Yeah. I don’t suppose… well. Let’s say us saving you makes it even?”

“She wouldn’t have been in there if it weren’t for you,” Draco said, offended.

Weasley grimaced guiltily. “Yeah,” he said, “s’pose you’re right, aren’t you. But still, I mean, it was pretty dangerous—”

“Yeah, so maybe you should feel worse about it,” Draco retorted.

“No, Draco, it’s all right.” Granger tucked her hair behind her ears. “I *am* grateful to you, Ron. And Harry. We can… I mean, you did save my life, and it’s not like it’s your fault the troll found us. And anyway I wasn’t very nice this morning, I suppose,” she said, though this last part was hard for her, and she tossed it out somewhat haughtily.

But it was good enough for Weasley, who shook her hand. “Bang on,” he said approvingly. “Square, yeah?”

She smiled. “Square.”

Then, to Draco’s shock, Weasley reached past her and stuck the same hand out to Draco. “You,” he said, “are an ungrateful git. You know that.”

“Do tell.” Draco eyed Weasley’s palm as if it contained a foul-smelling species of algae.

“But you did help. Might’ve saved my skin or something, I dunno. So.” He waggled his fingers. “Clean slate. I’m Ron Weasley. You are?”

Draco massaged his nose. He wondered what his mother would say if she could see him now. Shaking hands with a Weasley. The gut rebelled.

Granger tugged at his sleeve, obviously desirous that they should make up.

“Draco Malfoy,” he muttered, and without looking, he limply shook Weasley’s hand.

“Cool name,” said Weasley evenly, without a trace of mockery. “My gran says she knows your mum. You don’t know a Cedrella, by chance?”

He blinked. “Not Cedrella Black?”

“Yeah, yeah. That’s my Granny Weasley. And your mum’s Narcissa Black, yeah? So we’re like fourth cousins, twice removed, or something.”

“Oh, joy,” he said dully. “Hail and well met, coz.”

Weasley grinned. “Yeah. Think they disowned her for marrying my granddad. She was engaged to her cousin, ended up jilting him. It all seemed a bit pervy to me, but then, Weasleys don’t really go in for that sort of thing.”

Draco leered at him. “Never say never, *cousin.”*

To his surprise, Ron laughed.

They came to the portrait of the Pink Lady. “Pig snout,” said Potter.

The common room was packed and noisy. Everyone was eating leftovers from the feast, and floating platters of candy orbited the crowd like celestial bodies. “Ah, we’ve missed the best of it,” said Weasley, in devastated tones. “There’ll be only scraps left.”

“You had three helpings,” marveled Potter.

“I know, I’m starving.”

“Sweets!” exclaimed Granger. “I didn’t know there would be candy. I wonder if they have Cauldron Cakes. Draco, can you see if they have Cauldron Cakes?”

“Yeah, they’ve got Cauldron Cakes,” Weasley assured her, craning his long neck over the masses. “And Chocolate Frogs, and Bertie Bott’s. Want me to nab some?”

“Yes, please. And some sandwiches, if you don’t mind; I’ve barely eaten.”

“Sure. Harry, flag down some potatoes, would you? Draco, what do you want?”

Draco, who’d been preparing to slink off to the dorms, stopped. “What do you mean?”

“We’re getting plates, mate, do you want anything?” Weasley looked him up and down. “Are you leaving? They’ve got food here.”

“I know,” he said, somewhat stiffly. “I ate earlier.”

“You don’t want to stay for the party?” He nodded to Seamus Finnigan, who was setting up a ceedee player while Dean Thomas flipped through his collection.

“I’m not exactly —”

“Look!” Granger jumped on her tiptoes, clinging to Potter’s shoulders for balance. Potter was laughing and holding her steady. “They’ve got Turkish Delights! Real ones, muggle ones! I haven’t had one of those in ages! Harry, did you ever read…”

Draco looked back at Weasley. He shook his head.

Weasley shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said. “Have a good one.”

“Thanks,” said Draco coolly, and with a last glance, he retreated up the stairs.

NEXT CHAPTER: 9/4/22

The Quidditch Pitch

Chapter 5: The Quidditch Pitch

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Draco had no intention of developing an acquaintance with Harry Potter or Ron Weasley. Unfortunately, they had other ideas.

Starting the day after Halloween, the pair of them started to act very strangely around Draco. They said hello to him in the mornings, and bid him goodnight while they dressed for bed. If there was an empty seat at Draco's side, one of them might occupy it, and they would colonize any table where he elected to sit by himself. Once, they had even picked up their plates and moved down the Gryffindor table so as to disrupt his solitude with their noisy chewing and insipid chatter. This had been bad enough from Granger, but with all three of them triangulating, Draco scarcely had a moment to himself.

Granted, he could conceive of worse things. One morning, he forgot his satchel in the Transfiguration classroom, and he'd hardly had time to groan and spin on his heel before Saint Potter came strolling up the corridor with two satchels slung over his back.

"Forgot something, Malfoy?" he called smugly.

Or once, when he'd cut himself slicing foxglove in Potions: Draco hissed and dropped his knife, catching Weasley's attention. "Ooh, ouch," said Weasley mildly. "You know what to do with that, yeah?"

"No," Draco snapped, cradling his finger to his chest. At home, minor scrapes and bruises were healed by Dobby, or if it was more serious, his mother.

"You got to tie it up. Pressure makes the bleeding stop. Bill taught me. Here," and he drew the grayest, rattiest old handkerchief Draco

had ever seen from his pocket. He shook it aggressively at Draco. “Well, wrap it, don’t just sit there.”

And after class, he had seen Draco to the hospital wing, even though he’d complained all the while that the visit was unnecessary and Draco was being a baby.

Granger found this behavior far less mystifying than Draco. “They’re trying to be friendly,” she said, with a lightness in her tone that implied she was laughing at him. “You’re so sour that you can’t tell when people are trying to be nice.”

“I don’t need their charity.”

“It’s not charity, it’s friendship. People doing things for each other. You might try doing something nice for one of them, sometime, you know.”

He bristled. “I don’t owe them anything. I didn’t ask them to be nice to me.”

“All right, then, don’t,” she said. “But I don’t think that you’re being fair to them. Harry and Ron are good people, and they grow on you when you get to know them.”

He hauled open the door of the library and held it for her. “Like a species of fungus,” he deadpanned, and followed her inside.

Midterm exams finished. Results were posted outside the classrooms, papering an ivory swathe down the doorframe, a Doric declaration of academic achievement. Marks generally ran in order of highest to lowest, although the kinder professors went alphabetically. Flitwick, for instance, refused to give a grade lower than 50%, and offered a ten-point jump for any student who came in to review their mistakes after the fact. Snape not only sorted by score, but divided the list into categories of ‘Acceptable,’ ‘Needs Improvement,’ and ‘Unsatisfactory.’ Draco led the pack of ‘Acceptables,’ with a midterm score of 102%, a perfect O. He’d found

an error in one of the questions and corrected it, presuming it was a trick question. Granger trailed him with a score of 101%, since she'd been the only other student to find the error, but her correction had less detail than his.

Neville Longbottom had burrowed to the bottom of the 'Unsatisfactory' group. This was disappointing to him and Draco both, since he had been laboring weekly over Longbottom's cauldron. It did not matter. Longbottom was immune to instruction, incentive, and punishment. He had singed off his own eyebrows twice in a week and proved prolific in the art of turning cauldrons to molten slop. Draco had started wearing fireproof gloves to their lessons.

"I don't understand it," he spat, pacing the floor.

Snape sat behind his desk, grading papers. He allowed Draco to vent his frustrations in his office on the understanding that he was under no obligation to listen to them.

"He's like an automaton. I explain something, he says he understands, and then he doesn't do it. I ask him, again, if he understands it, and he says yes. And then he doesn't. Do. It. I tell him, Longbottom, if you don't do this, I'm going to club you upside the head with this ladle, do you understand, and he says yes, I understand, and then he *doesn't do it."*

"Welcome to teaching," Snape said flatly. He circled something and struck it out.

"It's maddening! And now he's got me worried about his midterm marks, like I don't have enough to concern myself with."

He had received another letter from his mother. She had been beside herself at the story of the mountain troll, which he may or may not have edited to emphasize his role in the battle, and he had to write a long letter convincing her not to withdraw him from Hogwarts and bring him home. Dobby had made a mugwump roast for

Samhain, which Draco had been aggrieved to miss, and she was thinking about turning one part of the East Wing into a music hall. And, she added, she was going to start taking visitors at the house again — for the first time in ten years.

Draco threw himself into a chair. “Don’t know why he’s not in Hufflepuff, anyway,” he said grumpily. “He’s got all the spine of a cuttlefish. ‘O-o-o-oh, I’m s-s-s-sorry, M-M-M-M-Malfoy!’ He’s less of a Gryffindor than I am.”

Snape said, “The hat does not necessarily Sort one where they would be happiest.”

“You’re telling *me.* Sir.”

The office fell quiet save for the scratch of Snape’s quill. The sound of water moving through old pipes groaned overhead. Somewhere, water was dripping onto stone, and the candlelight flickered eerily over various jars full of green embalming fluid, illuminating the shadowy objects that floated within.

Draco eyed Snape’s knee. Peering out from beneath the shield of his cloak, he caught a glimpse of red-spotted white gauze.

“Is your leg all right, professor?”

Snape moved his leg out of sight, hiding it beneath his cloak. “Perfectly.”

He frowned. He didn’t see any reason that Snape should lie to him, unless the answer was particularly embarrassing. He persisted, “Has Madam Pomfrey taken care of it? Or do you have your own supply of dittany?”

“Your concern is touching, but I do not require it.”

Draco slouched in his chair. Tapping his feet, he cast another bored look around the room. “I heard the Slytherin commons are in the

dungeons," he said. "I wouldn't know, I've never been. Is that because your classroom's down here, or is that a coincidence? The Potions Master can't always be Head of Slytherin."

"Draco."

"Yes, professor."

Snape dropped his quill in the inkwell with a brisk movement. "Tell me what you think of Harry Potter."

Since the question came out of nowhere, Draco had to take a moment to think. "Normal," he decided, after a moment. "Quiet. Bit stubborn. Could do to keep his nose out of other people's business. Granger likes him, but with her there's really no accounting for taste."

"Do you find him arrogant?"

Draco frowned. "Not really," he admitted.

"Self-serving? Spoiled? Cruel?"

"Possible, unlikely, and no."

"Do you like him?"

"Merlin, no," Draco retorted. "He's a shabby piece of half-blood riffraff in need of a haircut."

This answer had a curious effect on his professor. Snape put his knuckle to his mouth and gazed into the middle distance, lost in thought.

"Er… professor?"

"You are dismissed," he said suddenly.

Draco stumbled to his feet. "Did I say something wrong, sir?"

“Dismissed,” repeated Snape, with a curious intensity in his voice, and when he looked at Draco, his gaze passed cleanly through him, as if he didn’t see him at all. Then, without another word, he stalked out the door, leaving Draco alone in the dungeon.

The first Quidditch match happened on a bright, cold morning, under a sun-washed blue sky and over a field still iced thickly with frost. Draco intended to spend the day reading, but Lee Jordan, the resident bastion of house spirit, conducted a raid of the boys’ dormitory and bullied everyone down to the pitch to support the team. Draco made a symbolic protest of refusing to wear the Gryffindor scarf — which he regretted instantly once the highland wind raked across his neck. The stands had filled up, the speakers boomed with music, and the banners flickered bright and blinding in the winter sun. When the Gryffindor team soared out on their brooms, the Gryffindor stands shuddered with the weight of stamping feet. Draco, who had arrived late and squeezed in with Granger in the nosebleeds, clutched his seat and fought a wave of nausea. Nevertheless, the house spirit was so thick you could practically smell it. It was admittedly invigorating.

Which made the game itself all the more disappointing. Slytherin walloped Gryffindor by seventy points in a war of attrition between captains Wood and Flint, punctuated by Terrence Higgs neatly pocketing the Snitch at the two-hour mark. Draco, who had come determined not to get involved in the game whatsoever, nevertheless found himself standing up and shouting whenever one of the chasers fumbled, which happened embarrassingly often. He jeered at Flint when he fouled Katie Bell, not because he had any particular affection for Bell, but because it was a clumsy and obvious technical that the referee really ought to have pulled him for; and though he would deny it, when Flint caught a bludger to the face, Draco elbowed Potter — dispassionately and courteously, of course — in excitement.

Granger, who remained engrossed in their Transfiguration textbook throughout the match, only looked up at the ending klaxon.

“Oh,” she said, sounding not-quite-disappointed. “Is it over? Did we win?”

Draco sighed. “No, Granger. Generally, the team that’s booing and sighing at the end isn’t the team that won.”

On the way back from the match, Weasley shared in Draco’s disgust.

“I mean, Wood’s a decent captain,” Weasley said tragically, in the same way one might have said, ‘Oedipus was a decent king.’ “But he hasn’t got the chasers. It’s not his fault. Flint’s got Pucey and Smithers, and what does Wood have? Except for Angelina he’s got no muscle...”

Draco sniffed. “It’s the seeker’s fault. If Bronson caught the snitch when Gryffindor was ahead in the third quarter, that would’ve been the game. And don’t tell me the snitch doesn’t come out that early, because every quafflehead worth his salt knows that’s a myth, and I’d remind you that Krum caught the snitch in the second quarter in last year’s friendly with Romania.”

“No, mate, and I hear you, I do, but it’s the chasers, it’s all in the chasers, they’re the meat and potatoes of the game…”

“Nonsense. What would you know about it? Your team’s the Cannons.”

Potter was quiet for much of the walk back to the dorm, trailing behind them with Granger. As they were filing back into the Great Hall, Draco noticed him hanging back to stare wistfully at the quidditch pitch.

“Oy, Potter,” he called. “Are you coming in? It’s cold.”

“Go ahead without me,” he replied.

“Did you forget something?”

Potter shook his head. He put his hands in his pockets and sighed. He gazed at the checkered towers of the pitch like a sailor on the dock watching a ship set sail.

Draco followed his gaze. “You ever play, Potter?” he said, hopping down from the stoop. The door swung shut behind him.

“I was raised by muggles,” he said. “Never rode a broom before this year.”

“You liked it, though.”

He shrugged. “Thought it was pretty good, yeah.”

“Pretty good,” repeated Draco. He glanced at the pitch. “You know, you’re not grossly terrible at it. Flying.”

“Yeah? Thanks, mate.”

“That’s not praise, it’s factual,” he said in clipped tones. “Hooch loved you. Think she was filing adoption papers at the end of the lesson.”

“I don’t know about that. She was being nice.”

“False modesty flatters no one.” A gust of wind raked across their faces, and he wished once again for a scarf. “It’s a shame first years can’t try out.”

“I couldn’t anyway,” said Potter, finally turning towards the castle. “I don’t have a broom.”

Draco, whose father had owned a fourteen-piece antique broomstick collection, found this nearly inhumane. “How do your muggles get around, then?” he asked. “Floo?”

“They drive.” At Draco’s uncomprehending look, he continued: “They’ve got these things called cars? They’re boxes made of metal,

with rubber wheels underneath them, and when you get inside and press some levers it moves around…"

"Like a rolling jail cell?"

"Sort of. If you want to go somewhere far away, you can get in this big metal box called an airplane, and it'll go up in the air and fly you where you want to go."

Draco balked in horror.

"And you've been on one of them, these 'airplangs'?"

"Oh, not me," he said. "Uncle Vernon once flew to Berlin for a business trip, and they took Dudley to Disney World when he was five… I didn't go, though. They hired a sitter and told me to re-grout all the showers before they came back."

'Grouting' sounded so obscene that Draco feared asking what it was. He could no better express his sympathy than with a disgusted, vehement: "Muggles."

"S'not because they're muggles, it's because they don't like me," Potter said peaceably. "That's all right. I'm not very easy to live with."

Having lived with Potter for almost two months, Draco knew this to be a lie. None of the other Gryffindor boys were so freakishly neat, so careful to keep their things on their own side of the room. None besides Potter bothered to make his bed in the morning, not when the house elves would do it anyway once they left. It was honestly annoying: it made the rest of them look lazy by comparison.

"I think it's criminal to let muggles do that to a wizard," Draco said coldly, believing every word more than he had before. "And I'm not saying this out of any great love for you, Potter, but they should have been carrying you around on a litter and kissing your feet, and thanking you for the privilege."

“I don’t think that’s true,” Potter said uncomfortably.

“Well, I do. And you shouldn’t have had to wait until you were eleven to ride a broomstick, that’s just depressing.” He lifted his nose. “ *I* went flying for the first time when I was six.”

Potter wrinkled his nose at him. “You did not, Malfoy.”

“I did, thank you!” He paused and admitted, “My father took me.”

“Oh,” said Potter, a touch wistful. “That must have been nice.”

“Yes. He’d promised it to me as a treat if I sat through *Parsifal* at the Royal Wizarding Opera without falling asleep. I don’t think he expected me to do it, but I persevered, and he was a man of his word. When my mother saw us up there on the broomstick I think you could hear her shouting from China… Of course, it was perfectly safe, he took me on one of the slowest brooms he had, and there were all sorts of Cushioning Charms.” Draco broke off, suddenly aware he’d been rambling. “He wasn’t a great flier,” he added, belatedly, unsure of why he’d told Potter this. “Passable, but not great. Could have been excellent, naturally, but he never trained. He liked the broomsticks more than flying itself. I’m probably better now than he ever was.”

“So he’s not around, then.” Potter’s voice held neither sympathy nor condescension, and for that, Draco was pathetically grateful.

“No. He’s dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

Draco bristled and was about to snap at him when Potter said, “My dad’s dead, too. When I was a baby.” He chewed on his cheek, reflective, while the wind tangled his dark hair. “Wish he could’ve taken me flying.”

There was really nothing to say to this.

“Rough.”

“Yeah,” agreed Potter. “Dinner?”

“Sure.”

But Draco found himself returning to the conversation again and again over the course of the evening, his mind curving back towards it like a planet orbiting a star. The sound of Potter saying *Wish he could’ve taken me flying* ran on a loop in the back of his head. At first, it irritated him. It made it seem like Draco was lucky to have his father die later in life. Was that what Potter had implied? That Draco should pity him, because he had it worse?

But that just didn’t sound like Potter. It wasn’t in his nature to be spiteful or jealous, merely oblivious, and blind to his own insinuations. That wasn’t his fault, either. He wasn’t used to his words being taken seriously. It sounded like the muggles who raised him barely paid attention to him.

This last thought stuck in his head like a grain of sand, irritating him. It struck him as dangerously, almost violently, irresponsible that Potter hadn’t been told about magic sooner in his life. For a muggle-born like Granger, it was one thing: her parents weren’t to know, and couldn’t be blamed for not knowing. But there were wizards in Potter’s family before him, and his muggles would have known about them. So why hadn’t he been taught? Why hadn’t anyone told him? Why let the poor daft fool stagger into a world he knew nothing about, equipped with nothing but an underdeveloped sense of self-interest?

He stewed until it was late enough that the other boys trickled back into the dorm and started getting ready for bed. As he lay on his four-poster and tried to sleep, he heard Potter’s footsteps — you could tell because after dark, Potter always tiptoed, careful not to wake anybody, while everyone else stomped in — followed by a rustle of hangings and the opening of a dresser. When the drawer creaked,

Potter stopped, and eased it out slowly, painstaking in his effort not to make any noise.

It was wretched, when you thought about it. Draco had no idea what Disney World was and would rather summer in hell than find out, but it was still boorish beyond belief not to invite the whole family, at least if two-thirds or more of the relatives would be in attendance. A pureblood would never make such a mistake. His Great Uncle Orion had once sent Grandfather a Howler for failing to invite him to a tea party, on the grounds that because four of seven living Blacks would be in attendance, it was technically a family reunion.

Draco sighed, knowing then what he had to do.

Potter yelped when the hangings of his bed were ripped back. He hauled up the sheets to cover his (clothed) chest.

“Shoes and cloak, Potter,” Draco snapped. “It’s going to be cold.”

“...Where?”

“Where I’ll dump your body if you don’t get up and get *moving* , do you think I’ve got all night?”

One thing you could never say of the Boy Who Lived, he reflected, as said Boy hopped around in the darkness on one foot, searching for his other sock: call him stupid, call him reckless, call him green as the fresh-cut grass, but you couldn’t say he wasn’t game.

They crept down the stairs and through the portrait-hole. The corridors of Hogwarts were different at night, somehow bigger and longer, and far darker, as the lanterns that lit them in the evenings all extinguished once curfew passed. Moonlight streamed through the clerestory windows and lay in long milk-white bars on the wood, dappling the marble columns of the Great Hall. The castle sighed and groaned, resettling in its firmaments.

Draco crept along the side of the hallway, checking each corner before he turned it. He didn't dare light his wand for fear of making themselves more visible to Filch.

Potter followed, mimicking his actions. "Oy, Malfoy," he whispered. "Where are we going?"

"Keep your voice down! Out of the castle."

"Why?"

"Because I'm demented, apparently. Come along, quickly."

They darted down the Great Staircase, at which point Draco broke into a sprint for the front door. There was nothing else for it: anyone in the Great Hall could be seen from overhead and all directions by anyone who happened to be on the staircases above, and the only thing for it, if you weren't invisible, was to dash and pray. Potter raced after him, making surprisingly good time for his shorter legs, and they hauled open the doors together.

Outside, the lawns shone under a full coat of frost. Silvery clouds gathered like skeins of wool around the full and luminous moon, pockmarked here and there by stars. The lake had turned white and still as a marble plate, and somewhere in the dark quill-feathers of the trees, a nightingale was singing. It was cold, cold enough to turn the hairs on one's neck upright and to pebble the flesh of one's arms, but the wind had gone away, and now the night was still and dark and cool as a shard of black ice, silent save for the susurrus of the trees and the lonely strain of birdsong.

Draco and Potter crossed the lawns, their cloaks dragging over the brittle grass. The quidditch pitch swelled out of the night sky like a beast with eight heads, dark and eerily silent.

"The pitch?" Potter perked up. "Is that where we're going?"

“No, we’re taking a moonlight stroll by the lake. Mind your cloak! You almost tripped me.”

The gates were closed and sealed by a padlock the size of Draco’s head. Potter gave them an experimental rattle. “Rats,” he said. “Locked.”

“Well spotted. Any other observations for the gallery?” Draco hunted through his pockets for his wand.

Potter squinted up at the fence, evaluating. “Bet we could climb it,” he said, after a moment. “S’ not that hard. I’ve watched Dudley and his mates do it a hundred times. You could use that bar there as a foothold, and pull yourself over the top. Hop down, no problem.”

“Yes, Potter,” drawled Draco. “‘Hop down’ a ten-foot fence. Brilliant idea. When I reflect on my life, I often find I’ve dedicated insufficient time to my passion for rappelling…”

There was a rattle of chains, and he looked up sharply. Potter had attached himself to the ironwork and was scrambling, lizard-like, up the bars of the gate.

“Potter! Are you mad?”

The gate rattled and shook, but held fast. He quickly reached the top and swung his leg over the bars, careful not to bruise the Potter Family Heirlooms on the points of the fence. Then he slithered down the other side and dropped neatly to the ground.

“All right,” he said, ruddy with exertion. “Now you.”

Draco, stone-faced, lifted his wand and tapped it on the padlock. *“Alohamora.* ”

The padlock clicked, and he made a show of prodding the gate open with a single finger. It swung wide. He walked through.

“That’s useful,” Potter said appreciatively. “Did Flitwick teach us that?”

“It’s from the textbook.”

He didn’t mention that it was several chapters ahead of where Flitwick had them. He’d been bored, and the library had been closed.

They hopped a turnstile and climbed the stairs down to the locker rooms. Potter started for the Gryffindor dugout, but Draco stopped him.

“No. Slytherin.”

“Why?”

“Because they have better brooms.”

The Slytherin locker rooms were dark as pitch. Draco whispered *“Lumos,”* and the beam from his wand illuminated a set of gleaming brass lockers, wood benches, and green-and-silver hangings on the walls. He marched past the row of lockers, scanning the names: *Higgs… Pucey… Fletchley… Flint…*

That’d do it. Flint was a Twenty-Eight name, and Adrian’s mother had been the sole heiress to the fortune. Draco tapped the combination dial and muttered another “ *Alohamora.”*

“This is so cool,” said Potter, spinning around. “This is where they hang out before the match, yeah? And practices?”

Draco ignored him. He took down Adrian’s broom — a Comet Two Eighty, not bad — and a pair of dragon-hide flying gloves. They were going to be several sizes too big for either of them, but that couldn’t be helped. “Catch,” he said, tossing the gloves at Potter. With barely a glance at what was being thrown, Potter plucked them out of the air. “Put those on.”

For himself, he found and emptied the locker marked *Bole* . He'd noticed one of the beaters riding a particularly nice Cleansweep Seven, and he'd never tried a Cleansweep before.

"We're not stealing these, are we?" Potter said doubtfully.

"Of course not. Team equipment will be loaded with Tracing Charms."

"Won't they notice if we take them out of the pitch?"

Draco snapped the hem of his glove, rolled his fingers into a fist, and called the broomstick into his hand. It smacked his palm with a satisfying *thwack.*

"That's why we're not leaving the pitch," he said, and he strode past Potter onto the field.

The moonlight blazed almost bright as day. Draco mounted his Cleansweep and kicked off, swiveling a little while he got his bearings. The balance was different from his broomstick at home, more sensitive, but he soon hit his stride, and looped a lazy circle around the pitch for a warmup. When he came around the last turn, Potter had joined him in the air, and was hovering in the center of the field.

Draco leaned forward and increased pressure on his front-hand by a fraction. The Cleansweep bucked and dove, dipping its nose precipitously before he righted himself and steered it into an incline, white-knuckling the front-hand grip. He could feel the power humming under the wood, anxious to be let free.

"All right there, Potter?" he barked.

Potter turned his head. He was positively electrified with glee.

"This is *magic!"* he shouted.

"Of course it is! Not going to catch a muggle doing this, are you?"

He banked and cut a J-curve through the air, accelerating into a breakneck incline, and leveled off once he'd reached Potter's height. They hovered next to each other, the breeze ruffling their hair. Seen from above, they might have resembled the twin eyes of a yin-yang symbol, one white, one black.

Potter shuffled a little, reseating himself on the broom. "It's sort of — alive," he breathed, stroking the handle. "It's like I can feel what it wants to do."

"That's because you're sitting on a good broom. Comets are notoriously finicky, they take a strong hand, but if you don't mind being an active rider, you can get a lot of performance out of them. Cleansweeps, like this one for instance, they're more sensitive. Faster, each to each, than Comets, but harder to control, and the speed is useless if you don't know how to use it. Now, the model that everyone's excited about, the one that's supposed to thread the perennial needle of handling and speed, that's the upcoming Nimbus —"

He stopped: Potter was smiling.

"What?"

"Nothing. You just sound like Hermione," he said.

"I resent that!"

"Why? She's brilliant," he said simply. "Smartest person I've ever met. I wish I could sound like Hermione about something."

Of course, it was true. Nevertheless, he suspected he was being subtly called a boffin. The mischievous glint in Potter's eyes did nothing to disabuse him of this idea.

Potter started a slow helix upward. "Any idea how fast these things can go?" he asked.

“Sure. I could tell you.” Draco shrugged. “Or we could find out.”

This was the right thing to say. Potter’s face lit up with an animal grin. “First one to five laps?”

“Five sickles on it.”

“Why not ten?”

“Ooh. Wouldn’t be too rich for your blood, Potter?”

“Doesn’t matter, since it’s your money I’m taking.”

“Hark at him! Second time in the air, and he thinks he’s Krum.”

“Hardly takes a Krum to beat you,” Potter said, grinning.

“Funny. Do you want to fly, or do you want to talk? I know you’re better at one than the other.”

Potter extended his hand. “Shake on it, then. Five laps, ten sickles. We’ll both start from the goal-hoops.”

“You do that,” said Draco, and took off like a shot.

As the wind ripped through his hair, he could hear Potter hollering behind him: “ *Oi!* Not fair!”

Like taking candy from a house-elf, he thought, suppressing a grin.

He dropped down on his belly and the Cleansweep soar. The world became a blur.

The distance to the stands vanished so quickly that he misjudged the time it would take to turn, and he had to haul the broom into a hairpin to avoid collision. It banked and swerved at the twitch of his hand. The wind roared in his ears. His pulse pounded in his chest, strong and deep as a timpani drum. Every motion of his hand corresponded with a movement of his body in three-dimensional space, turning the

race into a complex game of acrobatics, athletics, and aerodynamics, all conducted at breakneck speed.

This was flying: not the low-hovering circles that Hooch had them crawling through in classes, but flying that thrilled, flying that soared, that dared gravity to look up and realize how it was being spited.

He crossed the field again, knit a tidy loop around the goalposts, and raced back the way he'd come. It occurred to him that he didn't know where Potter was, and he checked over his shoulder, momentarily concerned that the boy had toppled off his broom.

A shadow soared over him. Potter's Comet dropped in from above and leveled in the airspace just before Draco's nose, forcing him to bank or else crash into him. The Cleansweep swerved and shuddered at the sudden jerk, and Draco veered off his line, nearly tumbling into the stands.

"Potter!" he roared. "That's cheating!"

Potter laughed, loud and free and slightly crazed, and accelerated again. "Fair play, Malfoy."

Well, that was not to be borne. He would not take a lesson in cunning from a Gryffindor.

Draco hauled the Cleansweep back in line and raced after him.

They sliced a pair of close turns around the goal hoops and cut twin lines across the field. Potter was, he had to admit, indecently good. Though he'd never learned the theory, he appeared to simply understand the physicality of flying, how to move and where and how far in advance. As they went into a turn, he naturally countersteered against the pull of momentum by tipping his shoulders against the direction of the broom, and when they hit the straight-and-narrow, he drew his elbows in, cutting air resistance.

Whether he realized he was doing these things, it was anyone's guess, but somewhere in the back of Harry Potter's hindbrain lurked a very good quidditch player, and it was having the time of its life.

The third and fourth laps they spent in a dead heat. On the fifth, Draco made his move. As they approached the goalposts, he wrenched up the nose of his broomstick, forcing a steep deceleration as air resistance threw itself against his body. Using his nose as a pivot point, he hauled the back of the broom around in a sweeping motion — turning like a spoke around the nose of the broom, instead of guiding the whole broom through the curve — and, steadying out, sped off in the other direction. The move gave him a few precious seconds on Potter, who caught what he was doing only once he'd initiated his own turn.

He raced back for the hoops, thinking cheerfully of the way ten sickles would jingle in his pocket.

He was just past centerfield when from behind him there came a great cry, and Potter shot past. The boy was plastered down to the line of his broom, legs outstretched, barely touching the footholds, remaining astride it by sheer arm strength alone; his cheek was pressed to the wood, and his elbows were locked to his chest. At the speed he was moving, the current alone ought to have blown him off the broomstick, but it hadn't. He had reduced his aerodynamic footprint to the size of a dinner plate, which — because he was smaller than Draco — meant that even on an older broom, he could outpace Draco on a straight-and-narrow, since he didn't need to position his body for a turn.

Which the git must have very well known, because as he cleared Draco's nose, he shot him the tiniest, shyest little smirk he'd ever seen.

Then he crossed the line of the goal-hoops and let out a victorious shout.

“Did you see that?” he hollered, circling around and pelting back at Draco. “I got you!”

“Yes, I saw it,” Draco said sourly, starting back down for the pitch. Potter followed him.

“I really thought you’d trounce me,” he said, eyes sparkling. “And when you did that sweeping thing near the end I thought you had me for sure.”

“That makes two of us.”

“You were right about the broom, by the way. You sort of need to yank on it, I think I’m too small.” Potter landed clumsily beside him and staggered off the broom, shaking with excitement. “Still,” he said, “that’s really cool. Is this what wizards do all the time? When they’re not working, or sleeping?”

Draco almost snorted in derision. “For professional quidditch players, I suppose.”

Potter’s eyes became saucers. “You can fly for a living?”

“Sure. If you’re very, very good. And if you don’t mind getting hauled around the continent for nine months of the year, living out of hotels, shilling for fitness potions…”

“And they pay you for it?”

“Not enough, in my opinion.”

“That’s mad,” said Potter dreamily. Casting a last look around the quidditch pitch, he sighed, “I’d pay to do this.”

Draco was still sour about his loss when they made it back to the castle. He managed to get Potter to stop talking about it by appealing to the need for silence while they crept back to the common room, but even so, being beaten put him in a foul mood.

Besides, Potter had cheated. That drop-in from above was patently against the rules of quidditch. It wasn't a real win.

And so what if, as they climbed the second-floor staircase, Draco hopped silently over the trick stair, and continued on his way without bothering to warn Potter about it? So what if, as Potter followed him, he planted his foolish foot right smack in the hole where the stair should be, and toppled face-forward? And so what if, when he did so, Draco — instead of trying to catch him or break his fall — gave a hearty snicker to himself, and kept going?

It wasn't as if Draco installed the trick stair. It was Potter's own fault for not looking.

"Trouble with the leg, Potter?" he inquired, leaning against the banister, enjoying himself.

"It's stuck!" Potter tugged fruitlessly at his ankle. "Give me a hand, would you?"

There was something patently hilarious about Harry Potter fighting a losing battle with a staircase. Draco decided to enjoy it a little longer. "I don't know. I think you've almost got it," he yawned.

A soft *meow* at the bottom of the staircase made them both jump. A black cat prowled into the puddle of moonlight on the landing, and sat down, staring at them with luminous yellow eyes.

"Mrs. Norris," Potter whispered. He and Draco made eye contact, and they wore the same expression of dawning dread.

"Filch—"

"Second floor—"

" *Move!"*

Potter tried to take a step, but his leg hauled him down. With a cry of frustration, Draco swept down, seized the other boy by the armpits,

and pulled with all his might. With a splinter of wood, the trick stair released him, and the two went tumbling to the floor.

Mrs. Norris let out a piercing *MEOW.*

“What’s that, my sweet?” croaked a froggy old voice from around the corner. “Do you smell something?”

MEOW.

“What’s that? What is it you see?” The voice came closer, echoing in the landing, thick with glee. “Have you found some mischief, my love?”

Quick as a flash, Potter popped up and scrambled up the stairs on his hands and knees, followed by Draco. They sprang upright at the third-floor landing and ducked out of sight behind a statue of Helga Hufflepuff.

“I heard that!” came Filch’s shrill cry. “You, there! Stop! Students out of bed! Students out of bed!” And there came the horrible scrape of a cane on hardwood, and the limping thump-thump that meant he was hobbling after them.

“Run,” Potter hissed, and grabbing Draco’s elbow, he took off sprinting down the corridor.

He was shockingly fast: Draco’s legs burned in the effort of keeping up. Hurtling down one hall and then another, it took him a moment to realize that Potter didn’t actually know where they were going — they were taking a zigzag pattern into the depths of the castle in the hopes of losing Filch. It was because of this that they soon rounded a corner and found themselves in a dead-end hallway, with the clattering three-footed footfalls of Filch fast approaching behind them.

“Fantastic,” he spat. “Well done, Potter. Couldn’t have led us anywhere else?”

“I didn’t see you helping!” retorted Potter. “Come on, in here.” He seized the nearest doorknob, which rattled but did not turn.

“Merlin. Out of the way!”

Draco whipped out his wand and blurted a sloppy Unlocking Charm. The lock clicked anyway, and Potter whipped the door open, hustling them both inside.

It slammed closed, and they slumped against it. Through the wood, they heard a cat’s woeful meowing grow louder and then quieter as it prowled past the door. Its master soon followed. “Lost them, did we, my sweet? Not to worry… They must be hiding around here somewhere…”

Potter poked Draco’s arm. “Lock it,” he mouthed.

“You lock it,” Draco muttered, embarrassed. He didn’t actually know the counterspell.

A rumble like a distant thunderclap shuddered through the room. Draco stiffened. Beside him, he felt Potter do the same.

The other boy turned around.

“Malfoy,” he said, in a very thin voice.

“Don’t tell me.”

“Malfoy, we should—”

“I don’t care. Don’t tell me.”

Wordlessly, Potter grabbed his shoulder and whirled him around.

Above them blazed the sallow, bloodshot eyes of a monstrous dog, so vast its bulk covered the distance between ceiling and floor. It had three heads. Its noses twitched and canted in their direction, while three drooling mouths poured slippery ropes of saliva from yellowish

fangs. It was standing quite still, all six eyes staring at them, as Draco supposed he himself might stare at an intruder who burst suddenly into his bedroom at some unthinkable hour and disturbed his sleep.

He dropped his head, quite certain that if he continued to look at it, he would faint away. In this way he noticed that between its paws laid a square of wood, hinged, with a small iron handle and a padlock. It was a trapdoor.

Draco remained motionless, stomach roiling, as the abyssal growls increased in volume. Frozen in terror, he barely noticed that Potter had been hissing his name.

Finally, Potter gave up on a coordinated effort. (This was wise.) Seizing Draco's wrist, he flung himself out the door, using his body weight to drag Draco with him. The door slammed shut, and they pelted back down the hallway. Draco regained more and more use of his legs the farther away he was from the dog, and by the time they reached the third-floor landing, he felt very nearly capable of independent movement.

Unfortunately, this came at precisely the wrong time.

"What on earth?" said a thin, watery voice.

Draco startled. It wasn't Filch.

"I believe it is w-w-well past your curfew," said the voice, losing some of its timidity. "You should not be here… Mister Malfoy… Mister P-P-Potter."

And Professor Quirrell emerged from the shadows, gazing at them with an expression of grave foreboding.

"Detention for a *month,* " Potter groused, dragging his spoon listlessly through his porridge. "After classes *every* day, and on

Saturdays, including quidditch matches…”

“No!” Weasley dropped his sausage biscuit in horror. “Not quidditch, too? Does he know the season’s on?”

Granger sniffed. “It’s your own fault, both of you,” she said. “You shouldn’t have been out of bed after curfew. You’re lucky it was only detention, and not house points. Then we *all* would’ve been punished.”

“Lucky—” Potter erupted.

“And as for you,” she told Draco. “I thought much better of you. I’ve come to expect a certain degree of recklessness from Harry and Ron, but I thought you took school more seriously.”

He sneered at her. She blinked at him, clearly expecting an apology, but he was more than happy to disappoint. “How dreadful a shock that must be for you,” he said. “I’ll be sure to ask your permission next time, *Mum.* ”

She withdrew, stung.

“What do they think they’re doing, keeping a thing like that locked up in a school?” said Weasley, changing the subject. “If any dog needs exercise, that one does.”

“I dunno, but it’s protecting something. Malfoy saw a trapdoor, which means it’s probably some sort of guard dog.”

“A guard dog for what?” asked Granger skeptically. “Who’d want to steal anything from Hogwarts? And if it’s so valuable that you’d need a—” She glanced around, and lowered her voice. “A *three-headed dog,”* she continued, “to defend it, why not put it in Gringotts?”

“Hogwarts is safer than Gringotts,” Draco said boredly, turning a page of his newspaper.

“I dunno,” frowned Weasley. “Seems like if you can get into a room with ‘Alohamora,’ it’s probably not the safest place in the world.”

“There’s also the dog,” Potter reminded him.

“Yeah, but still... Where the devil d’you even get a beast like that, anyway? You can’t very well pick it up from the pound.”

“Seems like something Hagrid would know,” Potter suggested, and the others agreed.

Draco shuffled his paper and said nothing. He’d become acquainted with the groundskeeper once or twice, in passing, and decided to keep his distance. Half-blood or muggle-born or whatever they were, wizards were one thing; half-breeds were quite another, and he’d already debased himself quite enough this year by associating with blood traitors and rabble. Besides, the brute’s size intimidated him.

In truth, he felt dismal about the ordeal. He didn’t care so much about his academic reputation as the fact that, since Snape had learned of the detention, his mother would soon know of it as well, and he could already feel her disappointment emanating across the many miles between here and Malfoy Manor.

He had decided to blame Potter for everything. It had been Draco’s mistake for trying to do something that benefited anybody besides himself; clearly, it had backfired, demonstrating once and for all that selflessness was for chumps. If Potter hadn’t tripped, they wouldn’t have been caught by Mrs. Norris, which would have prevented them from running into that awful dog, and Quirrell wouldn’t have found them.

The grudge festered all the way to detention that night. He slouched into the classroom late and tossed his satchel on the desk with bad grace, dropping into his chair. Potter, who was already there, winced at the sound.

Quirrell clasped his hands behind his back. “Good evening, gentlemen,” he said. “Tonight you will be writing lines.” He spoke with an arch and aristocratic accent, vaguely Turkish.

Potter sighed and began pulling out some parchment. Draco, feeling indolent and ill-tempered, did the same, only slower.

“In your best handwriting, I would like you to write the following.” Quirrell flicked his wand at the blackboard. The words *I am very sorry* appeared in white script. “Please write until you have reached five hundred lines or detention is finished, whichever is coming first. Mister Potter, you have a question?”

“May I borrow a quill, professor? I’ve forgotten mine.”

Quirrell hesitated. Draco glanced up from his parchment.

“Of course,” said the professor. He went and retrieved one from the teacher’s desk at the front of the room. Then moving slowly, he approached Potter’s desk with short, halting steps. He held the quill out by the very point of the nib. A vein pressed out from his temple.

With evident unease, Potter took it. As the quill changed hands, Quirrell gasped and snatched his arm back.

“Professor?” said Potter, alarmed. Quirrell staggered away and leaned on the desk.

Potter shot an anxious glance at Draco and began to rise from his chair. “Professor?” he repeated. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Mastering himself, Quirrell stood up. “Please continue writing,” he announced. “Unfortunately, I have just remembered some urgent affairs that are calling me elsewhere. I trust that you will follow instructions in my absence. Good-bye.”

He swept out.

Draco stared after him. “What’s his problem?” he said.

“I dunno.” Potter paused. “D’you think he’s coming back?”

“No clue.”

“Suppose we could just leave,” he suggested.

“I suppose we could.”

“But if he comes back, we’d get another detention.”

Draco snapped his fingers. “How’s this. I’ll go, and you stay, and if he comes back, you just tell him that we got worried, and that I went to find him.”

Potter lifted an eyebrow. “And what do I get out of that?”

It was a classically Slytherin question; Draco was almost proud. “Well, you won’t get in trouble if he comes back.”

“Yeah, but you won’t, either.”

“I see this as a case of mutual benefit.”

“But you get to leave, and I don’t.”

“We must all make sacrifices for the greater good.”

“Why don’t *you* stay, then, and I’ll go?”

“Because I’m a terrible liar,” lied Draco. “I’ll crack under the first sign of pressure. If you get me alone with an interrogator, I’ll crumble to pieces. Quirrell could ask me anything, and I’d probably tell him.”

“You think your winning argument here is that you *can’t* be trusted?”

“Potter. Listen. This is a classic logical dilemma. If we both stay, and he doesn’t come back, we’re idiots. If we both leave and he does come back, we’re cooked. If one of us leaves, and the other lies, we’re both in the clear, regardless. The third outcome is clearly

optimal! But it only happens if someone stays back. If we can't agree on who stays back, then we'll sit in here the whole time, and probably come out looking like idiots when he doesn't show."

"Okay, but I don't see how any of that means you should be the one to go."

"Because," Draco said patiently, "I've buried the lede. You see, *I'm* going to go no matter what. So the only decision you have to make, really, is whether you'd like to keep us both out of trouble, or risk getting us both into more of it."

Potter fell quiet for a moment, mulling this over.

"Right," he said thoughtfully. "So, if you leave, and I stay, what's stopping me from just telling Quirrell the truth?"

Draco slouched low in his chair. "Unbelievable."

"You did have me for a minute, I'll give it to you."

"Can't believe we're going to sit here for an *hour* and do *nothing* because you couldn't take one for the team..."

"We're going to sit here for an hour because we've got detention, and that's no more my fault than yours," said Potter fairly. "Or we can both leave. I'd be alright with that, too."

The negotiations were interrupted by the door opening. Instead of Quirrell, however, it was Snape.

"Hello, Professor!" exclaimed Draco.

"Hello, Professor," muttered Potter.

Snape ignored both of them. "Where is Quirrell?" he demanded, his eyes flitting around the room, like Quirrell might be clinging to the rafters.

“Gone,” said Draco and Potter at once. Draco added, “We were just debating whether or not to go looking for him.”

Snape rounded on Potter. “What did he say to you?”

“Nothing in particular, sir.”

“He said nothing to you? Did you arrive before Mr. Malfoy? Did he say nothing to you, then?”

“He said ‘good evening, Mister Potter,’ and ‘you may sit down,’ I think,” said Potter, blinking. “Also, ‘here are your lines.’ Erm, and I asked for a quill…”

Snape dismissed this with a jerk of his head. “What else?”

“Nothing, sir, honestly.”

He scanned Potter’s face for evidence of lies. Finding none, his eyes narrowed. “Students should not be left alone in a classroom. You should have found a teacher. Five points from Gryffindor,” he snapped. Then he spun on his heel and beckoned. “Come, Draco.”

Draco scrambled out of his chair, beaming.

“Wait,” Potter called after him. “Where are you going?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Draco simpered. He sent a nasty smile over his shoulder. “Oh, and if he comes back, *do* tell Quirrell what happened, wouldn’t you?”

He traipsed out, following Snape, and the door swung shut on Potter’s flabbergasted face.

Buoyed by the sublime satisfaction of this moment, Draco practically floated down the halls on Snape’s heels. He didn’t even think to ask where they were going until they’d climbed the Grand Staircase and were hurrying along a slim corridor hung with portraits of various

wizards in purple hats. “Do you have a letter from my mother, professor?”

“Hush!” There was real anger in Snape’s glare. “Do you mistake me for deaf?”

“N-no, professor.”

“Then draw upon whatever dismal reserves of restraint you possess,” he said, “and lower your voice.”

Draco bowed his head, chastised. “Sorry, sir.”

The Potions Master stopped in front of a portrait of Giffard Abbott, a portly wizard from the fourteenth century. “Dragon’s egg,” said Snape.

Abbott sighed. “Oh, to be young again…”

“Dragon’s egg,” Snape repeated tersely, and Abbott swung forward with another sigh.

Behind him lay a small servant’s corridor, dark as night and so narrow that Snape had to step sideways through it. Draco, who could fit easily through, hopped into the passageway and swung the portrait-hole closed behind them.

In a moment, Snape’s wand flared with light. Though it wasn’t necessary, Draco whispered *‘Lumos’* and held his wand aloft, adding his weak torch to Snape’s brighter one. If Snape was impressed by his godson’s proficiency in Charms, he gave no sign of it.

They moved along the passage, their feet shuffling on the dusty floorboards. Through the walls, Draco could hear voices murmuring, and footsteps from the rooms beside them. Pipes rumbled overhead. They were moving inside the castle walls; if he remembered his Bagshot, these passages would have been built into the original castle for staff use, before it was kept by house-elves. Bagshot

wasn’t quite clear on who these servants would have been; some scholars thought it was simply a hired corps of witches and wizards, while others suggested the Founders had magically animated golems to cook and clean. But Chroniculus Punnet — whose magnum opus, *Decline and Fall of the Wizarding Empire,* had been Lucius’s favorite book — went still further, and claimed that the first servants of Hogwarts had been muggles kept under the Imperius Curse. (Bagshot had written a scathing dissent to Punnet’s theory in the *Journal of Contemporary Magical History,* and Professor Binns refused to answer questions about it.)

When they emerged through an alcove on the other side of the passage, they were outdoors, in the covered walk beside the Transfiguration courtyard. The sun had long since set, and their shadows danced long and freakish in the light from the braziers. They extinguished their wands and as Draco was tucking his back into his interior pocket, voices echoed from the end of the courtyard walk.

“I understand you are upset, Cornelius, but I cannot endorse what you propose…”

“Whyever not? We’ve got the political capital for it. Bones says the DMLE has been spoiling for something to break in the new auror cohort, and Asquith assures me that we have the votes in the Wizengamot…”

“But you will not have mine,” said a calm, elderly tenor. “You have neglected and brushed aside… not the least of which… possibility of a challenger. You have not been half careful enough, I think, with Runcorn…”

Draco looked up at Snape, who wore a tense, alert expression. As the voices came closer, he swiftly stepped into the shade of an alcove, pulling Draco in behind him. He pressed a finger to his lips.

“A protest party,” scoffed the other voice in a hoarse Estuary accent. “With your contingent on-side, we’d have a supermajority…”

“And a consolidated minority of increasing cohesion and drive… I confess, I am surprised I must explain the dangers…”

“I appreciate your candor,” said the voice, sounding like it actually rather did not. “But this will come to vote, and I warn you now, if you align yourself against me, my side… there will be those who paint you as a sympathizer.”

“Are you threatening me, Cornelius?” The voice was almost indulgent, like a parent questioning a child.

“What, I? Never. You insult me with the suggestion. But there are strong voices in my party, sir, strong voices, and I cannot be held responsible for what they say or do.”

“I am, I confess, less versed than you in politics,” the voice said politely, now so close Draco could hear the rustle of robes. “I have much to learn; it was my impression that the job of the Minister of Magic was to lead his party, and the people in it…”

The voices shrank away. When they were on the verge of becoming indistinct, Snape stepped out of the alcove and into the torchlight. “Come,” he told Draco, and they hurried down the hallway after them.

As they turned a corner, Draco saw who it had been. Albus Dumbledore stood in a set of midnight-blue robes, inlaid with silver trim, and a matching cap so long it hung below the ends of his shock-white hair. A pair of golden half-moon spectacles sat on the end of his narrow nose.

Beside him stood a short man shaped like a flower vase, clad in a pinstriped suit, and sporting a receding crown of gray hair underneath a green porkpie hat. Draco recognized him with a start: it was the Minister of Magic.

“Good evening, Professor Dumbledore,” purred Snape, strolling into the light. Less reverently, he added, “Minister.”

“Hello, Severus,” said Dumbledore warmly. “A lovely night for a walk, is it not?”

“It is,” Snape said, “passably temperate.”

This was an obvious lie; it was almost December, and bitterly cold. Draco frowned at him.

“Cornelius and I were out to do a bit of stargazing before he returns to the Ministry,” Dumbledore informed him. He gestured to the skies. “One can see stars out here in the highlands that one never glimpses in the city, no matter how keenly one looks… the smog, of course, obscures them. London, for all its charms, has a problem focusing its eye on distant objects.”

“Of course,” said Snape softly, raking his eyes over Fudge’s person. “I often find it… *profoundly* enlightening… to stargaze.”

Fudge said: “Yes. Stargazing.”

His Oxford tapped a reveille on the cobblestones.

“I know you for a fellow appreciator of the heavens, Severus,” Dumbledore agreed. “But to what do we owe the pleasure of this young man…?”

There was an awkward beat of silence. Snape drove his heel down on Draco’s foot.

Oh. “Malfoy! Draco Malfoy, sir,” Draco blurted, sticking out his hand. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“And a great pleasure to meet you as well, Mister Malfoy,” said Dumbledore, shaking his hand gently. “I had hoped to make your acquaintance earlier. I hope it is not too bold of me to say that you were the great revelation of this year’s Sorting. There are a few upsets every year. I believe it was a second cousin of yours who

caused a similar sensation in… 1970, Severus, was it not? Can it be so long ago?"

"Seventy-one," said Snape.

"Oh, dear, but I do think you must be wrong. Are you sure? It may have been after your time…"

"I was *in* that cohort, Albus."

"Ah, you must be right, then."

"Malfoy, you said?" Fudge glanced at Draco, appearing to notice him for the first time. "Of the Wiltshire Malfoys, surely? Son of Lucius?"

"Yes, Minister."

The Minister's hands disappeared behind his back. "Terrible business," he said stiffly. "About your father. Terrible business."

Draco did not know what to say. He looked to Snape for guidance, but received none.

"I strongly disavowed it," announced Fudge, seemingly speaking to no one in particular. "I unambiguously and plainly disavowed it. It does not matter what a man's crimes are, or how many number his sins; I do not celebrate unsanctioned bloodletting. In this country, we find justice in a court of law, not in the hands of renegades. Lucius Malfoy was a free man."

Unambiguous and plain are synonyms, thought Draco.

"It was a dark day for the wizarding world, I say, a dark day," rambled Fudge. "It never would have happened in my Ministry. Secretary Bones and I have worked tirelessly to secure Azkaban. We have doubled the size of the auror force, and expect to increase it fifty percent over the next calendar year. The Witness Protection Agency — our invention, by the way — has developed protocols to guard the anonymity of those who give testimony…"

Draco wondered if Fudge knew he wasn't old enough to vote.

"Have you eaten, Minister?" asked Snape suddenly.

"What?"

"Have you eaten dinner? If you have not, you must join us. The kitchens are making blood pudding."

"Oh. No, I couldn't—"

Snape lifted his voice over the Minister's. "The Hogwarts recipe is quite rare. They harvest the fresh blood of suckling piglets, each no older than a day, and mix it with ground sausage carved from the rump of a virgin mooncalf. This is served in a gravy of duck fat and beef stock, seasoned with the sausage drippings, and whatever blood remains from the pigs."

Cornelius Fudge paled. He dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief. "Delightful," he managed. "Unfortunately, I must really take my leave. I am not at liberty to… that is… I have a prior engagement which I must attend. Pardon me, Professor — young Malfoy — Albus." And with a dip of his porkpie hat, he walked quickly down the corridor, disappearing from sight.

Dumbledore sighed. "Excessive," he said, "and a touch unwarranted, I think. He means well."

"He's a simpering, pompous fool."

"He's the Minister of Magic."

"What did I say?"

Dumbledore turned to Draco. "I imagine you are somewhat confused," he said kindly. "I will explain. Professor Snape has elected to foreshorten the Minister's visit. Our Potions Master has even less patience for tedium than I, and politicians do tend to… shall we say, 'pontificate'?"

“I beg your pardon, professor, but I don’t take your meaning.”

Snape’s mouth was flat but twitching.

“The Minister is a vegetarian,” Dumbledore clarified.

Draco burst out with a snort of laughter.

“I am glad you share your godfather’s sense of humor,” said the headmaster indulgently. “Laughter is the most precious of all magics. Now, I apologize for the rudeness of what I am about to do, but would you allow me to borrow your Potions Master? I have a question about the constellation Orion which I believe he alone can answer.”

This dismissal was as gentle as it could be, and Draco did not mind the opportunity to leave: he was wretchedly uncomfortable, and felt up to his ears in matters he didn’t understand.

“Draco,” called Snape, as he was leaving. “Turn around.”

He obeyed. Snape made a show of looking him over, and snapped: “Where on earth did you get all that dust on your robe? Ten points from Gryffindor, for failure to meet standards of public hygiene. Give it here.”

Draco’s mouth dropped open. The dust on his robe came from the servant’s passage, and the same was encrusted all over Snape’s own cloak.

Rendered too speechless to object, he shucked his robe. Snape snatched it and cast a Scouring Charm. “There,” he said coldly, thrusting it back at Draco. “If I catch you flouting the dress code again, it’ll be twenty points. Good night.”

With that, he and Dumbledore strode off together into the night. Dumbledore cast a sympathetic look at Draco as they left, and he

heard him say to Snape: “...a certain measure of kindness… a child so very young…”

A chill stole through the courtyard. Fuming, Draco shook out his robe to put it back on. As he swung it about his shoulders, something small and white fluttered out of its folds, and he caught it before it hit the ground.

It was an envelope. The address read simply ‘Draco.’

He grinned and looked up, but Snape was already gone.

NEXT CHAPTER: 9/6/22

The Lady of Malfoy Manor

Chapter 6: The Lady of Malfoy Manor

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The holidays arrived far too slowly, and yet somehow earlier than anyone expected. One morning in mid-December, Hogwarts rose to find itself covered in several feet of snow. A glassy sheen of ice covered the lake, and icicles the size of dragon claws dangled from the eaves of the Great Hall. The Weasley twins bewitched some of these to drop whenever a Slytherin passed underneath them. Poor Ulysses, who had fought his way through a stormy sky to deliver Draco's *Daily Prophet*, sprained his wing, and Draco spent a fretful morning in the rookery nursing him back to health.

He was very much looking forward to going home. His mother's letter had overflowed with encouragement and praise, and tactful allusions to the many presents and treats which awaited him at Malfoy Manor. His absence had a bad influence on her, and led her to be profligate with Christmas shopping, and though she knew she ought to save some of them for his birthday, she might be persuaded, with a certain quantity of hugs and kisses, to release them early unto his keeping.

Granger was going home, too. "My family always spends Christmas at my house," she explained. "My grandparents come to stay with us, and we have the neighbors over for dinner. It's quite nice."

They were working in the Great Hall. Fat Christmas trees strangled in garlands and baubles flanked the walls, christened with a dusting of magical frost. Snow floated past the windows in feathery whirls, and Nearly Headless Nick led a caroling band of ghosts around the castle, guiding them in mostly tuneless renditions of 'Silver Bells' and 'Christmas Time is Here.' Peeves had strapped a bough of mistletoe

to a fishing-rod, and with it, took to harrying young couples around the castle, hooting and heckling.

Something occurred to Draco. “Granger,” he said, “what do your muggles do for a living?”

“My parents? They’re dentists. Together, actually. ‘Granger and Granger, Orthodontia and Dental.’” She sighed glumly. “They want to start me on braces next year.”

Draco frowned. “What kind of dents?”

“...What?”

“What kind of dents do they study?”

She hid a giggle behind her hand. “It’s nothing to do with ‘dents.’ Dentists are people who fix your teeth.”

“Oh,” he said, irritated by her condescension. It wasn’t like *he* ever needed a stupid dentist. “Why are yours like that, then?”

When she didn’t answer, he looked at her. Hurt dimmed Granger’s face like a sudden rain cloud on a sunny morning, swooping out of nowhere and sullying all the fun.

“They’re getting fixed next year,” she muttered. Turning away, she hunched over her book.

His satisfaction from shutting her up evaporated quickly, and the knowledge that she was guilting him on purpose did not help him resist the effort as much as he would have liked.

“There’s no need to be a baby about it,” he muttered back. “I was only asking a question.”

“It was a rude question.”

“Don’t be silly. Can’t you see I don’t give a fig about your teeth, whether they’re snaggly or otherwise?”

“Snaggly!”

“Snaggly, outsize, crooked, what would you call it?”

“They’re — in need of correction,” she said, shrinking into herself.

Realization struck. “They don’t look like that on purpose?”

“Draco!”

“No, I — listen — *don’t hit me,* witch — you’re serious? You don’t like them? Why the devil haven’t you been to St. Mungo’s for them, then?”

“I don’t know what that is!” she wailed, and making a sound like a kicked kitten, she scooted away from him.

He flung one hand in the air. “Well, that’s not *my* fault!”

Weasley, who was puzzling over a chess game with Potter, looked over. “Malfoy,” he said sagely, “you ever hear the one about the wizard in the bottomless pit?”

“No,” he replied, through gritted teeth.

Potter, after ten minutes of deep concentration, ventured: “Knight to D-six.”

Weasley glanced at the board, said “Queen to D-six,” and his queen trotted cheerfully across the board to clobber it. “All right, you’re about to hear an Arthur Weasley classic.” (“Goody,” said Draco.) “So this guy, he’s stuck in a bottomless pit. And he’s been falling for a while, when his mate gets him on the radio, and he says: ‘Where are you?’ and the guy says ‘I’m stuck in a bottomless pit.’ And his mate says ‘Well, you better apparate out of there.’ And the guy says, ‘No, no, that’s impossible.’ So he hangs up. A few hours later, his mate

rings him again, and he says: ‘Hey, listen, I’ve had an idea to get you out of the bottomless pit. I’ll apparate in there, grab you, and you can side-along apparate out with me.’ And the guy says, ‘No, I can’t do that.’ And he hangs up. And then a few hours after that, his mate rings him a third time, and says: ‘Okay, I’ve got it. I’ll apparate in there, hand you a Portkey, and it’ll teleport you right back to the top.’ And the guy says, ‘Thank you, mate, that’s really nice and all, but I just can’t do it.’

“And now the mate’s really good and fed up, I mean proper fuming, and he says: ‘What’s wrong with you? You’ve been in there for hours, what’s the problem?’ And so his — oh. Rook to G-eight,” he added, and Potter made a sad noise as his knight was bludgeoned to death. “Check. So his mate’s saying this, he’s saying: ‘What will it take to get you out of this bottomless pit?’ And the wizard says: ‘Why would I leave? Any minute now, I could see the bottom!’”

Draco lifted his eyebrow. “And you decided to bequeath this pearl of wisdom to us, because…?”

Weasley glanced meaningfully at Granger, who was still hunched over her book. “Starting to see the bottom yet?” he said.

The bell chimed four o’clock. All along the Gryffindor table, a line of china teapots shimmered into existence like a row of eggs. Draco filled his cup, and then, after a moment’s thought, he filled Granger’s. She continued to ignore him.

“Here,” Draco said loftily. “Girls drink first, that’s the rules.”

She shook her head.

“Don’t be like that.” He paused. “I haven’t anything against your teeth. Nobody even notices them.” He pushed the teacup closer to her. “Cream or sugar?”

She shook her head.

“Take it black, do you? That’s sort of tough, Granger. I’m impressed.”

“No, I don’t,” she huffed, reaching past him for the sugar. She dropped four cubes into her teacup and stirred vigorously. Draco stared.

“What on earth—”

“I like it sweet.”

“As *syrup?”*

“They make it bitter here!”

“Are you deranged? Are you, in fact, possessed?”

“Well, how do *you* take it, if you’re such an expert?”

“Dash of cream and a squeeze of lemon. It’s superior.”

“Blech.”

“Philistine.”

“Blech!”

But she was talking and laughing again, and that was far preferable to the alternative, so he elected not to prosecute the matter any further.

On December twenty-first, he rose at dawn and brought his trunk down to the Great Hall, where a swarm of students buzzed excitedly in anticipation of going home. Some came to see them off, including Fred and George Weasley, who were organizing a massive snowball tournament for all the students staying behind. They had dug up a pair of banker’s visors, and carried around clipboards and quills, offering people the chance to sign up. The morning’s sole point of excitement occurred when Marcus Flint tried to enter a first-year Hufflepuff’s name in the seventh year bracket, and the twins repaid

him by jinxing a battery of snowballs to chase him around the courtyard; this lasted until Filch caught wind of the trouble, and chased them all the way back to Gryffindor Tower, cane in hand.

Granger rode with him on the train. She was getting off in London, whereas he was to change trains at King's Cross and continue south. As they were disembarking, she handed him a folded square of parchment.

"That's my address," she said. "I already gave it to Harry and Ron; you can write to me, if you like."

He held it awkwardly, not quite sure what to do.

"And… and I suppose I ought to have yours," she said, crossing her arms, "if I'm to write you."

"You don't have an owl."

"I'll get one!" she said, turning brilliantly red. "Or I'll send it by regular post; it's good enough for most people, anyway."

He was fairly certain that the last muggle to try and deliver anything to the Estate had brought news of the Roman invasion, but nevertheless, he jotted down the address. Granger squinted at it.

"'Malfoy Manor,'" she read, "'Wiltshire.'" She paused. "That's it?"

"Well, yes." He tapped the page. "You'll want to put my name on it, too, or else Mummy will think it's for her and read it."

"What about a postcode?"

They both gazed doubtfully at the parchment. He didn't know what a postcode was, but he was too embarrassed to ask.

"There's only one Malfoy Manor," he observed.

"Right," she said, looking faint. "I suppose so."

He bid her goodbye, and resolved to write her a letter, if only to prove that he hadn't made the address up. Then he was alone on his second train of the day, and speeding through the English countryside towards home.

Malfoy Manor stood dark and resplendent under a cloak of ivory snow. A horseless sleigh carried Draco through wrought-iron gates and a twinned marble gateposts, along the long shaft of an avenue paved on either side by silver-clad lawns, more gates, an arrowhead of a drive in dark stone, and above it, the enormous layer-cake of a Neoclassical mansion in red brick and granite trim. The ground plan of the manor was oriented on a cross-axis, formed by the intersection of a domed central pavilion and wings extending to the east and west, each of which sported twelve windows at least. Over the twelve-foot maw of the entrance loomed a heavy pediment, braced on marble pilasters, with arched loggia and an elaborate relief of a pair of sea dragons doing battle. Marble sculpture clung like crusts of frost to the long, slate-covered ridge roof.

On the plinth stood a small, dark-haired figure in a green velvet peacoat and a cossack hat. At the sight of her, Draco leapt out of the carriage and ran to the door, staggering through billowing drifts of powder.

She hurried down the steps; he went charging up them; they collided in the middle, and she went down on her back in the snow.

"Sorry!" He sprang up, horrified. "Sorry! Sorry! Mother! Are you alright?"

Narcissa flung her head back and laughed not from amusement but from delight. "Goodness, am I really so frail as that?" she said. "Can I not receive an embrace without hurting myself? Perhaps I *am* old." She held out her hands and waggled her fingers. "Come and kiss your mother that loves you. You're so beautiful I can barely breathe."

He helped her up, brushing snow from her shoulders, and stood somberly at attention while she peppered his face with kisses.

“It was my fault. I oughtn’t have jumped. It wasn’t proper.”

“Boys always down from their first term with terrible manners,” she said mildly, batting away his hands. “I was warned to expect it. Besides, there’s no one here but you and I. Oh, and, well— Dobby is quite desperate to see you, but I told him you would meet him in the dining room. He has been cooking furiously. One would think we were receiving you back from war.”

“Excellent. They only had candy on the train, I’m starving.”

“Did they really? Appalling. When I went to Hogwarts, they served three-course lunches in the dining cars, and you could get bottles of Bollinger delivered to your compartment on request. *Sic transit gloria mundi,* my darling *…* shall we go and put poor Dobby out of his misery?”

In the dining room, Dobby had outdone himself. Lifting a silver cloche, he presented a bowl of spiced mushroom soup, a loaf of black rye bread with hazelnuts and pumpkin seed, and a rose of soft yellow butter. The napkins were folded in the shape of a heart.

When Draco entered the room, he bowed so deeply his ears touched the floor. He was wearing his finest pillowcase, with lace trim and hardly a stain on it. “Master Draco,” he said. “We welcomes you home, sir. Dobby has prepared a soup—”

“Dobby!” It surprised Draco how much it pleased him to see the elf. He rubbed the little creature’s head affectionately. “Have you been eating? You haven’t grown a bit since I last saw you.”

“This is a very good joke,” said Dobby with plaintive dignity. “It is getting funnier every time, sir.”

“Isn’t it? I think so. This looks very good, by the way, well done.”

The elf’s ears twitched back in pleasure. “Thank you, sir. There is madeleines and honey date ice cream in the freezer, if the master

wants dessert."

"You mean honeyed dates *and* ice cream, Dobby."

"Indeed, no, in fact. Dobby has been experimenting with ice cream flavors," Narcissa said indulgently, settling herself at the table. "He's working on… oh, what was it, this week?"

"Olive oil chocolate eggplant," he said proudly.

"Mm-hm. Just so." She lowered her voice to Draco. "We decided it was best for him to get a hobby. There was a grieving period when you left in September — meals were inedible for a month. I lost nearly a stone."

"And you eat this ice cream?"

"Oh, yes, some of it. Or somebody else does. I had Constance Crabbe over for tea on Thursday, and I made it clear she absolutely could not leave without trying some of Grandmother Malfoy's Frozen Cricket Surprise…"

Draco snorted. "And she liked it, did she?"

"Well, she couldn't very well say she didn't. That would be heinously rude. Luckily, Constance has an expressive face." She sighed. "She will forgive me. After all, I am a madwoman, and a madwoman must have her amusements."

This was sobering. He set down his spoon.

Narcissa had scarcely appeared in public since his father's death, ostensibly because she was still in mourning, but actually out of a desire to keep away from the Society limelight. As an excuse, she informed people that she was unwell, which at first garnered much sympathy, but after several years, the rumor mill kicked up again. *'Malfoy Manor – CLOSED FOREVER?'* speculated one author from *Witch Weekly,* in an issue Draco had burned before his mother found

it. *‘Narcissa Malfoy quits the scene to hide in seclusion with her son! It appears that her husband’s untimely death, combined with her sister’s betrayal, have driven her quite insane.’*

It all would have been easy enough to dismiss, if none of it were true.

“I’m sure she didn’t thank you for that,” he said, tearing a chunk of bread.

“I should have done worse,” she said grimly. “She was a terror. Manners that would have had my grandmother rolling… ‘I’m ever so *glad* that Vince is following in the family footsteps, because you know, family is *very* important to us Crabbes.’ And then: ‘Oh, but I do hope that doesn’t offend you, Narcissa.’ She thinks *that’s* subtlety? Why, I ought to have laughed her out the door — ‘very important,’ she says. Constance! An upjumped American dollar princess. Her ancestors were accountants for my ancestors, that’s what her ‘family footsteps’ lead back to. And she has the nerve to pretend she pities me, as if she wouldn’t punt her precious Slytherin son from the Tower to be in my position.”

At the word ‘Slytherin,’ Draco swallowed. “I see,” he said quietly.

Guilt flashed across Narcissa’s face. “Oh, but it’s not a worry to me,” she said quickly. “You must believe me, Draco, it’s not your fault. The Sorting Hat made an awful mistake. I’ve written to Dumbledore but he says nothing can be done…”

“There’s no point.”

“Yes, and it really isn’t so bad,” she said, as if trying to convince herself. “There are lots of successful Gryffindors. And you’ll make all sorts of connections—”

“Such as?”

“Well, I don’t know exactly what connections, but there must be some. Lots of Ministers come from Gryffindor.”

“I don’t want to be Minister of Magic.”

“Goodness, at least have a think about it first.” She smiled and reached across the table to take his hand. “Really, darling, you can’t take it to heart. It’s a dreadful shame but — these things do happen, and when they do, we must lift our chins, and show a stiff upper lip, and simply carry on with our lives. And you know, I always thought you looked very handsome in gold.” She squeezed his hand. “I’ve been thinking about it, and imagine how well you’ll look in your Gryffindor quidditch uniforms! And Gryffindor prefect, of course, because making prefect will be easy for you… and you know, when you *really* think about it, everyone knows that Dumbledore favors the Gryffindors, that’s no secret. So your chances of Head Boy—”

“I don’t care about being Head Boy, either.” He shoved his bowl away from him, and folded his arms, sulking. “I hate it there. It’s loud, and messy, and everyone’s stupid or low-class or both, and there’s barely anyone like us.”

“Have you made any friends, at least?”

He shrugged. “I guess so.”

She smiled encouragingly. “Other boys?”

“No. It’s… well, there’s one girl. But she’s bossy and loud and she annoys me most of the time.”

Narcissa was beaming. “But that’s splendid! I’d like to meet her. Shall we have her over? Would you like to invite her?”

“Probably not,” said Draco, thinking: *Absolutely never.* He pushed back his chair. “Perhaps some ice cream later,” he told Dobby’s hopeful face.

His mother caught his meaning. She said, “You must be tired, my darling. Shall I show you your room?”

“I remember the way. It’s been months, not years. You should have a lie-down. Have Dobby see to your back.”

“My back is fine. I’m thirty-two, not sixty.”

“Well, fine, but *I’m* having a lie-down, and I’m not sixty, either.” He stood, and she rose with him. “Dobby, bring Mother’s dressing-gown, would you?”

Narcissa halted the elf with an outstretched hand. “Dobby, don’t,” she said. “I’m not having a lie-down; I haven’t any interest in one.”

“Yes, but if the lady changes her mind, I’d like her to have it.”

“And if the lady changes her mind, she knows where to find her own dressing gown,” she said sweetly. “And she knows how to call for her own house-elf, too. Has her son forgotten?”

“No, it’s just—”

“Never mind. In fact I think I will go upstairs,” she said, striding past him to the stairs. “I have a novel to read, and I may do some painting while you convalesce. I find myself restless.”

“Mother.”

“Don’t fret! I will be perfectly happy to entertain myself, as always. You know where to find me.”

“Mother!”

She turned, and her expression was bright and pained and lovely. “Oh, Draco, you *worry* too much,” she breathed. “How am I to feel like a mother when you fuss more than I do?”

He bowed his head, uncomfortable. But in a moment, the fire went out of her, and she sank like a punctured zeppelin. “But you’re only looking out for me,” she said. “You’re only looking out for your mummy, aren’t you? My darling boy. You only want to take care of me. I don’t know what I did to deserve — such a darling — *darling* boy.” She turned, grasping the banister for support, and Draco noticed that beneath her peacoat, Narcissa was terribly thin. “Dobby, please… Please bring me my nightgown, after all.”

“Yes, mistress,” Dobby cried, clearly relieved that his masters’ orders had finally eclipsed, and disappeared.

Draco offered his arm. “I can help you up to your room—?”

“No,” she said coldly.

There was a silence.

“No,” she murmured. “No, that’s all right. Thank you, my sweet one. You go and rest. It’s been a long day, and we all need… some rest.”

And lifting the hem of her skirt, she slowly receded up the stairwell, leaving Draco alone in the vast dining room.

On Christmas Eve, he woke up to the sound of an owl doing its level best to destroy his bedroom window.

“Ulysses!” he snapped thickly, kicking off the covers. “You little airborne rat, I told you not to scratch the glass.”

As he staggered out of bed, slinging on his bathrobe, he realized the bird terrorizing the glass wasn’t Ulysses, but a scrappy-looking screech owl with a letter and a package tied to its legs. He hauled up the sash, and it fled into the room, made a frantic circle around the ceiling, and alighted on his desk. It required several treats before he could coax the letter away from it.

It was addressed:

Mr. Draco L. Malfoy

Malfoy Manor

Wiltshire(???)

The envelope wasn't sealed with wax, but a sticky substance he had to work off with a letter-opener. The letter itself was written in some kind of strange gray graphite-residue instead of ink, and left silvery smudges on his fingers when he touched it.

Dear Draco,

Merry Christmas. I really hope this owl gets to you somehow because I went through a whole lot of trouble to get it. My parents still wouldn't get me one of my own so I told them I had to go to Diagon Alley for more schoolbooks and while they were distracted I snuck into Eeylops and asked them if I could rent an owl for one use only. The clerk didn't want to do it but I begged & begged so he let me use his personal owl for three sickles and a knut. I don't know if that's a good rate or not because I haven't used wizard money much before but I didn't have any other choice. Please do not tell me if I have been robbed.

How is your break? Mine is good. My grandmother is here. I can't talk about magic or Hogwarts or anything around her, because she thinks I go to a girls' boarding school in Edinburgh, but I do give her an edited version. (I have to pretend you and Harry and Ron are all girls. Sorry.) My grandfather is eighty-nine years old and doesn't hear very well, so I have to shout everything around him, he reminds me ever so much of Binns. It's hard to remember that the stairs here don't move and I don't have to worry about the chocolate running away. Everyone was very excited to hear that I have friends now.

I’m sending you a Cadbury bar so you can see that muggles have done at least one thing better than wizards.

Yours sincerely,

Hermione J. Granger

He folded the letter carefully and set it aside. The accompanying package was wrapped imperfectly (there was liberal application of tape) in yellow paper with a pattern of sheep, and tied with a cherry-red ribbon. Inside he found a hardcover book called *History of the Peloponnesian War,* by Thucydides, with a brown leather cover and a title in gold embossed lettering. He flipped open the cover to read the inscription:

To DLM: Thucydides = muggle!! -HJG.

He rolled his eyes.

There was also a bar of something called Cadbury chocolate, which he nibbled and deemed acceptable. It wasn’t the next Bertie Bott’s, or anything, but he could understand why she kept nattering on about it.

It really was outrageous that her muggles wouldn’t let her have her own owl. Something ought to be done about that. Maybe he’d write to the Minister or something.

Dobby apparated into the room with a *crack.* “Merry Christmas, Master Draco,” he chirped. “Mistress is still sleeping, but she is asking Dobby to wake her up when her darling boy is awake, so she can come and open presents together.”

“That’s fine, but hold off a minute, would you?”

Draco stooped over his desk, fumbling around for a bit of parchment.

Dear Granger,

I received your letter. It is mildly impressive to me that you managed to find the shabbiest, loudest, most ill-bred owl in the world. I am sending this with Ulysses so you can see what a proper owl acts like.

Thank you for the book. It is very nice. I appreciate it.

You will find enclosed a cheque for 10 galleons, which

He paused, tapping his quill on his bottom lip.

You will find enclosed a cheque for 10 15 galleons, which should be enough for something

---

He paused again. Then he wet his quill and struck through what he'd written.

Thank you for the book. It is very nice. I appreciate it. You will find enclosed a cheque for 10 galleons, which I will bring your present to Hogwarts.

Merry Christmas.

Regards,

Draco Malfoy

He folded up the letter, strapped it to Ulysses' leg, and released both owls into the bright winter morning. Closing the shutter, he said, "All right, Dobby, go on and wake her."

It was an excellent haul. In addition to dozens of books and toys, his mother had bought him a new broomstick, the Nimbus Two Thousand, and heedless of her pleas, he mounted it immediately and rode it down the stairwell. It flew like a dream, smooth and fast and snappy, and he didn't get around to his other presents until noon.

He knew Potter would be sick with envy. Maybe, if he was extra nice to Draco, he'd let him ride it. (Then it occurred to him that he couldn't take it to school, and the chances of Potter coming to Malfoy Manor were about a Cleansweep Five's against his Nimbus; and he decided he would just have to brag about it enough for Potter to get the idea.)

Dobby had a present for him, too. It was a poppet made from braided string and pillowcase cuttings that must have come from his own supply. Draco thanked him withh an orange, which Dobby tearfully promised to add to his collection.

"Collection?" said Narcissa thoughtfully, once the elf was out of earshot. "So that's the smell coming from the cabinets. I thought we had mildew."

The last gift on the pile, wrapped in plain black paper, was Snape's. He saved it for last.

It contained a note in jagged cursive:

Draco.

This was your father's. Upon his death he willed it to me for reasons unclear. It may have been some sort of joke about keeping one's cauldron lit.

I expect you will appreciate it more than I.

—Professor Snape

The idea of his father making a joke was novel. In his few memories of his father, he did not recall a lot of chuckles to be had.

Under the wrapping was a cedar box with the Malfoy crest inset, and it opened up to a lovely bed of purple silk, upon which rested a silver lighter, engraved ‘L.A.M.’ When he thumbed the wheel, a small blue flame sprang from the top, about the length of his thumb.

He showed it to his mother.

“Oh, that *was* your father’s,” she marveled, lifting it to the light. “I remember. I wondered where this thing got off to.”

“Is there anything special about it?” He tried not to sound ungrateful. “Or is it just a lighter? Because even I can do a Fire-Making spell.”

She hummed thoughtfully. “It’s very high quality, for one thing,” she said, squinting at it with an expert eye. “It’s goblinmade. Sterling silver, probably varnished with mermaid’s tears. If I had to guess, I’d say Moribund’s, they were the *haute* jewelers when we were young. Everyone in our year got their engagement rings there… it should have the year...” She turned it over and showed him the bottom. It read: *Pro parva lux mea / 25th December, 1975.*

“‘For my light’?”

“A gift from his mother, I imagine.”

They were in the drawing-room, and light poured through the bay windows, illuminating the carnage of wrapping paper and boxes surrounding the twelve-foot Christmas tree. The smell of cooking turkey and cranberry sauce filled the house. Dobby was already at work on Christmas dinner.

His mother said, “Oh, and the flame was waterproof, if I recall. He’d make a show of taking it out and lighting his pipe in the rain.”

“No, really?” Draco scrambled to his feet. “It’ll burn underwater?”

“I presume so. A gimmick enchantment, I thought, since what on earth you’d do with a flame underwater — Draco, where are you going?”

He ran to the bathroom and threw on the faucets. Once the sink had about an inch of water in it, he plunged the lighter under the water and thumbed the spark-wheel. The blue flame blossomed under the surface of the water, shimmery and strange, like a feathery bit of kelp.

All Christmas Day, Draco set everything he was allowed to on fire. He insisted on doing the candles for dinner, the sparklers, the stoves, and the dining room fireplace. Then he took the leftover kindling outside and burned that, too. In the evening, he begged his mother to let him light something else, and she condescended to let him do her after-dinner cigarette, which she held in a holder the length of his arm.

The rest of the holidays passed in a blink. He put the Nimbus through its paces on the Manor grounds, scaring pigeons off the roof, and when it was too snowy or too cold to do that, he lit a fire in his father’s library and read Granger’s book. It started far too slow, in his opinion, but after you slogged through the dull bits at the beginning, it got pretty cracking, and it was well worth it in the end.

On the last day of break, with the sun glinting off melting icicles on the trees, Narcissa ventured out in the snow herself. Both Draco and Dobby did much hand-wringing over this, but she brushed them aside with a laugh and a cry of: “Faint of heart! Faint of heart! *Entendez-vous dans les campagnes, mugir ces féroces soldats?* My mother rode a broomstick, pregnant, through a snowstorm to St. Mungo’s because she was afraid to splinch the baby. It takes more than snow to hurt a Black!”

So Draco and Narcissa spent the afternoon laboring on a Hagrid-sized snowman, the final ball of which had to be levitated by Narcissa while Draco provided support on his Nimbus. Then, she passed the facial details — Dobby supplied a carrot and some coal bits from the kitchen fire — up to him, and he planted them in its face. The resulting creature was tall, wide, crooked, and ugly. Narcissa adored it.

“What a ghastly beast,” she exclaimed in utter delight. She conjured a top hat for it. Draco burst out laughing in a way he hadn’t in months, and she hauled him down into the snow, where he howled and kicked and pleaded for a reprieve from her cruel regime of tickling.

After a meal of turkey sandwiches and whipped chocolate trifle with raspberry jelly, Draco went upstairs to gather his things. Dobby had packed his bags, including his books, his new robes, and a variety of snacks for the train, including a temperature-controlled jar of something frozen that he dreaded to try. (Perhaps he would offer it to Potter or Weasley as a Christmas present.) Looking at his assembled trunks gave him a feeling so dismal that he left his room, and wandered the dark wooden halls of Malfoy Manor: up uncarpeted, noisy elm stairs, following passages of hardwood bisected by black tongues of drugget, through linoleum hallways lined with tapestry and grated windows, whisking here and there up minor staircases and passing by secret doors into hidden rooms, and through the vast atrium where an abandoned ballroom decayed under the dusty altar of a four-tiered diamond chandelier. He ran his hand over the old walls, and something in them hummed back to him, like the magic in his wand, an echo of a call he hadn’t known he’d given.

He found his mother in the portrait gallery. Along one side of the vaulted space sat a row of Malfoy family heirs, direct descendants of the male line dating back to the 1400s. Opposite each on the other wall sat his wife. In the mourning custom, black tarps covered the

portrait-frames, and Narcissa had yet to remove these, though the duties of mourning had elapsed two years since.

Narcissa was kneeling in front of the last portrait in the line. It was the only frame that lacked a mate. Her head was bent, and she was mumbling something to herself. The corner of the tarp had been drawn up, he saw, and pinned to the wall with a hatpin.

“Mother?” he ventured.

She did not seem to hear him. Her voice was low and slurred.

He laid his hand on her shoulder. “Mother?”

Narcissa’s head snapped up, and her pupils were the size of sickles. A chill ran up Draco’s neck.

“Lucius?” she said, her voice hoarse and doubled.

Draco stumbled back as if burned.

“Lucius,” she said, excitedly. “Lucius — is that you? Lucius!”

Her hand gripped his robe. He snatched it away from her, and she fell forward, onto her hands and knees.

“Mother, it’s me. Draco. Your son.”

If she heard, she gave no sign. She dragged herself up the wall, her hands scrabbling on the limestone. “Lucius! Lucius, where are you? Lucius, I can hear you!”

He tried to keep his voice low and soothing. “Whatever you’re hearing, Mother, I promise you it isn’t Father.”

Her head snapped around. She stared at him, beady-eyed. For a moment he hoped in vain that she’d heard him, and was giving it consideration.

Then she whirled and ran, her skirts billowing behind her, screaming: “Lucius! Lucius! Lucius!”

Draco swore and dashed after her. “Mother! Come back!”

“I hear you! Lucius, I hear you!”

She let the door to the Portrait Gallery slam closed in his face, and he caught it with a grunt. While he struggled, Narcissa dashed around a corner and out of sight.

Moments later, he rounded it and charged after her, but she was gone: vanished entirely from the hallway. In the distance, he could hear her cries echoing through the house as she moved further away.

“Damn. Dobby!”

The elf appeared with a crack, holding a frying pan in one hand and a scrubbing-sponge in the other. “Master Draco!” he said happily. “You are summoning Dobby?”

“Go and seal the doors, deadbolt them. Lock the upstairs windows, and if you see Mother, come and find me. Don’t do anything she says.”

Dobby was nodding until this last order, at which point he cringed. “Yes, Master Draco,” he said. “But only — if Mistress gives Dobby a direct order—”

“You do what I tell you! *I’m* the heir. *I’m* the firstborn of the male line. *I’m* the master of the house, and you’ll do as I say, or I’ll — I’ll make you iron your fingers.”

Dobby squeaked in terror. He disappeared.

Draco fumbled his wand from his pocket, ignoring the pinch of guilt in his stomach. Fear had made him cruel. He didn’t like threatening Dobby, but sometimes a heavy hand was required.

He lit his wand-tip, and hurried down the twilit halls. His mother's voice had grown distant, and he chased it back through the winnowing heart of the manner, through parlors whose furniture sat under ancient sheets like a herd of ghostly oxen, past marble statues of witches and wizards who all sported his father's scowl, and corridors lit by floating candelabras, and populated by the fading remnants of his mother's cries. He raced up a wrought-iron staircase, burst through a pair of doors into the East Wing, and found himself in his father's chambers.

The hangings had been torn from the king-sized bed, and the pillows shredded, their innards scattered across the room like fresh powder. The doors to the balcony waved softly in the evening wind, while digits of fog pressed in from the gloomy moors.

Narcissa leaned over the balcony railing, bent at the waist, one spectral arm protruding into the gloom. Tears streaked her gaunt face. Her shirtwaist had soaked through, and her long, thick hair, thrown free of its chignon by her frantic escape, fell in dark waves around her waist, swaying as she sobbed.

"Come back," she sobbed. "Come back, please. I miss you. Come back! I promise I'll be good… where did you go? Don't you miss me, too? Don't you love me, Bella?"

At the word 'Bella,' Draco startled: he thought she was calling for Lucius. But whatever specter his mother wanted, it showed no sign of mercy, and her sole answer came from the mournful croon of the wind.

He extinguished his wand and moved silently onto the balcony. She was perilously close to tipping over the railing, and as she gave another lurch, he leapt forward to catch her: but she caught herself, and canted backward, lowering herself slowly onto the pads of her feet.

When he touched her, she gave a hiccuping moan, and collapsed into his arms. He caught her and carefully lowered her to the ground,

cradling her.

“Mother,” he said gently, “it’s Draco.”

She turned her head this way and that, moaning.

“Mother. It’s me.” He tried to mask the anxiety in his voice, and failed. “Your son. You’re at home.”

“Home?” she slurred. Her eyes slitted open. “Am I home? But I haven’t been to the Abbey in ever so long…”

“You’re at Malfoy Manor. Don’t you remember?”

“Malfoy?”

“Yes, Malfoy. You married Lucius Malfoy, and I… you had a son.”

“A son? I had a boy?”

“Yes.”

“How lovely. Lucius wanted a boy,” she said dreamily. “I wanted another… have two, I thought… a girl and a boy… a matching set.”

He spoke through a tightness in his throat. “Why didn’t you?”

“Five years in Azkaban, five years, I was alone with my boy… a one-year-old boy. And when he came back, he didn’t want… wouldn’t allow… it wasn’t safe, he said, not for a daughter, a lovely little girl for the whole world to hate…” She turned her head into Draco’s chest, and wept.

He held her until her weeping ceased, and she was still. She had fallen asleep.

He patted her cheek. When she did not stir, he called for Dobby. Together, they lifted her and carried her into the guest bedroom.

When Narcissa was tucked in and sleeping soundly, he slipped out of the guest room and closed the door behind him. Dobby apparated beside him, holding her soiled laundry in a bundle under his arm.

“Did this happen while I was gone?”

Dobby dithered, yanking on his fingers.

“Dobby.”

“The Mistress says Dobby is not to answer questions about her,” he fretted. “The Mistress says that if he tattles, he must knock his head very hard against the wall and be sorry.”

“That won’t happen. I won’t tell her you said anything.” Draco knelt and tipped up the elf’s chin. “It’s very important that you tell me. For her safety.”

This was the ticket. The faithful servant quailed in the face of danger to his mistress, and his lip quivered. “Twice,” he burst out. “Once on Halloween and once on the old master’s birthday, she is having these daydreams, when she runs and yells and takes her clothes off! And Dobby is chasing her, saying no, mistress, please, mistress, but she is not hearing Dobby! She is not listening! And sometimes, she speaks to Dobby, but she is ordering him to do the strangest things: ‘Clear the tennis courts,’ she says, or ‘Go fetch Mistress a peacock feather,’ only we are not having any tennis courts at this house, sir, and there are no peacocks around! And she is not calling me by my own elf-name, but ‘Kreacher’!”

He could take no more. Letting out a wail, he flung himself at the wall, and Draco had to snatch him up like a toddler to prevent him from slamming his head brutally against it.

“No! No, stop it!”

“Dobby is bad! Oh, Dobby is a very, very bad elf! Low, lying, deceitful, thankless…”

“Stop it! That’s an order.”

Dobby broke off as if someone had cut his vocal cords. Suddenly placid, he relaxed in Draco’s arms.

“You’re not a bad elf, don’t be stupid,” he said, trying to infuse his voice with authority. “You’ve done exactly as you were told.”

“I am a bad elf,” Dobby said matter-of-factly. “I am lying and betraying Mistress.”

“You’re not betraying her. Listen. I’m going to give you an order, and it’s very important. You must listen carefully and always follow it. If anyone gives you another order that contradicts it, you must follow this one, instead.”

“What is it?”

“If my mother does something that puts her life in danger,” he said slowly, “or hurts herself, you must do your best to protect her. But if you can’t, you run and get—”

Get me, he was about to say, but what could Draco do? He couldn’t apparate, and he could barely do magic. Even if he could get back to the Manor in time, he’d be less than useless.

“Get Snape,” he decided. “Run and get Severus Snape. He’ll know what to do.” He shook the elf. “Do you understand me?”

“I do, sir.”

“You must swear it. Swear it on… swear it on our house. Like wizards do.”

Dobby swelled with self-importance. It was unusual for a house-elf to be asked to swear or promise anything; the laws of their servitude bound them too tightly to make it necessary. “Dobby swears on the house of Malfoy,” he said. “He swears it by the land and the blood

and the name of his young master, to whom he is a good and loyal elf."

"Good. We won't speak of this again. Now fetch my trunk, I'm going to be late for the train."

The journey back to Hogwarts felt short, for he spent most of the time sleeping, and yet when he arrived, he still felt weary. The train arrived late, and he dragged himself up to Gryffindor Tower without a word to anybody, save Peeves, who received a heartfelt four-letter one.

Once term started, it became apparent to Draco the clever trick in which their professors had colluded: they had waited until after holidays to assign the nastiest homework, so the students couldn't run home and tell their parents about it. He resented this as much as he respected it. Slogging through a thirteen-inch essay on the "quintessential similarities between a tea kettle and a piece of flash paper" for McGonagall, he resurfaced to find that he had spent four hours in the same corner of the library, and his right hand had cramped so badly he could barely feel his fingers.

When he returned to the common room, he found that Potter's posse had colonized the good table by the window, and were musing over a carnage of ink and wasted paper. A low fire guttered in the grate, and endless rain pounded against the windows, turning the landscape to a silvery mush. It smelled of candles and woodsmoke, and the Weasley twins were teaching some second years to play Exploding Snap by the fire. Seamus Finnigan had put on the new muggle music he'd gotten for Christmas, so the Gryffindor commons was filled with some throaty-voiced fellow called Smiths yowling to *'take me out tonight…'*

Finnigan and Thomas were hopping together in the corner, holding hands and singing along.

“Er, one,” said Weasley, using his quill to clean his ear. “You can step on them.”

Potter nodded vigorously, scribbling. “That’s good. That’s good.”

“Two… you can throw them.”

“Dynamite. Keep going.”

“Three,” he said doubtfully, examining the quill, “you can… cover things with them…”

Granger sighed, lifting her head. “Oh, come on, both of you, she doesn’t want a list. The *quintessential* similarity between flash paper and a tea kettle is that both of them do their jobs through the application of heat.”

This had also been Draco’s answer, and it secretly relieved him that she thought so. He closed the portrait-hole behind him.

“Oi, Malfoy,” said Weasley, sitting up. “D’you hear about Snape?”

“What about him?”

“Percy just came through and told us,” Potter said, grinning. “He caught a cold over the hols. Can’t teach classes. We’ve got a substitute for two weeks!”

“A cold? Is he all right?”

Granger, hearing his worry, gave him a sympathetic look. He ignored her.

“I dunno. Cracking good luck for us, though,” Weasley sighed, lacing his fingers behind his head. “Bet he was going to give us loads of homework… serves him right for being such a git.”

“He’s a professor, Weasley, have some respect,” snapped Draco. “And what do you mean, he’s got a cold? Can’t Madam Pomfrey do

anything about it?”

“Reckon she’s tried, mate,” Weasley said reasonably. “Sometimes you’ve got to sweat it out.”

“‘Sweat it out’? He’s one of the highest-ranking potioneers in the world. You know that, don’t you? He’s an actual, proper genius,” said Draco tightly. “What’s he sick with that he can’t cure?”

“The cure might take more than two weeks to brew,” Granger said reasonably.

He grunted in acknowledgement, though this was the first thing anyone had said to soothe his fears. “Is he taking visitors?”

“Visitors! Blimey, I didn’t ask. We got two Snape-free weeks! You don’t pull a gift unicorn on the horn.”

“Ron, don’t be insensitive,” Granger whispered. “Snape is Draco’s godfather.”

Weasley goggled.

“Godfather?”

“Yes, and even if you don’t like him—”

“‘You’ don’t like him? If ‘you’ don’t like him?! I’m sorry, didn’t he dock you five points for *knowing the right answer?”*

Draco winced. This was true, and it had been overkill. He hadn’t said anything, but he was fairly sure ‘failing to offer Miss Bulstrode a chance to raise her hand first’ wasn’t listed in the school handbook as grounds for citation.

“Even if ‘we’ don’t like him,” she admitted, “he’s still Draco’s family.”

“That explains *so much,”* said Weasley fervently.

Draco arched an eyebrow at him. “Such as?”

“Such as… I mean…” He gestured broadly at Draco’s person. “The whole… oh, you know…”

“I never drink… wine,” Potter muttered cryptically. Weasley knocked his head against Potter’s shoulder and buried a laugh in his elbow.

Generously ignoring this, Draco turned to Granger. “Did he say who was replacing him?”

“No, I don’t think so. You might ask Percy. Percy?” she called, and the redheaded prefect, who was reading the *Prophet* by the fireplace, looked up. “Did they say who was replacing Snape?”

“Quirrell, I think,” sniffed Percy. “At least for fourth years and below. For the N.E.W.T. level classes, they’re bringing somebody in, but it’s obviously hard to find at this point in the year...”

“Great,” said Draco sourly. “So we get the second-rate replacement.”

“One has to imagine staffing first-year Potions isn’t the first thing on Dumbledore’s mind,” Percy said. “After what happened on New Years’.”

“What do you mean?” said Granger.

“You didn’t hear? There was an attempted break-in.”

Draco stood at attention. “Where? When?”

“Oh, seven or eight o’clock, must have been. New Years’ Day. They herded us all into the common rooms and made us stay there until they’d secured the castle. I tried to get McGonagall to tell us what happened but they didn’t want to worry the students. Anyway, nothing was taken, but Dumbledore must be quite concerned. They’ve closed a whole corridor on the third-floor for the investigation.”

“The third floor?” Potter piped up, and the four of them exchanged glances. “Is that by the Charms classroom?”

“Why, yes, I suppose.”

“You mean…” Weasley coughed into his fist, and it sounded suspiciously like “the dog.”

“Use a hanky, Ron,” Percy said disgustedly. “And Malfoy, I assure you, Quirrell will be more than up to snuff. He once studied at the hands of Nicholas Flamel. And he was State Alchemist under the late Prime Minister of Romania.”

“Flamel?” Granger murmured to Draco.

“Famous alchemist,” Draco said, under his breath. “Bit of a niche celebrity in the Potions community. Of course, none of his discoveries have been corroborated or peer-reviewed, but—”

Percy rolled his eyes. “Oh, not this.”

“Allegedly, he succeeded in creating a Sorcerer’s Stone.”

Potter said, “Is that hard?”

Draco guffawed. “Is that hard? Is creating a rock that makes you immortal ‘hard’? I don’t know, Potter, how many of them do you have?”

“But he can’t be really immortal,” Granger said in alarm. “Immortality is impossible. Even through the use of magic.”

“Impossible to demonstrate,” Percy corrected, lifting his finger. “And the trouble, of course, is—”

“Once you go around yelling that you’ve made yourself immortal, the first thing everyone wants to do is kill you and take the thing that did it,” Weasley finished, yawning. “Plus, these things are all guesswork.

It’s the Peverell Paradox. You can’t know if someone’s immortal or not unless they die, and if they die, they’re not immortal.”

Draco stared at him. “What?” Weasley said defensively. “It’s in *Beedle the Bard.* I read, too, you know.”

Granger, exchanging a subtle glance with Draco, indicated that this was news to both of them.

“Well, if anyone’s immortal, it’s Flamel,” said Draco. “He’s over six hundred. Oldest wizard alive.”

“He claims to be over six hundred,” Percy amended snidely.

“He’s got historical records.”

“What records? They didn’t have birth certificates in the fourteenth century.”

Draco couldn’t fathom Percy’s skepticism; personally, having grown up in a world full of flying broomsticks and literal dragons, he could tolerate the strain that one special rock put on his suspension of disbelief.

“Sorry,” interrupted Granger, “but you said the Sorcerer’s Stone could make you immortal?”

“Allegedly,” insisted Percy.

“And Dumbledore knows him? Flamel, you mean?”

“They co-authored Dumbledore’s star-making paper,” said Percy, obviously pleased to have the opportunity to discuss it. “I’ve read it, obviously, and it’s quite good. If anyone’s interested, it’s called—”

(“They’re not,” Weasley told him.)

“So Dumbledore would, theoretically, know how to make someone immortal,” she said. “If he wanted to.”

“Allegedly!”

Draco rubbed his temples. “I mean, sort-of,” he griped. “It’s not clear if the Stone would work for anyone except Flamel. When you boil it down, it’s just an enormously powerful alchemy stone, so it’s made for the personal use of the wizard who shapes it.”

“But if someone might come to the conclusion that it was worth the risk.”

“Course they might,” Weasley said blithely. “That’s why he’s in hiding. They recalled his Chocolate Frog card upon request a few years ago, because he was getting too much attention.”

“And so,” she said, haltingly, “if he wanted to prevent the Stone from being stolen, might he ask his close friend, Albus Dumbledore, to help him keep it somewhere safe?” She looked at Draco, then Weasley, then Potter. “Maybe somewhere safer than Gringotts?”

“Safe from whom?” Percy said skeptically. “I don’t think immortality sounds very appealing, personally. I dread to think what I’d look like in two hundred years.”

“Oh, I know,” said Potter suddenly, startling everyone. “What about Voldemort?”

Draco and Weasley both flinched so violently that the table bucked.

“Harry, mate, hasn’t anyone ever—”

“Keep that word out of your mouth—”

“—seriously dangerous, there’s a taboo—”

“—show even a modicum of respect—”

Potter raised both hands slowly.

“All right,” he said. “What about ‘You-Know-Who.’ Hey? Big evil bloke who wants to live forever? Killed my parents?” His tone dripped with sarcasm.

When an awkward silence fell, he added aggressively: “Well, he’d want it, wouldn’t he?”

“If he were alive,” said Draco, deeply uncomfortable. “But he’s dead, Potter. You of all people ought to remember.”

“That wasn’t proven, actually!” trilled Percy, delighted by the chance to provide yet another correction. “His body was never found! It was concluded that he died based on circumstantial evidence at the Potter home, and the fact that he disappeared immediately afterwards. But there were no witnesses, except… well.”

He trailed off, glancing sheepishly at Harry, who gave a sarcastic salute.

Granger exclaimed, “There you go. So Voldemort—”

“Don’t say it!” snapped Draco and Weasley at once, and it was hard to say who was more embarrassed.

“Oh, fine! The bad guy, you-know-what, whatever you call him, could still be alive. Theoretically.”

“Theoretically,” said Percy. He checked his watch and stood. “And the Americans could win the Quidditch World Cup next year. But you’d need all the magic in the world.”

NEXT CHAPTER: 9/8/22

The Disappearance of Severus Snape

Chapter 7: The Disappearance of Severus Snape

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Snape did not come back after two weeks, nor two weeks after that. In fact, the term was halfway over before Draco heard a word about his godfather from anyone.

He threw himself into his studies, not from desire so much as a lack of preferable alternatives. The dismal wet of a Scottish spring forbade any evening excursions with Potter, and as exams approached, the library became more and more crowded with students who, to Draco's recollection, had never made an appearance within its walls before. For privacy, he retreated to Gryffindor Tower, where bleak winds from the moor thundered in the eaves and occasionally sufficed to obscure the atonal wails of Finnigan's music.

Secluded in his four-poster with the hangings drawn, he wrote long letters to Snape, which he left unaddressed and slipped beneath the Potion Master's office door. 'Dear Professor,' read one. 'I hope you are not dead, but if you are, please do your students the kindness of returning as a ghost, even temporarily, so we (read: your godson, Draco Malfoy) are not left in Quirrell's hands for final exams. Best, Draco.'

Snape's absence hurt him in another way. Because of the Ministry's surveillance, he could not write his mother. He received zero letters in the weeks between January and March, and it made him so restless he considered going to McGonagall and begging for leave to go home. He began lighting Dobby's candle each evening before he fell asleep. It gave off an olive-gray smoke that smelled like Narcissa and the Manor, old wood and damp stone, dust and cedars.

The only Gryffindor who shared his dismay at Snape's disappearance was, surprisingly, Granger.

"I hope nothing's happened to him," she said fretfully (once they were well out of Potter and Weasley's earshot.) "He's not my favorite teacher, and I'm certain he doesn't like me, but I don't want harm to come to any professor… and quite frankly, he's ten times the Potions Master Quirrell is. Swap?"

They traded papers. Granger had suggested they review together for a particularly tricky Charms assignment at the start of term, and it had somehow turned into a habit. If it had been anyone else, Draco wouldn't have tolerated criticism of his work, but she was still beating him in Transfiguration.

"Quirell is a hack," he said scornfully. "He doesn't even know the right way to chop a stag-beetle… for a potioneer, his knife-work is atrocious."

Granger leaned in and lowered her voice. "Did you see," she said, "when we did the Forgetfulness Potion, how his model looked? It wasn't at all how the book described — it was yellow instead of green, and the smoke was the wrong shape."

"It was the same with the Pompion Potion," he said disgustedly. "It wasn't just mediocre, it was wrong. Ours both looked better than his."

"I don't understand it. For someone who worked with Nicholas Flamel, he's terrible!"

"I tried complaining to McGonagall."

"Really? What did she say?"

"That I couldn't expect everyone to live up to Snape," he said bitterly, circling a spelling error, "and that Quirrell was a Board Certified Potioneer, so twelve Grandmasters evidently disagreed with my

assessment of his abilities. As if a cert means anything. A flobberworm could pass the Boards."

Granger sighed. "Well, honestly, it's not us I feel bad for. You and I will be fine. But the others… I mean, poor Neville, he might have to retake it next year."

"You don't have to tell me about 'poor Neville,'" he muttered mutinously. He knew all about it. He and Longbottom had been working double-time to try and get the boy's Potions grade up to snuff, but the difficulty of the material escalated sharply in the second term, and for someone who had barely fit his mind around the fundamentals, this was too much to ask. More cauldrons were sacrificed to Longbottom's indelible powers of destruction that spring than Draco had seen Snape lose in ten years of potion-making, and with each loss, the boy became less and less motivated, until he barely responded to Draco's instructions, polite or otherwise.

This came to a head in the last week of March. "I'll never get this," Longbottom complained, shoving his chin in his palm and looking longingly out of the Tower window. It was the first really fine day they'd had in months. The sky was a clear, forget-me-not blue, and a group of girls in white dresses were picnicking on the lawn by the lake.

"I'm doomed," he continued glumly. "I'm going to have to repeat the year. Gran will kill me."

"Good," snapped Draco, who had been working with him for far too long to have any patience left for moping. "I'll send her some flowers if she does. Then I'll be free of you."

"It's not my fault! It's too difficult! I've tried the same potion three times, and I've done everything right, it just doesn't want to work…"

"It doesn't 'want' to do anything. You're failing because you're not stirring correctly," he uttered through gritted teeth. "You need to stir *slowly* and *steadily* for *three minutes,* which is not, in fact, an

extraordinarily difficult task, but you keep getting distracted, so it curdles—”

“But that’s imp-p-possible,” said Longbottom. “I can’t sit still for three minutes, I get ants-s-s-sy. I want to move around. My gran s-s-says—”

“Oh, please, *do* tell me what Granny Longbottom says. I simply dribble with anticipation.”

“My g-g-g-ran says,” Longbottom soldiered on, “that I’ve got a, a, a special condition, and I c-c-c-can’t sit in a-a-any one place for very long. She says my dad was the s-s-s-same.”

“Well, that’s a comfort,” Draco said acidly. “Your dad was spastic, so you are, too. Are you sure she was trying to comfort you?”

“That’s r-r-rude,” said Longbottom bravely, “a-a-a-and y-y-you shouldn’t say it. I d-d-don’t c-c-c-c-c-c-c—” He stopped, swallowed, and closed his eyes. He tried again. “I don’t care what you say about me,” he said, pronouncing each syllable carefully, “and you can be as mean as you want, and it’s probably true. But p-p-please don’t say stuff like that about my dad.”

For some reason, this meek entreaty irritated Draco even further. “Why?” he snapped. “I’ll say what I please about your father, Longbottom, and anyone else’s. In fact I bet he *is* a spastic. You should hope he is, anyway. At least that would explain why he couldn’t be bothered to raise his son—”

Longbottom stood up so fast his chair skittered back and fell over. “My father was a hero,” he said, cheeks blazing, voice clear. “Which is more than anyone can say of yours.”

The common room became very quiet.

“Really,” said Draco, in a voice so low it was almost inaudible. “Is that so. How very proud your grandmother must be.”

Longbottom, to his credit, refused to stand down. He stared at Draco with balled fists, breathing hard. “Yes,” he said. “And he sacrificed himself to stop people like *your* father from taking over.”

“People like my father?” He gave a joyless smirk. “There’s a word you want that you’re not saying, isn’t there? Go on, Longbottom, have it out. Everyone knows you’re thinking it.”

There was a pause, and Longbottom bit out: “Death Eater.”

“There you go,” Draco sneered, in faux admiration. “Why, you do have a backbone, after all. I say, this is a revelation. Do you get that from your father, too? Of course, being dead, I doubt there’s much more than a backbone left of him by now…”

A susurrus of disapproval wound its way around the common room: this was below the belt, and nobody liked it. Least of all when hurled at Longbottom, who, despite his incompetence, cowardice, and reproachable tendency to leech off the abilities of those around him, was somehow better-liked in the Tower than Draco.

“He’s not dead,” said Longbottom, and he wasn’t stuttering anymore.

“Oh? So he did run away, then. Some hero he is, isn’t he, man could stand up to the Dark Lord but couldn’t stomach you—”

“He’s in St. Mungo’s,” said the boy coldly.

Draco paused. He did a few quick calculations and arrived at the implication of his words. The realization was a bit like a stab to the gut.

“Because of your aunt,” he added, twisting the blade.

Draco couldn’t think of anything clever — or even coherent — to reply to this, so he said nothing. He sat in the horrible silence and fumed, hateful, as Longbottom stood there radiating righteousness like a mounted knight.

Longbottom turned and picked up the chair. He set it right and pushed it into the table. He turned off the cauldron burner (correctly, Draco noticed) and extinguished the flame. Then he said: “Don’t take this the wrong way, M-M-M-Malfoy, but if I were you, I would try to be nicer about other people’s families. You know, considering.”

Then he left. There was a quiet dignity in the sad hunch of his shoulders.

Any hopes Draco had of the fight blowing over were extinguished by supper. Fred and George Weasley spread the story like a virus, and within the day, none of Gryffindor would speak to him. This included Potter and Weasley, who sat apart from him at dinner, pointedly parked on either side of Longbottom.

Only Granger joined Draco.

“Careful, Granger,” he jeered as she sat down. “Don’t want to spoil your reputation. You might get murderer on your sleeves.”

“For Pete’s sake, don’t be silly,” she scoffed, reaching for the pumpkin juice. “To be clear, you were totally horrible to Neville, but that was your own doing, not your father’s, and frankly if you just apologized to him I think he’d be willing to move on.”

“Apologize?” Draco wrinkled his nose. “To Longbottom? Eugh.”

“Alright, don’t,” she said crisply. “But you can’t sulk about everyone being cross at you if it’s your own stubbornness that prevents it from blowing over.”

In fact he could, and did. For the next two weeks, he stubbornly went about his day without talking to a single Gryffindor, save Granger. At first she kept him company, sitting with him for classes and meals, but eventually she tired of this self-imposed pariahdom, and began taking some of her meals with Potter and Weasley again.

“They’re my friends, and I miss them,” she snapped, in response to his (somewhat passive-aggressively) pointing out the change. “You can’t ask me to go cold turkey with you, that’s unreasonable and you know it. And it’s such a stupid fight, I’m sorry, but it is! All you have to do is walk up to Neville and say, ‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that about your dad, let’s make up.’ That’s it! I can write it down for you, if you want.”

What birds had to do with it, he had no idea. “Get over it, Granger. I’m not begging for forgiveness from the squib son of blood traitors.”

“Three things.” She counted them off on her fingers. “One: it’s not begging, it’s asking. Two: he’s not a squib, that’s rude, and you should be nicer to him. Three: there’s no such thing as ‘blood traitors,’ and if you keep saying things like that, I’m not going to sit with you anymore.”

That this was a real threat with some meat in it, and which was capable of making him nervous, annoyed him beyond measure. He stuck three fingers in the air. “Three things,” he said, mimicking her high-pitched voice. “One: asking for something in exchange for nothing is *always* begging. Two: everybody’s nice to him, and it doesn’t do him a bit of good. He’s been coddled and carried his whole life, and that’s why he’s so miserably ill-equipped for everything now. Three: ‘blood traitor’ is a perfectly real word for a perfectly real thing, and it’s not even a bad word, so I don’t know why you’re getting hysterical about it.”

“I’m not hysterical,” she said calmly. “It may not be a slur, but it’s still cruel. It’s an unkind name for people whose only crime is not hating muggles. You know — like my parents?”

“Not this again.”

“‘This’ is my family,” she insisted. “For someone who cares so much about family lines, you must be able to understand why it’s important —”

“I’m not saying it’s not important, I’m saying you’re being dramatic about the most irrelevant things. I didn’t insult you! *You’re* not a blood traitor. *You’re* not a muggle. You’re a witch, and if you must know, I happen to respect you. You’re probably one of the only people at this school who’s actually earning her place in it, instead of coasting on basic competence and grade inflation.”

Granger, for some reason, failed to be charmed by this compliment. “I know you’re in a bad mood because Snape’s gone,” she told him, regarding him dispassionately with her dark brown eyes. “I understand that you’re worried about him. And I apologize. That must be very hard for you. But that’s no excuse for treating everyone else poorly. I’m sorry you have to hear this from me, but you do have to hear it: Nobody likes a bully, and nobody cares what their reasons are.”

And she said nothing else to him for the rest of the day.

The weather turned warm again in the middle of April, and one balmy Sunday evening, under a cloudless twilit sky, Dumbledore made an announcement.

“Attention!” he cried, as the remains of dessert shimmered off their plates. “Attention, dear friends, peers, and students! A brief announcement, before you wander off to your various evening occupations.” He bowed his head. “It is my great sorrow to announce that your beloved Potions Master, Professor Snape, will not be returning for the remainder of term. He has been recovering steadily but slowly, and wishes me to communicate his disappointment at being unable to share in this segment of your education.”

A chorus of dismayed shouts arose from the Slytherin table, and one sole gasp of dismay from the Gryffindor’s. The rest of the hall shuffled in poorly concealed glee.

Granger, sitting amidst a flock of several Weasleys, shot a worried look down the table at Draco.

“As we cannot in good conscience ask Professor Quirrell to proctor and grade two separate exam periods, Potions will be taught for the remainder of the year by a substitute teacher. His replacement, Professor Sebastian Dagworth, has served for several years as an adjunct professor at Durmstrang…”

But Draco did not hear out the end of the sentence. He sprang up and ran from the hall, heart pounding.

By now he knew the way to the dungeons well, and he made short work of the distance. He threw himself down a flight of stairs, rode the banister to the bottom, and dashed down a stone corridor lit only by guttering torches, skidding a corner and slipping through a crevice behind a statue of Ptolemy. This spat him out in front of the Potions Master’s quarters, and he hurled himself against the door, hammering on it furiously.

“Professor!” he shouted. “Professor! Are you in there? Can you hear me? It’s Draco! Let me in!”

No answer came. He hammered again, shouted some more, and then fumbled for his wand. Fine, he thought. He would break into the room, if Snape wouldn’t come out, and if that didn’t work, he’d blast the door open. *Answer me, you greasy old goat. If you’re dead, so help me, I’ll kill you.*

“Mister Malfoy? What is the meaning of this?”

It was Quirrell. He had emerged from the Potions classroom, holding an enormous stack of books under his arm, and he peered at Draco as if he couldn’t quite make out his face. Draco quickly hid his wand behind his back.

“I want to speak to Professor Snape,” he said, with a lack of courtesy that would have shamed his mother into hiding.

“Indeed?” said Quirrell mildly. “Well, I hope you do not expect him to answer, if you intend to be yelling at that door all night.”

“…Sorry, sir?”

“He is not in there,” said the professor, nodding at the door. “He has been in the Hospital Wing for some time. I do not think he is taking visitors. I have come several times to see him and Madam Pomfrey is usually shooing me away.” He gazed absently at one of the braziers, his expression distant. Then his eyes snapped up to Draco’s, and Draco was unsettled by the way the flames played across his irises, which were preternaturally pale. “I was bringing him chocolates and flowers, you see,” he added. “To wish him speedy recovery. He is very ill.”

The idea of anyone wanting to bring Snape flowers and chocolates, or indeed thinking Snape would accept them, was perfectly comical.

He narrowed his eyes. “Very kind of you, sir,” he said.

Quirrell stepped forward and held out his hand. “If you have a message you would like to give to him, you may give it to me. I will see that he gets it.”

He stepped backward. “No, sir.”

“You are not trying to give him a message? You were saying you wanted to speak to him.”

“No, sir, I… I’m sorry, it’s nothing important.”

At this, Draco decided it was time for a stylish exit. He turned around and sprinted from the hall, and didn’t stop until he was back to Gryffindor Tower.

“Potter!”

“Mmf.”

“Potter!”

“Mmmgh — *Malfoy?* What the—”

Draco shoved him a third time, and Potter went flailing off the mattress in surprise. “Wake up,” he hissed. “I need you to do something for me.”

It was past midnight. Draco was still fully-dressed, but the rest of the dorm was fast asleep. Snores rose from Weasley’s bed, thick enough to disguise their whispering.

“What?” Potter said blearily. He squinted. Without his glasses, his eyes looked funny somehow, like they were naked. “Malfoy? Is that you?”

“Yes. Glad you asked. I need to get into the Hospital Wing, and you’re my accomplice. Now, here’s what we’re going to do. You’ll distract Filch, and I’ll sneak in—”

“Hold on. No. Hang on. What?” He sat up, snagging his glasses from the bedside table, and fumbled them on. “It’s the middle of the night. Go tomorrow.”

“I can’t go tomorrow, there’ll be people about. I need to break in.”

“Why?”

“I’m going to see Snape.”

“Great,” said Potter. He put his glasses back on the bedside table, and started climbing back into bed. “Have fun. Don’t get caught.”

Panicking, Draco hauled Potter out of bed by the scruff, like a wayward puppy. He let out the same kind of indignant yip. “Come on! You’re going to help me.”

“NO — leggo, you sallowy git—”

“Stop squirming! Come on, I’ve got your shoes here, there’s no time to waste—”

Potter, who was surprisingly strong, wriggled free of Draco's grip. He scuttled across the bed and glared at him, though because he wasn't wearing his glasses, most of it ended up directed at the wall over Draco's shoulder. "You've got some nerve, after what you said to Neville."

"What I said to Longbottom? Who cares?" He wanted to tear his hair out. "Why is everyone so up in arms about a tiff between me and that snivelling lump?"

"Oi. Because he's our friend," Potter whispered hotly. "And because he doesn't deserve how you treat him, especially given the way he's been singing your praises all year for helping him with Potions."

At this, Draco paused. "He has?"

"Yes. Neville's told everybody who'll listen how you've helped him, how you're the only reason he's close to a passing grade now. He says you're the only tutor he's ever had who makes Potions make sense. He's been incredibly gracious. And all year, you've been jeering at him behind his back. It's cruel."

"I… but he's not passing," Draco said, bewildered. "He's probably going to have to repeat the year. I failed."

"You think he cares?" Potter rubbed one of his eyes with a knuckle. "He knows perfectly well he's failing Potions. He doesn't need you to tell him that. He's just excited to feel like he's learning, for once."

Draco frowned. He hadn't thought that Longbottom was taking anything away from their weekly exercises in failure. He'd assumed that they both hated it equally.

He said haltingly: "So he thinks I'm a… good teacher?"

"For some reason," Potter grumbled. "Don't ask me why, I'd rather eat a wurst-flavored Bertie Bott's than have you for a Potions partner."

“Yeah, feeling’s mutual,” he said automatically, but he couldn’t muster much malice. “I … all right, listen. If I promise to apologize to Longbottom, will you help me?”

Potter looked at him searchingly.

“No,” he said incredulously. “What kind of negotiation is this? Apologize to Neville because it’s the right thing to do, and go to the Hospital Wing tomorrow, when we’re all awake!”

“Shh! I can’t do that, I told you, they won’t let me in!”

“So? That’s your problem!”

“I thought you were a Gryffindor!” Draco whisper-shouted.

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’re helpful! And selfless! And you do stupid things without asking questions!”

“Oi!” A pillow came winging over from Weasley’s bed and smacked Draco in the back of the head. He had the faultless aim of a boy who had been raised in a bedroom with several other boys.

“Quiet, boffaview,” he slurred. “Wuzzall the noise?”

“Nothing.”

“Go back to sleep.”

“Naw,” he denied, blinking. “Wuzzat? Wuzz going on? Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes,” said Draco.

“No,” insisted Potter.

Draco curled his hands into fists. “Potter,” he said, thinly. “I seem to recall, not too long ago, that someone did something rather selfless for you, and it involved both of you being in a place where you shouldn’t have been.”

The other boy’s face flickered with guilt. He argued, “That was hardly selfless. You got to fly around, too.”

“I didn’t need to invite you. I could’ve gotten into the lockers all by myself.”

Potter dragged a hand down his face. He groaned.

Then he rolled out of bed, grabbed his robe, and shrugged it on over his pajamas.

“Wipe that smirk off your face, Malfoy.”

“I’m not smirking,” Draco said, smirking.

Weasley, now fully awake, poked his head through the hangings. “Whaz’ going on,” he demanded. “Where’re we going?”

“Nowhere. Go back to sleep.”

Weasley ignored him. “Harry? What’s Malfoy up to?”

“We’re going to the Hospital Wing. Wanna come?”

Weasley considered this, pursing his lips, and then gave the universal shrug of: ‘eh, might as well.’

“No! We’re not bringing Weasley!”

“Ron can come if he wants to.”

“This isn’t a Gryffindor field trip! This is a clandestine mission!”

“Yeah, sure. Ron, you’ll want socks, mate, it’s cold out there.”

“Good call. Thanks, mate.”

Draco folded his arms. “You lot want to get caught, do you?” he said coldly. “Because it’s hard enough to sneak around with two students. With three, we’re sitting ducks.”

Potter grinned. “But we won’t get caught,” he said.

“Oh? Need I remind you what happened last time?”

“Last time,” he said, “we didn’t have this.” And he produced from the bottom of his dresser a long cloak made of a shimmery material that moved like liquid in his hands.

“What’s that?”

“Invisibility Cloak,” Weasley crowed. “Harry got it for Christmas.”

“You mean a Disillusionment Cloak.”

“No, that’s the cool part. It’s the real deal.”

He rolled his eyes. “Invisibility Cloaks are an urban legend.”

“I thought so too, but you’ve got to check this out. He’s fully invisible, look.”

“No. Weasley. This isn’t one of those ‘competing evidence’ debates, I mean it’s genuinely impossible. There is no Disillusionment *Charm* strong enough to achieve complete invisibility, so a bespelled cloak, no matter how good it is…”

“Mate, just look.”

“...can never… fully… achieve…” Draco spun around in a circle, looking for the dark-haired boy. But there was no sign of him.

“Potter?”

“Right here,” said an amused voice behind him. He jumped.

Weasley snickered.

“Potter,” he hissed, heart racing. “Are you there? How the devil—”

Potter’s face appeared from a crevice in thin air, grinning wickedly. “Cool, isn’t it?” he said. “I’ve been using it to sneak around for months.”

“Where did you get that?” Draco reached out and rubbed some of the material between his fingers, jaw agape. “Do they sell these? Where can I buy one?”

“Like Ron said, Christmas present. No clue who from, they didn’t sign the note. Apparently it was my dad’s.” Potter spread his arms and beckoned Draco in. “It fits Ron and me, so the three of us shouldn’t be a problem.”

“So long as you don’t mind getting a bit friendly,” said Weasley with a leer.

Admittedly, Draco’s resolve did waver. But he steeled himself with thoughts of Snape on his deathbed, subject to the mysterious whims of Quirrell.

“If either of you step on my toes,” he warned, “I’m hexing your tongue into rubber.”

They made it as far as the common room.

The portrait hole was open, and they were almost out the door, when a voice from the corner demanded: “What are you doing?”

Draco tipped his head back and let out a moan of impatience. Weasley patted him on the shoulder. “Told you we should have put the cloak on in the dorms,” he advised Potter.

Granger appeared from behind an armchair, wearing the ugliest pink pajamas Draco had ever seen. They were embroidered with bunny rabbits, and were about two sizes too small for her, so her ankles protruded from the cuffs. “Are you sneaking out?” she asked. “All three of you? Together?”

It sounded like this last part was the hardest for her to believe.

The boys looked at each other. An unspoken agreement formed as to what their strategy would be.

“No,” said Draco.

“Nope,” said Weasley.

“Why would you say that?” said Potter, holding the portrait hole open with his foot.

“No, no, no! You can’t go out! You’ll be caught, and you’ll get Gryffindor in trouble!” She folded her arms and stamped her foot. Draco found this ridiculous and somewhat endearing.

“No, Granger, look. This is important—”

“I won’t let you!”

“Hermione,” said Potter, in appealing tones, “we’ve got the cloak. It’ll be alright.”

“And what happens if someone hears you? Or if Mrs. Norris smells you? Or if—”

“Hang on,” Draco said indignantly, holding up a hand. “You knew Potter had an Invisibility Cloak? And you didn’t tell me?”

She ignored him. “Or if there are alarms on the Hospital Wing? And what do you want in the Hospital Wing, anyway? It’s the middle of the night!”

“His dreadful godfather,” sighed Weasley. “Unfortunately.”

“...might have let me in on it,” Draco was muttering, “not that I’m important or anything, but seeing as half of Gryffindor gets to know…”

“Oh,” said Granger, in a small voice. She looked at Draco. “You’re going to see Snape?”

He shrugged.

She tapped her foot and bit her lip. “Because they won’t let you see him in the daytime,” she guessed.

“Private ward,” he told her.

She fidgeted furiously for a few moments more.

“Fine,” she said. “All right! We’ll go.”

“We?” said Weasley in alarm. “What’s this ‘we’? Who invited you?”

“Well, obviously, I’m going to help,” she said loftily, binding her hair back with a bit of elastic. *“I’m* not taking any chances of you getting caught and losing Gryffindor any points.”

She glanced at Draco, and he suddenly found himself staring at the ceiling, filled to the brim with uncomfortable emotions.

“I don’t know if four can fit under the cloak,” Potter said uncertainly, shaking out the fabric. “I mean, we’ll try it, but we’ll have to move slow…”

Indeed, as it turned out, he was right to be skeptical. Ample as the cloak’s original owner must have been, even a large cloak could not comfortably fit four children, and they roamed the hallways in fits and starts, stopping every now and then to readjust, or because someone had to tie their shoe. Weasley, who was the tallest, had to stoop so their feet wouldn’t show, and Granger ended up wedged

uncomfortably between Draco and Potter. Altogether it took far too long for Draco's liking to reach the Hospital Wing, and by the time they approached the oaken double-doors, the Great Bell was striking one o'clock.

"All right, here's what we're going to do," whispered Granger. "Ron, you wait here with the cloak and watch for Filch. Harry, you come in and watch the door to Madam Pomfrey's office. I'll stay in the main ward and make sure no one wakes up."

"Why am I on Filch Alert?" complained Weasley. "I'm stuck out here, am I, while you lot go in?"

"Oh, honestly, Ron, if you'd like to swap with Harry that's fine—"

"Oi," Potter whispered loudly, silencing both of them. "Quiet."

It was well-timed, for the oak doors had parted. The four of them scurried behind the corner, and Weasley crouched low, so the cloak covered them.

A hooded figure crept out of the Hospital Wing, its face hidden by cowl and shadow. It paused, appearing to scan the area, and then prowled toward them, gliding seamlessly over the floor.

Draco's neck tingled as it drew closer, and he pressed himself against the wall, suddenly terrified for the integrity of the Invisibility Cloak. Though he knew intellectually that it couldn't see them, something in his hindbrain insisted that it was no good, they were done for, of course it could see them, they were standing right smack in front of it.

The figure checked the corner before turning, and stared right through them at the stairwell beyond. As it did so, a ray of torchlight fell on its exposed profile. Granger gasped, and Weasley kicked her ankle.

It was Snape.

The Potions Master looked terrible. Gaunt and sallow, with cloudy bags under his bloodshot eyes, Draco could count the individual beads of sweat on his forehead, plastering his greasy hair to his temples and dripping down his long nose. As they watched, he took a rattling breath, and drank deeply from a silver flask. When it was finished, he seemed to straighten up — though he looked no less miserable — and moved with fresh purpose down the hallway.

“No wonder he’s been sick for ages,” Weasley marveled, at a volume that made Draco desperate to remind him they were invisible, not inaudible. “Somebody poisoned the wanker.”

“Stop it, Ron, you don’t know that,” said Granger, with a nervous glance at Draco.

But quite frankly, Weasley had a good eye, and Draco agreed. He had seen roadkill with more vitality.

“But where’s he going?” Potter wondered, watching the cowled figure begin a long, laborious journey up the stairs. “It’s the middle of the night, and he’s sick as a dog. What’s so important he’s got to do it himself?”

“One way to find out,” suggested Weasley.

Potter shrugged and looked at Draco. “He’s your godfather,” he said. It was clear he did not personally care for Snape and all, and that all else being equal, he would not risk one iota of his own health and happiness in Snape’s defense — but he was extending the offer anyway, because it was obvious Draco cared, and for some reason, under Potter’s maniacal rules of honor, this mattered.

Draco filed away these confounding realizations to address later. “Let’s go,” he said.

The fourth member of the group was kneading her hair in distress. “I really, really don’t think this is a good idea!”

She continued her efforts to deter them all the way up to the third floor. But because she couldn't leave the Cloak without risking being caught, she was trapped in their inexorable march onwards.

It wasn't difficult to follow him: though the Cloak was a slow-roaming, eight-legged animal, Snape walked with a limp, and had to pause to gather his strength.

At the head of the third-floor corridor, they spotted Mrs. Norris skulking around the banister.

"Oh, let's kick her, just the once," begged Weasley.

Draco, who thought this was a great idea, started to say so. But Potter gave his veto with a headshake, though he was grinning.

Snape, on the other hand, held no such reservations. Pointing his wand at the feline, he rasped, *"Petrificus Totalus."*

The cat snapped to attention, its legs bound together. Its body rigid, it swayed where it stood, and then flopped on its side, stiff as a board.

"Good one," Weasley crowed. "Maybe he'll punt it, and we can watch."

Snape disappointed Weasley, however, by stepping carefully around Mrs. Norris and continuing through the corridor. The four hurried after and watched him slip through the door that contained the three-headed dog.

Weasley made to follow, and Potter and Draco hauled him back. This was not easy: Weasley was as dense as he was tall, and could probably have lifted either of them with ease.

"That's the three-headed dog," said Potter. "He's going after the thing it's guarding. The treasure, or the Stone, or whatever it is."

“It doesn’t sound like he’s fighting a three-headed dog,” Granger pointed out.

“Maybe there’s a Muffling Charm,” said Draco.

“Or the dog isn’t there anymore.”

“Or he’s found another way past it…”

“Hang on, shut up for a second,” said Weasley. Ignoring Draco’s indignant look, he turned his ear to the air, and the others heard what he had: the tinkling melody of a harp.

Potter pushed the door open. Because of the Cloak, they were forced to follow him, even though Draco was feeling queasy and not altogether sure about this. He respected his godfather — certainly liked him, and thought he was one of the better adults out there — but he didn’t much fancy dying for him.

As the door creaked, the harp music swelled. The dog was curled up in a pile of straw at the back of its chamber, dozing fitfully, while a magical harp played lullabies at its feet. The trapdoor in the middle of the chamber was open.

“That’s clever,” said Granger. “You wonder how much trial and error it took to figure that out…”

Without waiting for them, Potter ducked out of the cloak and hurried over to the trapdoor. “It’s all dark down there,” he said. “No ladder, it’s a straight drop. That’s where Snape must be.”

“What do you think he wants down there?”

“Anyone’s guess,” he said, and stuck his hand experimentally into the hole. Draco almost shouted.

But nothing happened, and he pulled it out, waggling his fingers, checking the back for residue. “But if there’s more traps down there,

he doesn’t look like he’s in a fit state to take them on.” He looked at Draco. “You still want to follow him?”

In truth, the answer was *no, not a chance.* He didn’t think Snape wanted anyone following him, and Draco’s sense of self-preservation (which had awoken, bleary and confused, at the sight of the dog) was starting to clang a cowbell in the back of his brain, howling: *Not good! Terrible idea! Go back to bed!*

“Well,” he said, dithering.

Granger, seeing her opportunity, seized on it. “We should get another professor,” she hissed into his ear. “If we run and get McGonagall, and tell her what’s happened, she can come and find Snape and she’ll be loads more equipped to face what’s down there anyway, and yes, we’ll lose points for being out of bed, but that’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.”

“How noble of you,” Weasley said dryly.

“It’s better than going by ourselves! What are we going to do down there? The dog is only the *first* obstacle; do you think they’ll get easier the closer you get?”

“Hermione?” said Potter.

“What?”

“I wish you’d kept your voice down,” he said, in a small voice.

The harp had stopped. A growl rumbled the stone beneath their feet. Draco, still safely hidden beneath the cloak, balked and drew it tighter around himself: but Potter, who was freely visible, was caught in the dog’s yellow glare.

The four of them stood absolutely still. The beast clambered to its full height, shaking itself awake.

Potter, still astoundingly calm, said: “The three of you start walking away, slowly. I’ll keep it distracted—”

He didn’t have time to finish. The dog lunged, jaws snapping, and with a shout, Potter took the only escape he had: he leapt into the black square of the trapdoor, and was gone.

One of its jaws snapped shut over the place he had been seconds before, with a hard *crack.*

“Harry!” shouted Weasley. He shook himself free of the cloak. Charging, he dodged a swipe of the dog’s massive paw, and hurled himself into the trapdoor after him.

“No,” Granger said, terrified, white-knuckling his arm. “Oh, no, no, no, what if they’re dead?”

The dog, unable to see them under the Cloak, took to circling the chamber, growling and slobbering. Its footsteps rattled the walls. Draco was shaking so badly he was surprised the Cloak hadn’t fallen off.

“Who cares? We’re about to be,” he hissed, edging toward the door. He put an arm around her back and tried to steer her in his direction. “Now come on, let’s get out of here—”

“We can’t leave them!”

“I assure you, we most certainly can!”

“I’m not going to run away, when — when they might be lying at the bottom of that shaft, bleeding out, with broken necks—”

“If their necks are broken, they’re not bleeding to death,” he pointed out, and realized only after she gasped, stricken, that this might not have been the most convincing thing to say. “No, never mind. Listen, do you know what? If we want to be realistic about this, we should’ve heard them hit the bottom by now. If they broke their necks, we

would've heard that, too. They're probably not dead or dying. So I say, we do your plan, we go get McGonagall, she goes, gets them, we lose a mountain of points, big deal, we don't get eaten, bigger deal, and we all live happily ever after!"

"We can't."

"Of course we can. What's your problem now?"

"The dog's fallen asleep in front of the door," she whispered.

It had. The three-headed beast, having prowled a full circuit of the room, had laid down in front of the sole exit to the chamber, and closed its eyes once more. Draco moaned in despair. He wracked his brains for how to get around it: a diversion, perhaps, or a Knockback Jinx…

"That settles it," Granger decided. She looked at him, and seized his hand. Her fingers were very small and very cold. Automatically, he let her lace them between his.

"Together?" she said.

"What? No. Not together. Stop. What are you doing?"

He realized her intentions only too late. The barmy witch ran forward and leapt into the trapdoor.

He shrieked in dismay, feet scrabbling against the floor, but Granger was too strong, and they both went tumbling down into the darkness.

Cold, damp air rushed past him. Down they fell in total darkness, tumbling over each other, until after what felt like a lifetime (but was probably only three or four seconds), they landed with a hard *thump* on something soft and warm.

"OUCH!" roared the something.

"Ron!" Granger said delightedly. "You're alive!"

“No thanks to you!” said Weasley, wrestling his way free of the tangle of limbs. “What’s the big idea, swan-diving onto me with no warning, I’ll be lucky if I still have a spleen!”

Hands wrapped around Draco’s shoulders and hauled him free of the pile. Potter set him upright, and then went back for Granger, whom he helped daintily to her feet. “Glad you’re alright,” he said, with a nod to Granger and — surprisingly — to Draco. “Snape’s gone, by the way. I think he got past whatever this chamber used to be.”

They were standing in a damp, stone cell with walls stained black by moisture. Dozens of chains dangled from the ceiling, and from each chain hung a wilted plant of some kind, its brown and snakelike tendrils hanging limp like rattlesnake skins. It was clearly dead: the dusty brown of the leaves gave no evidence of life, and black scorch marks dotted the skin here and there.

“Wonder what this is,” Weasley remarked, lifting one tendril and dropping it. “Should’ve brought Neville, he’d know…”

“Devil’s Snare, I think,” Granger said, studying it. “It’s a carnivorous plant, and it strangles its victims before eating them. It hates light and heat, though, so I think Snape must have used flames to kill it; that explains these little scorch-marks.”

“Or he just saw a big wriggly thing trying to strangle him and set it on fire,” said Weasley, which Draco had to admit was fairly plausible.

Granger dusted off her pink pajamas, which were distinctly more gray and grimy than they’d been before contact with the cell floor. “Well,” she said, in a bracing tone. She lit her wand, and a beam illuminated the narrow passage leading out of the chamber, which sloped downward into shadow. “That’s our way out.”

Draco looked up. Above them, far in the distance, sat the tiny square of the trapdoor. The walls of the shaft were slick and seamless rock. Even if they could manage to levitate themselves — which he didn’t

half trust any of them except Granger to do — they'd still have the dog waiting on the other side.

He lit his wand, too. "If they bury me next to you people, I'm coming back as a ghost to sue," he announced, and marched out of the dungeon cell.

Before long, they passed through a vaulted archway and into another room. It was a brilliantly lit chamber with a high ceiling, and its floor was littered with a host of glittering feathered keys. Across from them, the door to the next room had already been unlocked, and it stood ajar, leading them to the edge of a huge chessboard.

Weasley wandered onto the board. "This was a *great* game," he said, with feeling. "Look how many pieces they're down. They bled each other out. Black's down to four pawns, a bishop, and the queen, and it's still got White bunched in the corner, except for the poor knight. They knew what they were doing."

He leaned down and picked up a knight's discarded shortsword. When he hefted it, a bead of light ran along the blade: it was real metal.

"Careful with that," Draco said, ill at ease.

"Nah, it's not that sharp," Weasley said, swinging it experimentally. "The edge is wrecked from hacking on stone all the time. Nice to have something meatier than a wand, though. Malfoy, Harry, you want one of these?"

"I'll go without, thanks," said Potter.

"I'll also go without, thank you," said Granger primly.

"Didn't mean it like that, I just figured since you were—"

"A girl?"

“I was going to say a bit smallish,” he said guiltily, and she walked past him with a huff.

In the next room, they passed the corpse of a vast troll, and Draco fought the urge to throw up. The chamber beyond that held a ring of black fire and a row of colorful bottles, along with a note. One of the bottles was empty. The note was untouched.

Granger got to the table before he did. “This is Potions,” she said, which Draco found a bit obvious. “It says one of them lets us through the fire ahead of us, and one of them takes us back towards the entrance… well, that’s a bit useless, isn’t it, since there’s no way to get back up through the trapdoor? I suppose if we’d thought to bring a rope… Oh, well. But if Snape’s already been through ahead of us, and he drank the one that lets him go forward, that means all of these are the wrong ones.”

Weasley, distracted, swept his sword in a playful arc through the air. “Don’t any of the other ones do anything?”

“Three are poison, two are wine. And there’s a logic puzzle, here, to figure out which is which… oh, that’s interesting…”

She drifted off. Draco read the note over her shoulder, quickly, and deemed it useless.

He approached the black fire and held out his hand: it was hot. When he shone his wand over it, they didn’t shimmer or change like an illusion. Holding out his hand, he noticed that the lights over the flames were yellow, bright yellow, like candlewax.

He muttered *“Nox,”* and then cast *Incendio,* feeding a stream of red fire into the black. The flames shuddered and warped at the exchange, and when his flames met the black, they shimmered and turned black, too.

He bent and examined the fuel at the base. It was coal, dark and unremarkable, with peppery white bits of cinders flecked here and

there. He sniffed. The smell of kerosene was strong.

Potter and Granger were conferring.

“Just strip naked, I reckon, and run straight through?”

“Don’t be stupid, you’ll certainly burn yourself. What if your hair catches fire?”

“I don’t hear you coming up with any other ideas…”

“Oi, Gryffindors,” Draco called, standing up. They attended. “I’m willing to bet an indiscreet number of galleons that the empty bottle was a Fire Resistance Potion. They’re not hard to make, but some of the ingredients are quite hard to get, and they’re not the sort of thing one tends to carry around.”

“Okay,” said Potter, as in: *so what?*

“Which means I doubt this is Conjured, because the Fire Resistance Potion doesn’t work on Conjured flames — it’s notoriously ineffective against Fiendfyre, for example. So this is a gas-fire, same as you use for a cauldron burner. In fact, I don’t think it’s magical at all: you can turn regular flames black by burning sodium residue under a sodium lamp.” He lit his wand again, and passed the beam over the flames: wherever the light touched, they turned yellow. He smirked. “See?”

“That’s clever,” admitted Granger, which was quite possibly the highest compliment he’d been paid all year. “But I’m not sure if that helps us, exactly, Draco.”

“No, it does,” Potter said suddenly, and he peeled off his cloak. “Because it means you can do this.”

He threw his cloak on the fire and started stamping on it. Granger yelped, but Weasley understood, and he shucked his robe to do the same. Together, they smothered the fire under their cloaks, beating it

out with their feet. Smoke poured from the fire in billowing gusts, but slowly, the flames disappeared, suffocated by heavy wool.

“First day of Potions,” Potter said cheerfully, brushing off his hands. “Fire safety. Snape’s a pill, but I *did* listen to him.”

“Don’t tell him, it might give him a heart attack,” said Weasley.

Granger coughed, waving away blooms of smoke. Her eyes were watering. Feeling bad for her, Draco offered her his handkerchief, and she gratefully held it to her nose, breathing through it.

“Next one?” suggested Potter gamely, gesturing to the passage ahead.

Granger stopped them. “Cloak?” she suggested.

Draco, who had been hoarding the Cloak under his arm, relented to share it. Slowly, cloaked and cautious, they ventured forth into the next room.

They were in a vaulted limestone chamber, shaped like a cathedral, with a tall gilded mirror propped in the center dias. Before it stood Professor Quirrell. He was staring into the mirror intently. At his feet lay strewn a pile of dark robes, which Draco recognized, with a jolt, as Severus Snape.

He must have made some kind of noise, because Quirrell glanced up, checking the doorway in the reflection. His eyes pierced them. Potter gave a sharp intake of breath.

“Who’s there?” he called. His accent was gone, and there was a presence to his voice there hadn’t been before, as if he had finally woken up.

The four of them huddled low, so the cloak covered their ankles. Draco tried to see, from this distance, if Snape was still breathing. He felt sick.

“I can hear you.” Quirrell turned around. He held a long, spindly wand with a bend in the middle, and it was this he pointed at the door. “Reveal yourself.”

Granger let out a small whimper. Draco snatched her wrist and squeezed, willing her to shut up.

Quirrell’s eyes narrowed. He tilted his head to one side, scrutinizing the passageway behind them.

“Ventus.”

A blast of wind exploded from Quirrell’s wand. It raked through the chamber and knocked the four of them on their backs, ripping the Cloak from their shoulders. Weasley’s sword went flying. The Cloak itself swept back up along the passageway, flapping and twisting like a great silvery bat. Draco sprawled out and flipped over, scrambling to his feet. The others did the same.

“Mister Potter!” Quirrell sounded delighted. “I had wondered who would come for Professor Snape first. I confess, I am surprised. And Mister Malfoy! I had not taken you for an adventurer.”

Potter drew his wand. This was almost as admirable as it was stupid. “What’d you do to Snape?”

“Nothing more than was merciful. I admit, I did not expect him to be half so resilient to the henbane; of course, I suspect he ceased to drink Pomfrey’s curatives after his first few bouts of sickness. Such a suspicious mind, has Severus. Nevertheless, he had the right of it. He must have realized, when his morning’s tea came without the usual odor of henbane, that I had something planned for tonight. It was a good effort. Yet he underestimated my strength. He thought I was Quirinus Quirrell, the feeble potioneer, instead of my true self. But who could blame him? No one else could achieve such a perfect disguise. He tested me for Disillusionment Charms, glamour spells, and Polyjuice Potion, but he could never have understood the true genius of my deceit… the idea of using another human being as a

mask *itself!* Even he, a wise and clever Potions Master, could not comprehend the brilliance of Lord Voldemort."

Draco was frozen. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Weasley shimmying forward on his belly, one arm outstretched to reach his sword.

"None of that," said Quirrell, and flicked his wand. Ropes flew from the tip and snared Weasley, wrenching his arms behind his back and knotting his ankles together. The boy gave a grunt that was more surprise than pain. With two more brusque flicks of the wrist, Potter and Granger met the same fate, and Draco staggered backward, into the shade of the archway, in a fruitless attempt to protect himself. But Quirrell's wand fell still, and did not move again.

"Draco Malfoy," he intoned. "My child, what are you doing here? You should have been in Slytherin."

Draco's mouth dropped open.

"Don't listen to him, Draco," shouted Potter. But neither Quirrell nor Draco appeared to hear him.

"How they have shamed you," said Quirrell sadly. "How they have brought you low! Last scion of the Most Ancient and Most Noble House of Malfoy, denied his birthright, and consigned to live among mudbloods, traitors, and thieves. What a crime it is. This promise I will make to you freely: for these and other injuries against us, they will be repaid tenfold."

Draco could not speak. His tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth. Cold sweat coursed from his temples and slicked his shirt to his skin. He edged still further from the dias, his feet fumbling over uneven stone.

"I thank you, though," mused Quirrell, "for bringing Harry Potter to me. You have served me as well as your father did, in this. Now,

attend me, young Malfoy; the night is young, and my work is never-ending.

“The mirror is the key to finding the Stone,” he murmured, tapping his way around the frame. “Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this… but he’s in London… I’ll be far away by the time he gets back…”

Quirrell came back out from behind the mirror and stared hungrily into it. “I see the Stone… I’m presenting it to my master… but where is it?”

Draco wasn’t sure what the mirror had to do with anything, but so long as it kept Quirrell distracted from talking about Draco, he was content to let him sniff around it. In the meantime, Granger had managed to sit upright, and was rolling her wrists around in their bindings, trying to chafe them free. When Quirrell put his back to them, she twisted around and mouthed, *Diffindo!,* lifting her bound wrists at Draco.

Terrified, he shook his head. Was she mad? What was her plan after that? Make a run for it? It would take Quirrell all of a millisecond to cast a Killing Curse. Even if he freed her, they didn’t stand a chance.

Meanwhile, Weasley had flipped onto his belly and started inchworming his way across the floor of the vault, his eyes fixed hungrily on the sword.

“I don’t understand,” said Quirrell, tapping the glass. “Is the Stone inside the mirror? Should I break it?”

“It shows your heart’s desire,” said Potter, in a voice thick with loathing. “It can’t make it real.”

How on earth do you know that? Draco craned his neck to get a glimpse of the mirror, but it was too far away, and he couldn’t see anything clearly in it. The best he could make out was a blond man in the doorway, clad in dark robes, which he took to be himself.

“Nonsense. It’s in this vault because it holds the stone. You simply lack the imagination to produce it.”

Weasley hauled himself forward another few feet, rolled thrice, and pressed the binding on his wrists to the edge of the knight’s sword. Draco stared at him. With all his might, he compelled Weasley telepathically not to do anything stupid. This had the sum effect of dropping a water balloon on a rabid wolverine.

“So it’s the Sorcerer’s Stone you want?” said Granger, drawing Quirrell’s attention again. She exchanged a glance of some kind with Potter that Draco couldn’t read. “To resurrect Lord V-Voldemort?”

“Lord Voldemort needs no resurrection,” boomed Quirrell, and his voice was doubled again. “Lord Voldemort is now as he has always been — strong, powerful, magnificent—”

He started to walk backward from the dias. His knees snapped in the wrong direction, and he reached behind his back, contorting the joints of his shoulders in horrible ways. The thing — Quirrell, Voldemort, whatever it was — lurched down from the pedestal and stumbled on its own backwards-facing feet, falling onto its hands and knees. At least, it looked like its hands and knees: it snapped Quirrell’s elbow joints in the wrong direction, and then crawled forward, while from the back of its head, Quirrell screamed.

Granger shrieked and scrambled backwards on her knees. Weasley sprang to his feet, sword in hand, and charged the creature, swinging gracelessly. Quirrell reared up, its knees bent backward, and wrenched its broken wand-arm around, hissing like a snake.

And if it had been any other man — literally anyone, Albus Dumbledore or Harry Potter or Nicholas Flamel — anyone instead of Severus Snape… If it had not been Snape, his godfather, his father's friend, who had lurked in the background of Malfoy birthday parties and Christmas dinners and anniversary celebrations for eleven years… who had saved Draco from drowning in the duckpond when he was four, taught him to make Pepper-Up Potion on the kitchen

stove, and shared his umbrella at Lucius Malfoy's funeral — Draco might have taken this chance and bolted out of there as fast as his legs would carry him. He would have indulged, proudly, in the age-old Malfoy family tradition of saving his own skin.

Instead, he summoned every scrap of Gryffindor courage he owned — it was, altogether, not much — to force himself to turn around, and he walked slowly back into the face of death.

It occurred to Draco that he was unlikely to get a better chance. He dove forward and seized Potter's wrists, muttering *"Diffindo"* at the bindings. It was clumsy, and the spell went wide, slitting a bright red line down each of Potter's wrists, but Potter didn't seem to notice. He hurled himself at Quirrell with the abandon of someone whose plan of action protruded no further than three seconds into the future. His fist connected with Quirrell's jaw.

The Quirrell-creature gave a scream of pain and scrambled backward, ruined limbs flailing. A scorch-mark in the shape of Potter's fist marred the skin of its cheek, black and almost ashen, as if the flesh were wrought from clay. Clutching its face, the thing brandished its wand, and howled, *"Avada—"*

A sword collided with the back of its head.

Weasley had been right: the blade was dull, but with enough force, anything could hurt. The Quirrell-creature bayed and fell to the ground, a sword-handle protruding from the back of its spinal cord. Weasley ripped it out and made to swing again, but he had to break off to dodge a flash of green light, which jetted under his right arm and created a verdant firework against the ceiling of the chamber. Potter took his chance and lunged, palming the creature's jaw, and the thing gave out a scream that was not human, like ten cats being drawn and quartered at once.

While Potter and Weasley kept it distracted, Draco dropped to his knees and seized Granger's bindings.

“Took you long enough!”

“I didn’t want to get either of us killed! Hold still—”

“Hurry, hurry, hurry! My wand’s in my back pocket—”

“Hold still, I said, or it’ll be your own fault if I open a vein—”

His second *Diffindo* was cleaner, and the severed ropes fell neatly away. He did her ankles next, and she leapt to her feet, wand outstretched. *“Rennervate!”* she shrieked, and a flash of brilliant red light flew across the chamber — sailed over the creature’s shoulder — and missed it.

Draco hissed, “Lower, you’ve got to aim *lower,* it’s not ten feet tall—”

“I wasn’t aiming for it!”

A stirring came from the dias. Slowly, the pile of dark robes drew itself upright. Severus Snape, in what must surely have been the worst shape of his life, hollow of eye, bloody of mouth, soaked in sweat that was pink with rivulets of blood that trickled from a wound in his forehead, stood and drew his wand as if he intended to die fighting. He took in the scene inside the vault, beheld Potter and Weasley locked in combat with the inhuman remains of Quirinus Quirrell. His lip curled.

“Stupefy.”

The Quirrell-creature collapsed. Weasley, who had been about to deal a mighty blow with the sword, dropped it and fell to his knees, panting. There were tears on his face.

Granger gasped with relief, and collapsed against Draco (who felt this unfair, as he was barely up to the task of standing himself.)

“Professor,” he shouted. “Professor, are you all right?”

“Draco?” Snape’s expression transformed in an instant from weary relief to unadulterated shock. “What are you doing here?”

But he didn’t have time to answer. Snape looked up, saw something coming down the passageway, and his expression reverted from shock back to relief.

“It seems I have come too late, Severus,” said a soft, elderly voice.

Snape slipped his wand back into his pocket, relaxing. “Something of a motif, with you, Albus.”

“You have every right to chastise me. We each have our *hamartia,* as the Greeks would say. Mine, I fear, is to always arrive in the right location precisely five minutes later than I should have been.”

Dumbledore strode into the vault, and Draco noticed that his wand was drawn. It was a long, knobbly piece of wood with a grip of scalloped stone. To his recollection, Dumbledore had never revealed his wand before.

“Meanwhile,” said Dumbledore, stooping to help Weasley to his feet, “it appears our young friends have a knack for arriving precisely when they mean to. I consider this an auspicious sign for their futures.”

“Professor,” blurted Granger, and (bless her) actually raised her hand. “What on earth was—”

“Miss Granger, you have done far more tonight than anyone can justly expect of you, and though I have no right to ask for your patience, I fear I must,” said Dumbledore. “In fact, I must ask for your forgiveness, too, for the impoliteness of what I am about to do.”

“But you haven’t done anything,” she said curiously. Dumbledore smiled and lifted his wand.

A piercing white glow filled the chamber, and Draco screwed his eyes shut against it. When he tried to open them, he felt himself descending into a soft blackness in which there was nothing, no light, no sound — nothing but a woman’s laughter, and a scent that reminded him of home.

NEXT CHAPTER: 9/10/22

A Nice Day to Start Again

Chapter 8: A Nice Day to Start Again

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

He woke to a cramped neck in a small, sweet-smelling room.

He had been laid on a cot in an office of some sort, and a blanket had been drawn up to his chin. The wallpaper in the room bore a cheery print of poppies and hydrangeas, and a vanilla candle guttered on the desk.

In an armchair beside him sat Albus Dumbledore, perusing an issue of *Witch Weekly.*

Draco sat up.

“Good afternoon, Draco,” said Dumbledore.

“Where’s Snape?”

He did not care that Snape would have boxed him about the ears for showing these kinds of manners. “Where’s Granger?” he demanded. “Where’s Potter and Weasley?”

“Your friends are all quite safe, I assure you. Professor Snape is recuperating in his chambers, having availed himself of the healthful effects of a bezoar. Harry and Mister Weasley are convalescing under Madam Pomfrey’s expert care, and Miss Granger has been harrying that dear lady for some time in an effort to ascertain your location.”

“Convalescing? Did they get hurt?”

“I believe Mister Weasley sprained his arm attempting to wield a shortsword, and Mister Potter has several cuts on his wrists.”

“He got those fighting Quirrell,” said Draco quickly.

“Naturally.” Dumbledore folded his magazine and laid it carefully on the desk. “You will be relieved to know, I expect, that Professor Quirrell is no longer with us. The Stone has been secured, and subsequently destroyed. My dear friend Nicolas and I decided that it was not worth the risk. Both he and Snape, by the way, were quite confounded by your performance in the Potions room; would you ever consider confessing how you did it?”

Draco had any number of responses to this, ranging from *the Stone is real?* to, *what do you mean by ‘no longer with us’?* to, *so you follow Witch Weekly, do you?*

“It was a sodium flame,” he said finally. “I identified it, and — Potter and Weasley stamped it out with their feet.”

Dumbledore laughed and clapped his hands. “With their feet! I could not ask for a better answer. Thank you, Draco. I believe, in exchange for your honesty, you should get to ask some questions of your own.”

Draco thought this was fairly decent of the old man. “Well, good. About time someone had some answers around here,” he said, aggrieved. “I have about a hundred questions about all of this.”

“Goodness, I’m sorry, but that sounds exhaustive. You and I will have to arrange subsequent appointments. As for today, might I politely solicit you to confine your number to three?”

“Three?”

“Oh, dear, you sound so deflated. Forgive me, Draco, I know I have disappointed you profoundly in the past twenty-four hours. I confess I will probably do it again before the next twenty-four have elapsed. If it is any consolation, the disappointment of the young in their elders is one of the most sacred traditions which those same elders pass down.”

“...Why is that supposed to be any consolation?”

Dumbledore’s smile spoke loudly of mischief. “Is that your first question?”

“No.”

He spread his hands, evocatively. Draco swallowed and frowned, thinking hard.

“How did you know we were in the vault?”

“Ah. What a pleasant first question! I anticipated something far more juicy; I was preparing to divulge the entirety of my history with the genus *Capra*. But I will enjoy answering this much better. To wit: it appears that, in your efforts to enrich and augment his education, you won the loyalty of a very valuable friend in one Neville Longbottom.”

He couldn’t believe it. *“Neville* ratted on us?”

“We might differ in our choice of verb,” suggested Dumbledore thoughtfully. “‘Rat’ implies a degree of malice which Neville does not possess. The dear boy witnessed the four of you leave the dormitory, and when, after an hour, you had not returned, he alerted Professor McGonagall to the possibility that you might have encountered some trouble. It was this, in part, which delayed my arrival in the Vault: I did not know you had dared to cross the trapdoor.”

“What was the other part?”

“Political matters in London,” he said simply. “And because I decline to elaborate further, we shall not count that as your second question.”

Draco thought some more. During the silence, Dumbledore pulled out a pair of knitting needles and began to clack them merrily, cobbling together the worst cross-stitch Draco had ever seen.

“Cornelius Fudge,” he said.

“Our dear Minister,” Dumbledore affirmed. “What about him?”

“Is he reading my letters?”

The headmaster chuckled. “Is he, personally, reading your letters? I do not claim to know the Minister’s predilections, but if pressed, I would guess not, for any number of reasons. For one, he is a busy man, and we busy men try to let the affairs of eleven-year-olds resolve themselves. For two, I think that Professor Snape’s efforts to conceal your correspondence with your mother have secured you thoroughly against the Minister’s snooping.”

“You knew—?”

“Professor Snape does little in this castle of which I am unaware,” he said simply. “I was aware that he was taking regular visits to Malfoy Manor; he made no secret of his purpose in assuring your privacy. I did not stop him, for I considered it benign, and for I thought that there was little the Ministry could do to protect you here that I could not.”

Draco wrinkled his nose. “Protect me?”

“Protection, yes. That is, of course, the reason your mail is watched.” Dumbledore paused. “Did you not know this?”

“I don’t know anything about any of this. The only reason I know someone was reading my mail is Snape told me.”

“Ah. Yes, Snape and I differ in opinion about why the Ministry does certain things. He is generally more suspicious of its intentions, whereas I — having the rare and unwisely coveted ability to ‘see behind the curtain,’ as it were — attribute its most alarming behaviors to incompetence, not malice.”

“I don’t care if they were incompetent or malicious, or both. Who’s reading my mail?”

“Nobody,” said Dumbledore patiently. “If you *had* used owl post, however, the document would have been copied and filed away for future consultation should it ever come up in an investigation of yourself or your family. More likely still, it would have been used to gather information about the whereabouts and activities of former Death Eaters who might seek revenge on the scion of a house that betrayed them. As at least one has done before.”

Draco fell silent.

“You don’t like to think of it,” he said softly. “Of course. I apologize for my indiscretion.”

“I don’t care about that,” he said brusquely, but Dumbledore could tell he was lying.

“How much do you know about her?” he inquired gently. “If you would forgive the discourtesy of the question.”

“Not much.”

Dumbledore set down his knitting, and waited.

Begrudgingly, Draco continued. “She’s my aunt,” he said unwillingly. “My mother’s sister. She was a Death Eater. She and my father worked together in the war.”

“Well done.”

“It’s family history. Of course I know it. My mum can do the whole tree back to 1800, it’s mad. Like this: Bellatrix Irma Lestrange, neé Black, born in 1951, eldest child of Druella Rosier and Cygnus Black, first of three — if you’re writing, drop an asterisk — and then: married to Rodolphus Lestrange, eldest son of Rodney and

Delphinia Lestrange, first of two, born 1947, died 1988. Childless," he finished.

"Draco."

"Oh, and she put Neville Longbottom's parents in St. Mungo's, apparently—"

"She killed your father."

"So?" he said roughly. "My father betrayed her."

Dumbledore put away his needles and folded his hands calmly in his lap. "Your father bought your family's freedom by cooperating with a Ministry investigation to eliminate the festering remnants of a cause that was long since lost."

"My father gave up his wife's sister for sixty years off his sentence and a government pardon."

"A pardon for his wife," corrected Dumbledore. "Circumstances which, one might think, would buy him some familial fidelity."

"If you think that, you don't understand the Blacks."

"I most certainly do not," he admitted. "There are a hundred things about your mother's family which I shall never understand, and never hope to. But I flatter myself by saying that I *do* understand loss, and death; and the effect that both can have when suffered by children."

Draco looked at the ceiling. He refused to take the bait.

Dumbledore sighed.

"I apologize. I did not intend to plumb the bony depths of your family closets here today. I meant only to suggest that, were certain dangerous parties to take a renewed interest in you or your family, the Ministry would be interested in protecting you against these threats."

Far from reassuring Draco, this infuriated him. He spat, “Great. So after they let my father get murdered, they decided to start stealing my owls and screening all my family’s mail under the flimsy pretext that they can, what, stop her from killing him twice—”

“The Minister of Magic is undoubtedly a somewhat foolish man, but his shame at the tragedy of your father’s death was earnest. He has no desire to see it repeated.”

“Oh, well, that’s fantastic. Really. I feel so very safe.”

“You are upset.”

Draco sat up. “I want to make it clear,” he said angrily, “that if it weren’t for Snape, I probably *would* be dead by now. That’s who protected us. Not Fudge. If he wants to help, he can take his promises and his owls and try *minding his own business.”*

“I have been suggesting the same to him for some time,” Dumbledore said sadly. “Alas, when one is the Minister of Magic, ‘minding one’s own business’ does not in itself constitute a viable option.”

Madam Pomfrey poked her head into the room. “Oh! My apologies, dearie,” she said. “Didn’t realize you were awake.”

“That’s quite all right, Poppy, it sometimes surprises me as well,” said Dumbledore cheerfully. “Thank you for checking in. How fare our recovering heroes?”

“Hearty as horses, each to each. I swear, the things a young body can take. Potter is begging to be released, and I’ve kept Granger at bay with all but force.”

“By all means, retreat, then,” he assured her. “I see no reason to deny young Miss Granger the things she wants, especially when she pursues such simple pleasures with such commendable vigor. I will hold your office hostage but a moment longer.”

“Take all the time you need, Albus.”

When she had gone, Dumbledore turned to Draco. “I expect they will want you as well,” he said. “So I will release you presently. I will say only this: you performed exceptionally last night. Godric Gryffindor himself, I think, would have been proud to see his colors around your neck.”

“Oh, no,” Draco said, alarmed. “Me? I was only there because they made me. I didn’t have a choice.”

“One may exercise a great deal of bravery even in situations where one has no choice,” said Dumbledore gravely. “Great works have been done by those who, despite their own desires, have taken up the mantle of nobility, even with begrudging hands.”

Draco squirmed. “I’m not noble,” he said hotly. “I was scared out of my mind. I froze up. I wanted to run. I was going to run, if I’d just found the right moment—”

“My dear boy,” said Dumbledore, smiling, “there were dozens of moments. Each drifted past you like ships in the night.”

“Not on purpose!”

“Very well. I will ask Mister Potter, then,” he said, “who happens to owe you his life, whether he thinks you acted nobly, or in, as you seem to think, the basest kind of self-interest; and I doubt that his answer will align more with yours than mine.”

“That’s tosh! Weasley hit the Dark Lord with a *sword!*I stood there and cut their bindings, and what, I get a medal?”

“Your concern for ensuring Mister Weasley receives equitable treatment is touching,” said Dumbledore, in tones of happy surprise. Draco fought the urge to tear his hair out: that wasn’t what he’d meant. “Unexpected, but touching. To your question: no, you do not

get ‘a medal.’ However, considering the circumstances, I think a reward may not be entirely out of order.”

He perked up. “Like a present?”

The headmaster laughed. “Yes, you might consider it a gift.”

“Do I get to choose it?”

“Within reason.”

“What’s within reason?”

He smiled. “With your father’s ear for caveats. Very well. Any one wish of yours which is within my power, and which I can bring myself, on moral grounds, to grant, I promise to fulfill.”

Draco said, “Put me in Slytherin.”

A long moment passed. The amusement seeped slowly from Dumbledore’s face, leaving the weathered folds a landscape of chagrin and regret.

“Ah,” he said. “You have hit upon a request that meets neither criteria, I am afraid.”

“Professor, please—”

“You are unhappy in Gryffindor?”

“...It’s not about happiness.”

“You believe you would be better off in Slytherin?”

“Of course I would,” he said immediately. “I’d be with my own people.”

Dumbledore stared at him for what felt like a long time. His eyes were unspeakably sad.

“This is my fault,” he said finally, removing his spectacles. Withdrawing a polka-dot handkerchief from his robes, he began to polish them. “I never try to interfere in Sortings, if I can avoid it. The Hat, whose wisdom has fed centuries of great wizards into the world, should not be questioned on such matters. But there comes the rare case, now and then, where I think I can predict its judgment… and, when that judgment conflicts with what I believe to be the best interests of the student, or perhaps even the Wizarding World at large, I, in my supreme arrogance, will take it upon myself to interject.”

“Interject?” Anger prickled, like the telltale scrape of a match, at the bottom of Draco’s spine. “What do you mean, interject?”

“The Hat tends to sort each student as the student would sort herself. For students seeking like-minded peers, it sorts them so. For students seeking to be challenged, it does the same. For students who do not know their own heart, it chooses the House most likely to help them find it. This is how, incidentally, your friend Neville Longbottom found himself in Gryffindor.”

“But I asked,” he said in a trembling voice, “I asked it. For Slytherin.”

“Yes. I know.” Dumbledore put down his glasses. His shoulders slumped, and Draco might have felt sorry for him, if he weren’t so angry. “As I thought you would. But — and forgive me, Draco — I thought that for a student like yourself to excel, to prove yourself — you might benefit from some additional help.”

“Help,” he repeated.

“Help, yes. From peers more likely to — how shall I put this? Allow you to see yourself clearly.”

“I was supposed to be in Slytherin,” he said, his voice shaking with anger. “I was *supposed* to be in Slytherin. You admit that. You interfered.”

“Yes.”

“Well, fix it, then! Put me back!”

“I cannot. The Sorting is permanent. Students cannot transfer between Houses.”

“But I’m not where I’m supposed to be!”

“Do you really believe that?” The headmaster tilted his head curiously.

Draco spluttered. “Do I—? What do you mean? You just said you agreed with it! You said I was supposed to be in—”

“Upon your arrival to the castle, you were undoubtedly fit for the House of your choosing. Now, I am no longer sure.” Dumbledore put his head down, twiddling his thumbs. “Perhaps this is arrogance. If so, I apologize. But sometimes, even a year is quite enough for a House to make its mark on its inhabitants. I confess that Professor McGonagall has certainly come to find you an entertaining and enjoyable addition to her charges, which is an opinion she might not have espoused at the beginning of the year.”

He drew his knees up onto the cot and hugged them. To think of it: all his misery, throughout the year, could have been prevented. He could have had a good year instead of a wretched one. He could have avoided every lesson with Longbottom, every sleepless night lost to Finnigan’s CDs, every bothersome pop-quiz with Granger, the time he’d had to fight a *troll…*

But also, of course, the evenings in the common room when Finnigan had put on a not-horrible piece of music, and the Weasleys brought up snacks from the kitchens, and Granger nattered on at him explaining the thesis of her latest paper. And the rare quiet nights in the Gryffindor dorms, when the rain came down softly on the windowpanes, and he could hear the full bellows of the frogs

beneath the lake blow the evening full of sound, reminding him of summer nights at the Manor.

Those hadn't been awful. He wouldn't choose to forget them, if he could.

"I leave you with this," said Dumbledore. "There are three children outside this door who believe that you are their true friend and housemate; and though I clearly cannot persuade you one way or another, I believe they may have thoughts to share on the subject."

Saying so, he rose, and opened the door. Draco heard him say, "I often reflect on how difficult it must be to eavesdrop when the subject has cast *Muffliato.* Philosophers often ask: If a significant conversation is not spied upon, is it still significant? With these and other ruminations, I must leave you."

Then he was gone, and there were shadows in the doorway, shuffling their feet and waiting awkwardly to be invited in.

"Draco?" said Harry tentatively, poking his head into the room. "Are you awake?"

Two other heads appeared under his, wide-eyed. "You wouldn't believe how much candy they left us, mate," said Ron ecstatically. "It's nutters. The twins must have raided the kitchens. You like black Licorice Wands?"

"Nobody likes black Licorice Wands, they're disgusting," whispered Hermione, and then: "Draco, I brought our homework from yesterday, I thought you might want to get a head start on it! If you'd like you can copy my answers for part of the Potions homework. I don't think Snape will mind too much, since you couldn't go to class."

This demanded a response. He whipped his head around and glared. "Bite your tongue, Granger, I'll copy answers in Potions when hell freezes over."

“Oh, you *are* awake!”

She bounded onto his cot, causing a minor pillow eruption. “Can you read my essay, then? Because it’s due tomorrow and I haven’t had time to revise it and I could really use a second pair of eyes…”

“Blimey, you could give the bloke a minute to catch his breath,” said Ron, slumping into Dumbledore’s chair. He kicked his feet up on the armrest and popped a pack of Chocolate Frogs. “But seriously, black licorice? Takers? We need to get rid of it somehow.”

Harry stood in the doorway, grinning, with his hands in his pockets. Feeling defiant, Draco said, “What are you looking at, Potter?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Just trying to remember, that’s all.”

“Remember what?”

“What this looks like,” he said. “So this summer, when I’m back at the Dursleys’, I have something nice to think about.”

And Draco, who found this puerile, and disgusting, to say nothing of embarrassing to everyone involved, rolled his eyes so hard that they hurt afterwards. “For Merlin’s sake, close the door,” he snapped. “I don’t want anyone seeing us associating together.”

“You’re not ashamed of us, are you, Malfoy?” Ron stuck out his tongue, which was stained brown from chocolate.

“Jointly, individually, and of you in particular, Weasley.”

“Feeling’s mutual, you jammy git. Chocolate Frog?”

Draco sighed and rested his head against the cot. He regarded the ceiling with a helpless sense that he was being manhandled brutally by the hands of fate. Or, specifically, the hands of Hermione, who was still trying to sneak her essay into his pocket.

“Yeah. Sure, I could go for a Chocolate Frog.”

It took quite a while for them to unload the Hogwarts Express. It had been a terrible day to leave the castle: June flowers were blooming everywhere, turning the lawns into a patchwork quilt of red and yellow, and the sun filled the sky with a light, watercolor blue. Meanwhile, in King's Cross, the air smelled of smoke, iron, and the intractable scent of human bodies bustling together, queuing up to leave the platform. Harry and Ron had gone first, after trading hugs and promises to write, and then Ron had hauled Harry off to meet Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

Hermione had grown somewhat teary when saying goodbye to the boys, and now that she and Draco were alone, the waterworks started gearing up again. "Well, I hope you have a good summer," she said. She held out her right hand. "Please give my best to your mother. And if you'd ever like to visit, I'm sure my parents would…"

He snorted.

"Right. Never mind. But do, you know, if you ever feel like writing — I'm just going to be in London, it won't be hard for your owl to find me."

"My owl?" he said. "What's this about my owl? Ulysses is still recovering from a wing sprain."

"If you're saying you're willing to try muggle post, I'd be perfectly happy, but I have to warn you, it's not quite as fast—"

"Granger, I say this without exaggeration: I would much rather die." He pulled the cover off his trolley and lifted the owl cage, which was covered in a tawny curtain. "You'll just have to use your owl, instead."

She didn't take it at first. She stared at the offering.

He rattled it a little, and the creature inside gave a baleful hoot. "Go on and take it," he said. "I've not got all day. If you don't like it, you'll have to take it back to Eeylops, I'm not sure what their policy on

returns is. I also don't know how you'd go about sending it away; if you tell it to go, it's bred to come right back, so your muggles ought to have some trouble getting rid of it."

"This is mine?" she said.

She was taking far too long, so he grew impatient and hauled off the tarp himself. The owl inside was on the small side, with a coat of toasted amber and a heart-shaped white face. Its eyes were vast and dark, and it had a lovely little V of a beak that gave its stare an inquisitive effect, as if it were conducting a perpetual examination of the world.

He'd need a cask of Veritaserum to admit it, but he'd picked it because it reminded him of her.

Hermione took the cage, hugging it to her chest, and stared at him in a way that made him fidget and grow warm in the face.

"You got me an owl?"

"Someone needed to. It was beneath both of our dignity. I wasn't about to let you run a parade of strange owls through the Manor grounds."

"You *got* me an *owl."*

"Merry Christmas," he said, looking away. "I owed you a present. Sorry it's late."

"How much did you pay for this?"

"Listen, I told Mother, if we have to mortgage the Manor, that's just the way it is."

"You're lying!"

"I never lie about wines or real estate. It's bad form."

“Does it have a name?”

He shrugged. “It’ll answer to whatever you call it.”

She lifted it to her face and cooed. It cooed back with regal dignity.

“Thucydides,” she decided. “Do you like that? You do? I like that, too.”

“That’s the most pretentious thing I’ve ever heard. And mine’s named Ulysses.”

“Thucy, for short.”

“That’s worse.”

She grinned at him. “I have a present for you, too.”

He pinched his nose. “No, see, Granger, the way this usually works is, we both give each other gifts at Christmas. What I’ve done is put mine off for half a year, so I’ve had to pay it back with interest—”

“It’s not a Christmas gift! It’s for your birthday. June first, isn’t it? It’s today.”

It was. He was surprised; he didn’t remember mentioning it, though his mother had sent him a boxed cake at breakfast in the Great Hall. He’d received a few ‘happy birthdays’ from people in passing, and the Weasley twins had taken it upon themselves to serenade him at lunch, but aside from these ritual humiliations, the occasion had gone unmarked.

“I wrote my parents, asking them to get this from the mall,” she said, digging around in her satchel. “I told them your parents hadn’t enough money to buy you one, which was a lie, obviously, but I thought it might be worth it.”

“What’s a ‘mall’?”

She was babbling because she was nervous. She really didn't need to be; he hadn't expected to get anything from her. "It took me a while to think of it. I tried to come up with something you'd like but you wouldn't think to get for yourself. That's what my mum says the best presents are. I was going to get you another book, but I thought that would be a bit boring."

"Perish the thought."

"And," she said, with satisfaction, "this is muggle technology. So if you like it, you have to admit that you like something made by muggles."

She offered him a small gray box with a black square inset on the face, made of some odd lusterless material. Connected to the box by a cord were a pair of threadbare black earmuffs. The word 'WALKMAN' ran along the bottom of the box.

He tried not to look too disappointed.

"Thanks," he said, with as much feeling as he could. "This is very nice, Granger."

"Silly! You haven't seen what it can do yet. Here." She took back the earmuffs and, going up on tiptoes, slid them over his ears. The cups slid in place, and the band settled into his hair, in what he was certain could not be a flattering look.

"There," said Hermione in satisfaction. She paused — they were standing very close to each other on the platform — and then, seeming to find her nerve, she threw her arms around his shoulders.

Instinctively, he put his arms around her waist. Uncertain where to go from there, he patted her on the small of the back.

It was hideously awkward. But not, altogether, unpleasant.

"Happy birthday, Draco," she said.

She pressed a button on the side of the box.

A sound swelled in his ears. He turned around, thinking that perhaps some buskers had come up behind them while they were hugging, but there were none. The thunder disappeared when he removed the earmuffs, and reappeared when he put them on.

Whatever his expression was, Hermione laughed at it. She waved at him and said something, but he couldn't hear her, because a drumbeat had started behind the ambience.

The music swelled in volume as she disappeared into the crowd of the platform, and he was left standing there, increasingly stunned. It was like Finnigan's music, but it wasn't — it was much better, for one thing — and it was closer, like it was *inside* him, permeating him, going in and through him and leaving him humming like the magic in his wand.

And so Draco stood on Platform Nine and Three Quarters, holding his box of muggle magic, as his world — as it seemed so often wont to do — changed unalterably and forever.

Hello! Thanks for reading!

I'll be taking a short hiatus while I finish editing Year Two (and continue writing Year Three). Hopefully, it should start coming out in about a week. It'll be the same length as Year One (seven chapters, approximately novella-length), followed by Year Three, also in the same novella range; after that, each year will get a bit bigger. Y3 will also be the last part of what I consider 'Volume One' of this fic, marking the end of this 'act' of the characters' lives. After that… well, after that, everything's in the planning stages, but there's lots of irons in the fire.

Thanks for all the love. If you're reading this, you're the reason I keep updating. And a special thanks to everyone who commented; I read all of them, and I'm grateful for each one.

Love,

GT

Runcorn for All

Chapter 9: Runcorn for All

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

And when you've taken down your guard

If I could change your mind

I'd really love to break your heart

—Tears for Fears, “Shout”

Dear Draco,

I knew you’d like it! It’s my favorite album, too. My mum says that if I keep my grades up, she’ll take me to see them for my birthday in September. My cousin Nicole loves them too, and since she’s staying with us, I get to share her cassettes. (You must keep this a secret, but I have to tell someone: She has such a crush on Michael Dempsey, and keeps a picture of him in her underwear drawer.)

It does feel sort of odd to be home. I love them, of course, but whenever my aunt or uncle asks what I want to do when I grow up, I have to lie and say I’m studying to be a barrister or a chemist or something. And sometimes, Nicole and Jason will be talking about something they’ve learned in school, like History or Maths, and I have to keep quiet because they never taught us that at Hogwarts, and if I ask what it is, I’ll sound stupid. But it’s even worse when it’s the other way around! Yesterday I had to sit through a whole conversation about Thracian history, saying nothing, though I was

just dying to tell them that the sea-peoples of the Bronze Age were marauding hags!

Even my parents do their best, but they don't really "get" some things, like why we use owls, or why phones don't work on Hogwarts grounds. And I obviously can't tell them about things like the three-headed dog and the Vault, or they'd never let me go back. Do you tell your mum everything, or are there some things you hide from her, too?

Ron invited me to go to the Burrow at the end of the summer, but I don't think we'll get back from Mallorca in time. Also, my parents aren't too keen on me staying over at a boy's house, even though Ron has six siblings, so there'll be loads of people around. I told them they were being puritanical and old-fashioned, and Mum gave me a quid for using "puritanical" correctly but said I still couldn't go.

Also, have you heard from Harry? It's been a while, and between you and me, I don't trust his relatives as far as I can throw them.

I hope you're having a wonderful summer.

Your friend,

Hermione Granger

Dear Granger,

Don't get too excited. I didn't say it was better than Beethoven, I just said that if you wanted to send me some more cassette decks, I'd be happy to reimburse you. I don't know how much they cost, but I'm sure it's no object. They can't be more than a symphony membership, and for some reason Mother insists we keep several of those.

I will say you're onto something with The Cure, though. I liked "Boys Don't Cry" and the one about Friday. It's good flying music.

I am sorry that your muggles have barred you from achieving your full potential as a know-it-all. Rest assured that when you return to civilization, your big head will be fully obvious to anyone who matters. Moreover, I'm not sure why your mother and father can't wrap their heads around the concept of owls. According to Binns, at one point muggles used pigeons to carry messages, so I don't know what's not clicking for them.

*No, I don't tell my mother everything that happens at Hogwarts. I don't know anyone who tells their mum *everything,* wizard or not. In some ways, muggles have it easier — all sorts of baggage comes with being part of a pureblood family, and it doesn't always bring you closer together. Do you have any aunts you're not allowed to talk about? Or names you're not allowed to say?*

In any case, I wouldn't worry about it. I'm told that angsting over the fact your parents don't understand you is a customary part of adolescence.

I haven't heard from Potter, either. If you're worried they're withholding his mail, I can try sending Ulysses; he's fierce as a lion, and more than a match for any muggle. I'd like to see the Dursleys try to stop him from getting through Potter's window. And I mean that sincerely, I would very much like to see it.

Write soon; do remember about the cassettes.

Yours etc.,

Draco Malfoy

Dear Malfoy,

Hello!! Thanks very much for the letter! Sorry if your owl is missing a few feathers when he comes back — Dudley took a swing at it with a flyswatter, and then it sort of tried to kill him I think? Aunt Petunia insisted on taking him to the hospital for the scratches, even though they were pretty tiny and probably didn't even hurt. Uncle Vernon threatened to call animal control but I told him if he did that you'd sue, and that you came from a super-posh rich family with lots of solicitors. That got him good and scared.

My summer's been pretty boring. The Dursleys locked all my school stuff in the cupboard. Wand, books, Invisibility Cloak, all of it. The wand's not so bad because I couldn't do magic anyway, but I wish I had my Cloak. My neighbor Mrs. Fig is pretty nice, and I used to sneak over to watch TV with her in the afternoons. Now I just have to sit in my room all day between meals.

Anyway, sorry for all the complaining. I really do appreciate your letter. I haven't gotten any from Ron or Hermione because Dudley always scares the owls off with his BB gun. Hedwig is really happy to have the company, too, I think she's been lonely.

Hope your summer's been great. Can't wait to be back at Hogwarts.

Best,

Harry

Dear Potter,

What you describe is intolerable and outrageous. The hell do you mean they won't let you out of the house. Did you permit them to confiscate your wand? Do they know who you are?

I knew your summer accommodations were suboptimal, but I had no idea it was this bad. If you need rescuing, say so at once.

If I do not receive a reply to this letter, I will assume that you have been imprisoned by a pack of deranged muggles, and I will entreat the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to intervene accordingly. I do not know what sort of creature a Dudley is, but I assure you that scratches will be the least of its worries then.

Sincerely,

Draco L. Malfoy

Dear Potter,

It has been a week. I have not heard back from you. Are you dead? If not, indicate.

Perhaps you thought I was joking about the Ministry threat. I was not. I do not care one whit about your muggles and I will gladly bring the full might of magical law enforcement down upon them.

Sincerely,

Draco Malfoy

Dear Malfoy,

Thanks for the tip-off. Situation being handled. Harry's here now. ('Here' is the Burrow). Gonna stay with us for the rest of the summer I reckon. When we go back Mum wants to ask Dumbledore if we can file for partial custody. She's ripping mad because the twins and I

stole Dad's flying car which he wasn't sposed to have in the first place, so I'm grounded until my wedding or something, but it was worth it.

Going to Diagon Alley for school supplies on the 17th. Hermione's gonna meet us there. You can come too if you like.

Fred & George say hello by the way. They came over while I was writing and poopy peepee big fat stinker BUTTS BUTTS BUTTS

Gotta go now.

Cheers,

Ron

FRED WAS HERE

GEORGE WAS ALSO HERE

Dear Weasley,

What?

Sincerely,

Draco Malfoy

Around ten o'clock, the midmorning sun cut through a bank of fog, and turned Diagon Alley into a landscape of aquatint. In the small cobbled space between shopfronts, gold-fringed tufts of mist floated

here and there like living clouds, and wizards drifted through these in swells of colorful robes like a flock of birds of paradise. The rare glory of a warm day hung over the crowds, and tawny branches whirled and danced over the street, threatening in their flush the approach of fall. The stone storefronts, so old that they lilted against each other for strength, seemed to breathe with life.

Draco leaned against the wall of Gringotts and sipped tea from his carafe. He wore a new cloak of crushed green velvet over a suit, freshly tailored, with a golden pocket square. A fresh stack of galleons burned a hole in his pocket.

As the clock tower boomed ten, he checked his watch and lifted an eyebrow. If someone had stopped to look at him, they might have taken note of the exceptionally well-dressed and impatient twelve-year-old who appeared to be visiting Gringotts on his own.

“Draco! Draco, over here!”

Hermione stood atop the white flight of stairs to the bank, trailing a cumulonimbus of bushy hair. She raced down, taking the stairs two at a time, and he realized too late that she was not slowing down. He locked his knees just in time for her to launch off the last step.

“*Oof.*”

“Hello! How are you? It’s been ages! Were you waiting for us?”

“Hello, Granger,” he said, detaching her, and setting her straight on the pavement. “Nice to see you. You look well.”

It was true. She’d tanned several shades darker over the summer, and sunshine had laid caramel highlights in her hair. New freckles peppered her heart-shaped cheeks. But the biggest change was the glint of metal inside her mouth, and the way she smiled at him with her lips pressed firmly shut.

“What happened to your mouth?” he said, frowning.

“I got braces!” She peeled back her lips and set her jaw, revealing a grate of metal that ran like railroad tracks across both sets of teeth. “My parents say I have to keep them on for a year, and then I’ll have perfect teeth.”

“Are they painful?” He squinted at them.

“It hurts sometimes,” she admitted. “Especially when I got them tightened. And I have to wear these rubber bands to fix my overbite. But it’ll all be worth it, and I’m lucky I got them young. Some people have to wait until they’re teenagers.”

She smiled broadly, and even the metal bolts on her teeth couldn’t detract from the voltage of her grin. “Don’t they look perfectly horrid?”

He began to agree with her, but he’d made that mistake before, and saved himself at the last minute. “I hadn’t noticed,” he said loftily.

It was the right thing to say. Her smile widened.

“Hermione! Draco!”

Bounding up the crowded street came a veritable legion of redheads, all wearing the same scrappy robes and grin. Ron led them, followed by Fred, George, Percy, and a middle-aged man with Ron’s ears who must have been their father. Roped into the passel was a single dark-haired exception, hurrying alongside them, though his short legs had to step twice for each stride of Ron’s. His expression was of bemused bliss, as if he couldn’t believe his own luck.

“Harry! Ron!”

Hermione went flying at them, and battered them with hugs in turn. Fred and George swooped in and whisked her off the ground in a joint three-way embrace, eliciting a squeal of surprise, and then passed her off to Percy, who balked and gave her a crisp, firm handshake.

Then she pivoted to Ron's father, stuck out her hand, and announced, "Hello! *I'm* Hermione Granger. I'm Ron's friend. You must be his father, Mister Weasley. I've heard so many good things about you."

Mr. Weasley was a spindly, balding man in glasses, whose height was vast but disproportionate to his muscle mass. Somewhat flabbergasted by Hermione — as he should be, as anyone should be, really — he shook her hand. "Arthur Weasley, and the pleasure is mine, Miss Granger. Ron's gone on about you all summer."

"Dad," Ron groaned.

Draco snickered. Mr. Weasley turned to him, blinked, and extended his hand, too. "And you must be Draco Malfoy," he said, with a quick once-over of Draco's robes. "Ron's told me about you, as well. I hear you helped to save his life."

"Reports of my virtue have been greatly exaggerated," said Draco. Not wanting to be rude, he shook hands, repressing a small twinge of discomfort: his mother would be shocked to see him shaking hands with Arthur Weasley. His *father* — he couldn't even think.

"None of that. Ron has a great eye for friends. We owe you a great deal."

He shoved his hands deep in his pockets. "Weasley, you dog," he said coolly to Ron. "You didn't tell me we were friends. I would have made a card."

"Shuddup, you prat."

"Language, Ron!"

Another pair of Weasleys came bustling into view, one a pear-shaped matronly woman with a handbag, the other a skinny girl clutching her hand. She was spindly and tall for her age, like all the

Weasleys, with a smear of peanut-butter freckles over her nose and eyes of shock-bright blue.

“There’s more of you?” Draco muttered. Arthur Weasley clearly wasn’t shooting blanks.

“Oi,” said Ron, eyeing him.

“Draco, this is my wife, Molly Weasley,” said Arthur, taking her under his arm. “And my daughter, Ginny.”

“Draco *Malfoy,* oh, hello,” blustered Mrs. Weasley, wringing Draco’s hand. “I’m sorry we’ve met this way, I look *such* a mess. I usually never leave the house dressed like this.”

“Not at all,” said Draco smoothly. “Your father wouldn’t be a Prewett, by chance?”

“He would! He would! Agrippus Prewett, of the Cheshire Prewetts,” she said proudly.

“And do the Prewetts still reside at Capesthorne?”

Her obvious pleasure at the name commingled with a touch of sadness. “Oh, my dear, not for some time, I’m afraid,” she said. “It was shuttered during the war, and then after the war, well, there was no one to care for it, and it couldn’t be kept up, so we passed it off to a cousin of some means. It’s been in their hands ever since.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said politely, and he wasn’t lying; it *was* a tragedy for a Twenty-Eight family to lose its ancestral seat. He hadn’t known the Prewetts were extinct in the male line, either, but it sounded as if Molly were the only one left. “It was a great house.”

“Oh, yes, it was. Such a pretty place! I meant to take the children to see it, but they never seem to take an interest in family history.”

Fred stuck a finger in his open mouth. George mimed throttling himself. Percy hung on her every word.

“I find there is little like the majesty of an English country house,” said Draco, “to inspire an interest in one’s roots.”

George slumped against Fred, wracked by tremors of invisible vomit. Fred waved frantically for a medic.

“That’s perfectly right!” Molly’s eyes sparkled. She rounded on her children, a little wild-eyed, as if freshly conscious of their defects. “How’d you like to see where your grandfather lived?”

“I would!” Percy piped up.

“That’s the embarrassing part, you *would*, wouldn’t you, Perce,” Ron muttered. He glared at Draco. “Did you have to?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said, smirking.

“Yeah, sure. Joke’s on you, she’ll be plotting to have you betrothed to Ginny before the day’s out. C’mon, Harry, let’s go before she starts trying to rebuild the dynasty.”

“I think we should split up,” Arthur said, distracting his wife from her stratagems. “Percy, you needed a new quill, didn’t you? And new books for you *and* the twins… Ron, you can use the twins’ hand-me-downs. And Ginny, you need one of everything, since it’s your first year…”

Draco turned to the youngest Weasley. “You’re going up?” he said, surprised. She was so small. He was certain he hadn’t been that small, last year.

She stared at him, wide-eyed, and nodded. Her knuckles strained white in her mother’s grip.

“She’s shy around strangers,” Ron explained, tweaking Ginny’s ear. “Hasn’t said three words at a time since Harry moved in. Just ‘yes, Harry,’ and ‘no, Harry,’ and ‘where’s Harry?’ Honestly.”

“Not true,” she said stubbornly, though this did not exactly prove Ron wrong.

“Where did you board?” Draco asked Ginny, trying to be courteous. She shook her head.

Ron pinked. “Nowhere. Mum homeschooled us,” he said. He added, somewhat snidely: “I bet you boarded at Scrimble’s or Hickinbottom, didn’t you? You could afford it.”

“Actually, my mother tutored me,” he drawled. “She preferred to have me home.”

“Oh. Well, that’s all right, then,” said Ron, suddenly chipper again. “Nothing wrong with it, we’re all still at Hogwarts anyway, aren’t we?”

They separated. Percy and his mother went in search of a quill, while Arthur took Fred and George out for breakfast with their friend, Lee Jordan (a handsome, smiling boy with dreadlocks, who Draco remembered having an uproarious argument with Seamus Finnigan over something about beetles and stones.) Mrs. Weasley hurried Ginny to a secondhand robe shop (“I want to go with Harry,” the girl protested) and Arthur announced they would all meet at Flourish and Blotts at noon.

Then Harry suggested dessert for breakfast, which horrified Draco and thrilled Hermione, so the four of them went to Fortescue’s. Inside the sweet-shop it was cool and the air smelled sticky-sweet, like sugar cones. The flavors ranged from Vanilla to Foie Gras, and he made a mental note to tell Dobby. (On second thought, perhaps he shouldn’t; the elf didn’t need the inspiration.) Harry bought two strawberry-and-peanut-butter cones for himself and Ron, and a mint-chocolate chip for Hermione, and then insisted on getting one for Draco, though he maintained that the whole affair was ill-mannered. More as a concession to Harry than anything, he tried a scoop of green tea in a cup, and they wandered up the alley, eating their sugar for breakfast.

In front of Quality Quidditch Supplies, a crowd had gathered for the unveiling of the Nimbus 2002, and Ron spent some time with his cheek plastered mournfully to the glass.

“A two-thousand series… just imagine…”

“At least you have a broomstick,” sighed Harry.

“You’ll need one this year,” Draco remarked. “Unless you intend to fly a school broom for quidditch, which is suicide.”

“Fred and George fly school brooms,” Ron objected. “So does half the Gryffindor team.”

“Yes, and have you noticed the Gryffindor team gets thrashed every time we play Slytherin?”

“I hope you’re wrong,” Harry said glumly, “because I haven’t got one.”

Draco gave Harry an odd look. “Why don’t you just buy one?”

“What do you mean?” said Harry.

“You’ve got full access to your inheritance, haven’t you? It’s not tied up with an executor?” He nodded at the Nimbus 2002. “Go in there and get one.”

Harry elbowed Draco and nodded at Ron. The ginger had stepped apart from the other three, and was silently walking the rack of secondhand Cleansweeps, his hands deep in his pockets.

“It’d be stupid anyway,” said Harry loudly, “buying a broomstick before I’m on the team.”

They passed Percy and Mr. Weasley outside a junk shop, perusing shelves laden with rusted cauldrons, split-feather quills, and splintering brooms. Percy was reading a biography of Leonard Spencer-Moon, who, if Draco recalled, had been in Slytherin the

same year as his grandfather. He pointed out the odd choice of subject to Ron.

“Oh, that’s Perce for you,” he grumbled. “He’s been plotting to get Prefect since first year. He wants to be Minister one day.”

Draco hummed in interest. “Which party?” he inquired, though he had a guess.

“Any party that’ll have him. But Mum and Dad are Pops, and he couldn’t bear to disappoint them, so he’ll probably stick to the left.”

Hermione and Harry exchanged a look that said: *Shall you ask, or shall I?*

“What’s a Pop?” said Harry.

And Draco and Ron exchanged a look that said: *Shall you explain, or shall I?*

“Wizard politics,” said Ron, relieving Draco of the burden. “‘Pop’ stands for the Populares Party, they’re the left-wing of the Wizengamot. Main rival on the right is the Ops, short for Optimates. Course, there’s all sorts of smaller parties mixed in, Greens and Liblabs and Cavs and what-have you, but those are the main coalitions.” He gestured to Draco. “His dad was huge in the Cavaliers, for example. My dad came home complaining about him all the time.”

“My Uncle Vernon’s a Tory,” said Harry. “He complains about the government giving all his money to poor people. Are the Cavs sort of like that?”

Draco did not want his father lumped into any group of which Vernon Dursley was a part. “It doesn’t map to muggle politics,” he said sulkily. “It’s a different thing.”

In Gambol and Japes' Wizarding Joke Shop, they met Fred, George, and Lee Jordan. Neither Draco nor Hermione had much interest in that store, so they cut out early for Flourish and Blott's, but were stymied at the door by a large crowd of wizards queuing for autographs with Gilderoy Lockhart.

Across from Flourish and Blott's, the buildings parted, and a dark, winnowing side-street branched off from Diagon Alley proper. Low-guttering candles lit the uneven black cobble, and shabby-looking wizards with hoods drawn high scurried in and out, darting suspicious glances over their shoulder. A gnarled wooden archway over the sidestreet proclaimed its name.

Draco brightened. "Hey, Granger," he said, tugging her away from the bookstore. "You ever been to Knockturn Alley?"

"No, what's that?"

"Diagon Alley's better-bred cousin. Put your hood up, you don't want too much attention down here."

He led her under the archway and they slipped into the shade. Immediately, the light dimmed, and the fog seemed to thicken. The largest shop, Borgin and Burkes, had a great glass storefront displaying the skeleton of some winged reptile, and opposite that, Noggin and Bonce sported a rich collection of shrunken heads, dangling from cords in a smoky window display. Two doors down, a rat the size of a dog shrieked and rattled the bars of its cage, advertising the wares of Mtaw's Menagerie. Two shabby-looking wizards watched them from the shadow of a doorway as they walked by. A vendor selling poisonous candles crooned to them, and Draco put his arm around Hermione, hurrying her past.

"This is all prohibited," Hermione hissed, as they passed another vendor selling what appeared to be fried troll fingers. "I've counted seven different kinds of contraband in three storefronts, and I'm pretty sure that's an endangered species…"

“I know! Isn’t it great?”

“No!” She was shrill. “The Ministry ought to close down everyone here!”

“Ah, they can’t do that. Then where’d they buy all their contraband? You’ll like it when you see the really fun stuff. Come on.”

He led her further, and the fog sealed behind them, blotting out the light from Diagon Alley. In the window of a jeweler’s store, Hermione stopped to look at a magnificent choker of silver and rubies, sparkling on a black pillow. A matching tiara glittered on the plinth above it.

“You don’t want that,” Draco assured her. “See the card?” It read: *CURSED! Do not touch. SOLD TOGETHER – ₲10,000.*

“Why would anyone buy jewelry that’s cursed?”

“Not to wear it, obviously,” he said. “You’d buy it for someone you really hate.”

“I don’t think I could ever hate anybody that much,” she said, balking at the price.

“I don’t know,” he lied, spinning his signet ring on his third finger. It fit a little better than it had last year, but it still slipped around fairly often. “Perhaps I can. I wouldn’t waste money on a necklace, though, not if I’ve got a perfectly good wand and a right hand to use it with.”

“You wouldn’t do anything awful, though, would you?” she insisted, frowning at him.

“I don’t know. It depends on what they did. Do you have a point? … Oh, look!” He pointed. “Mulpepper’s Apothecary! Snape told me they sell the only hagraven claws you can find in Britain...”

“Draco!” He’d been tugging rather insistently on her arm, but at her cry, he let go. “What are we doing here?” she hissed.

“Just looking,” he said, “unless you see something you want. Isn’t it cool?”

“No! It’s horrible!” She wrapped her arms around herself and cast a fretful look over her shoulders. “All of this is Dark magic.”

“Oh, c’mon, not all of it. Most of this stuff isn’t even magic, it’s just bits and bobs—”

“Which can be *used* for Dark magic.”

“So what? That doesn’t make it Dark. And even if it does, you have to admit it’s interesting.”

She hugged herself tighter. “Professor McGonagall says Dark magic is a dangerous path,” she whispered.

“And McGonagall’s not a Dark witch, so what would she know about it?” he said, annoyed. “My family’s been patronizing Knockturn Alley ever since it opened, and *I’m* not a Dark wizard.”

Hermione opened her mouth to object, but the conversation had started to annoy him, and he decided to move on. “Look, here’s something normal,” he said patiently, drawing her across the street. “It’s a pub. Nothing Dark about a pub, is there, Granger? Unless you count the ales.”

Her argument deflated, she made an exasperated sound in the back of her throat, which might have been a thwarted laugh. “That was terrible.”

“No worse than Weasley, I’m sure.”

Beside the door of the White Wyvern, the brick was plastered with posters, advertisements, and community announcements; one baleful flier pleaded for word of a lost cat. The largest poster by far

was a black-and-white portrait of an aged, square-faced man in a suit, whose queerly colored eyes stared so intensely at the viewer they appeared to lift their sockets out of his face. Streaks of gray veined his dark, oily hair, which coiled in spirals on his shoulders, and a thick beard swathed his mouth and jaw in smoky curls. The burly mantle of his brow gave him a haunted, hooded expression.

Above his head, it read in big, square lettering: RUNCORN FOR ALL!

Hermione saw him reading it. “Who’s that?” she said.

“Albert Runcorn,” said Draco. “Leader of the Opposition, in the Wizengamot. Interesting, I didn’t think he’d run this year.”

“For the Minister of Magic, you mean?”

“Yeah. He’s this sort of political darling for the Ops, you see. Came up through the Auror program, Director of Magical Law Enforcement, then elected to the Wizengamot, chaired Economic Affairs for three terms, and he’s still pretty young — relatively speaking. Everyone thought he’d try for Minister next, but they assumed he’d wait for Fudge to serve a third term.”

“Because he likes Fudge?”

“Merlin, no. He hates him. But a Minister can’t serve more than three terms, and the sitting Minister usually wins reelection. So it would’ve been typical to wait.”

“Your prime minister has term limits?”

“Of course he does. You don’t want some dopey codger hoarding the seat for twenty years, do you?”

The door to the White Wyvern swung open, and a pair of wizards stepped out. The first was a wiry boy with a mop of mousy brown hair, just shorter than Draco, and dull, smoky blue eyes. The second

was a short, pug-nosed girl with greasy black hair pulled into scalp-straining pigtails. They both pulled up short at the sight of him.

“Why, hello,” purred Theodore Nott.

Draco jerked his chin, a cross between a greeting and a warning-off gesture. “Nott.”

“Malfoy.” Theodore hopped down from the stoop, robes swirling. He had a lazy, oily kind of grace; he moved like his bones were made of something viscous and syrupy. “Long time, no see.”

“Almost a year, isn’t it,” Draco agreed.

“I confess I felt somewhat abandoned. I thought we were going to be the best of chums at school.” He polished his fingernails on his robe and sighed, mournful.

“Yes, I wonder why *that* didn’t happen.”

“I sincerely do. You could have visited us, you know,” said Theodore, verging closer to sincerity. “I mean, some people would raise a fuss, but who cares? There’s not a law against sitting at other House tables.”

“I didn’t see you at mine, either.”

“You can’t expect me to sit with Gryffindors, come on, now.”

The pug-nosed girl, having heretofore held her tongue, broke out in a tinselly soprano. “What, *that’s* him?” she demanded, running her eyes up and down the length of him in obvious disgruntlement. “That’s Draco Malfoy? Lucius Malfoy’s son?”

“Told you I knew him, didn’t I?”

“But he can’t possibly be a Gryffindor,” said the girl shrilly. “His family’s been in Slytherin for centuries.”

“Sorry,” said Draco icily. “I wouldn’t interrupt, but my ears are burning, and I don’t know who you are.”

The girl stuck up her chin and gave him a short, formal curtsy. He blinked. That sort of gesture wasn’t typical anywhere outside a formal meeting between houses in the Sacred Twenty-Eight, and even then, it was a decidedly old-school move. Draco’s own mother didn’t make him bow to anyone except at balls and business meetings, and Narcissa Malfoy was almost as old-school as it went.

“I’m Pansy Parkinson,” said the girl. That made sense, now that he’d heard it: Parkinson was one of the Twenty-Eight, though not quite as grand as the Malfoys or the Blacks. He could see why she’d opt for the more formal play to assert herself. “My mum heard the Malfoys had a son at Hogwarts this year, and wanted me to find you, so I could deliver our family’s regards.” She stepped closer and lowered her voice. “Tell me honestly. Are you really in Gryffindor? Or is Teddy playing a joke on me?”

Draco took a bracing breath. “No,” he said. “He’s telling the truth.”

“Oh!” She clearly didn’t know what to do with this. “Oh, that’s… that’s… I mean, I don’t want to be *insulting,* but…”

“But you’ll soldier on, anyway,” said Theodore amusedly.

“But that’s simply silly!” She rounded on Theodore, as if he bore full responsibility for the misfortune. “You should be with your own kind —”

“And what’s ‘his own kind’?” said Hermione Granger, in tones that could have started an ice age.

Pansy paused, and her eyes did a quick elevator trip down-and-up. They settled on Hermione’s teeth. She smirked.

“Well, for starters—”

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure,” Theodore interrupted, pushing off the wall. “Draco, be a lamb and introduce us.”

Draco, who would rather have gnawed glass than be referred to as a ‘lamb’ ever again, shot him a dark look. “This exceptionally charming individual is Theodore Nott,” he said. “Nott, Hermione Granger.”

Theodore held out his hand. Hermione grasped it, and quicker than she could withdraw, he darted it to his lips and kissed the air above her knuckles.

“*Enchenté.”*

“Oh,” she said, looking rather less charmed than alarmed. “I didn’t think you were French. Your accent—”

“He’s not,” Draco said shortly.

He chuckled airily. “It’s true. I’m a sham. I just like the gesture, I think it’s dashing.”

“I see. Does it impress a lot of people?”

“Enough for me to keep doing it. Why? Did it work?”

“I don’t know if ‘impressed’ is the word I would use,” she said doubtfully, rubbing her hand. Draco smirked.

“You never do that to *me,*” muttered Pansy, elbowing him.

“And you never give me those kinds of curtsies. One day, Pans, you will be nice to me, and you will learn on that day how perfectly lovely I can be.”

“When kelpies fly.”

“Stranger things. Let me see: Granger, Granger, Granger. Why do I remember that? Do you know the Dagworth-Grangers?”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Hermione.

“No? Worth a shot.” He snapped his fingers. “I know. You were first-ranked in Transfiguration last year.”

Any other student might have taken this compliment with blushing and denials, but not Hermione. She replied, with an astounding measure of indignation: “Not *just* Transfiguration.”

“A thousand pardons,” he said, with an amused glance at Draco. Pansy scoffed.

“But yes, that was me. I’m surprised you remember.”

“I remember because I wanted to kill you,” he said casually. Draco startled. “I worked myself to the bone for that class, and I thought I was a shoo-in for top marks. Then I see the posting, and who is it instead, but this jammy kid, Granger, who nobody in my circle seems to know, with a name such that I can’t even tell if it’s a boy or girl.”

“I’m very sorry to have disappointed you.”

“Don’t be. McGonagall showed me your paper. You’re either brilliant, or you’re the best cheater I’ve ever met, and either way, I’d like to get to know you.” He spoke with such arch tones it made it almost impossible to tell his sincerity from sarcasm. “Friends like you tend to come in handy.”

Hermione gave a small, polite smile. Draco could tell she’d loathed the reference to cheating; there was a twitch in her cheek. “In that case,” she said, “you might come sit with me and Draco, sometime. Unless it’s really too hard for you — being around all those Gryffindors.”

Draco snickered. Theodore, however, didn’t take offense, but sighed and shook his head ruefully. “Just my luck,” he says. “Why are the interesting ones never respectable? Oh, well. Come along, Pans. I must soothe my shame by spending money.”

He shook Hermione's hand — properly, this time — and Draco's. As they made to leave, he noticed the Runcorn poster. "See that, did you?" he asked Draco. "My dad's giving a small fortune to his campaign. You and your mother might consider doing the same, if you're interested in stepping back into politics."

"I appreciate the advice, but my mother and I will choose our own investments."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said, and both he and his pigtailed sidekick strode off into the gloom.

Once they were out of earshot, Hermione said, "I hope you won't be cross with me for saying so, but if that's who you'd have ended up like, it's lucky for you that you didn't end up in Slytherin."

"Shows what you know," he said grimly. "That's about as nice as it gets."

Draco very nearly did not make it to his second year at Hogwarts. After delays on the train from Wiltshire to London, he scrambled onto the Hogwarts Express just as the engine groaned to life, and were it not for the quick eye and quicker hands of George Weasley, he might have toppled out of the moving car.

"There you are, mate," said George kindly. "We were worrying about you."

"Ta," he said brusquely, straightening his tie. "Got held up. Where's Fred?"

The twin's erstwhile partner was nowhere to be seen.

"Locking Crabbe in the loo, I think," he said easily, checking his watch. "Should be back soon. Thought we were joined at the hip, didja?"

“You do everything together.”

“Life’s easier with four hands instead of two,” he said, shrugging. “But a little time apart does Freddie and me some good, now and then. Lets me hear myself think. Give me that trunk, Blondie, it’s still bigger than you are.”

He hauled open the nearest compartment door and vaulted Draco’s trunk into the luggage rack. “Oi, Perce, Gin. Look who made it.”

“Why, it’s about time,” said Percy. “We were quite worried when you didn’t show on the platform. Weren’t we, Ginevra?”

Ginny glanced up through her hair. She had changed into her robes, which were too big for her, being obviously second-hand; she had rolled them up at the cuffs. “Hullo, Malfoy,” she said. He nodded.

“I’m giving Ginevra some advice for her first year,” said Percy, reclining in his seat with the poise of a French king. “As I was saying, you’ll want to focus on Potions and Transfiguration. Those are the respectable subjects, and they’re the hardest to make the N.E.W.T. History of Magic is essential, but your grade in it is not; the worst is Herbology, and second to it, Charms…”

The train went over a loud portion of track that blissfully obscured whatever Percy had to say. Draco eyed the door. George, who was leaning on it, grinned at him.

“Treat your head of house as your superior officer, not your parent. You’ll spend your second year getting rid of all the friends you made in the first, so don’t worry about socializing in the first year, just focus on your studies. But if you do make friends, try to associate with the *right* kinds of family — you know, people with reputations.”

It was so similar to Narcissa's advice that Draco could have laughed. He pressed his lips together and looked out the window.

By and by, Percy broke off to use the loo, with a promise to continue upon his return. In the ensuing silence, all three of the remaining inhabitants took a moment to savor it.

“Malfoy?” said Ginny, quietly.

“Weasley?”

“Did you ask for Slytherin?” She darted her eyes at him, then away. “When you were Sorted?”

He set his jaw. “Is there a reason you’d like to know?”

“Not in particular,” she said, and fell silent.

It wasn’t hard to see that she was lying, or why.

“Yes,” he said, after a moment. “I asked for Slytherin.”

“Did it… did it make any difference, do you think?”

“Does it look like it made a difference?”

“But did you really — I mean, when you asked, did you actually say —”

“Gin,” broke in George, in a kind voice. “You know nobody will think less of you—”

“She was talking to me, Weasley,” Draco interrupted coolly. George lifted his hands. “As for you, Weasley — She-Weasley, that is — yes, I asked, and yes, I was clear about it. But I was a special case. Your family is up six on the House front. You’ll be fine.”

“But everyone thought you’d be in Slytherin, and you—”

“Believe me when I say our situations are not alike,” he said. “And, in the unlikely event that they are, and you do end up — it’s Slytherin you’re worried about, I’m assuming? Yes? — if you do end up there,

you'll find yourself in the company of people with a great deal more dignity and sense than those you've been brought up with. If I were you, I'd enjoy it." He paused. "And the green will go with your hair. If you've seen your brothers' quidditch uniforms, I really needn't say more. It should be illegal for gingers to wear red."

She cracked a grin.

"Do you enjoy it?" she asked curiously.

"Enjoy what?"

"Your House."

Before he submitted to the harrowing ordeal of answering that question, Percy returned. It was the only combination of circumstances which could have possibly made this cause for relief.

"Have you seen today's *Prophet?"* he exclaimed, brandishing the aforementioned article. "The Magical Security Act is moving to debate in October. Weeks ahead of schedule!"

George yawned. "My God, what have they done," he said. "Can I get the Sports section, Perce?"

"And let me have it, after you," said Ginny.

But Draco paid attention to the prefect, because for once, he'd said something of interest. "Really? Fudge moved it up?"

Percy, obviously grateful to have someone upon whom to impress the significance of his knowledge, showed him the headline. It bore a picture of Fudge (looking rather gloomy, Draco thought) speaking from behind a podium, while flashbulbs fired madly in his face. The headline read: FUDGE FREES THE DOCKET: LANDMARK LEGISLATION GOING TO VOTE BEFORE WINTER RECESS.

"Cannons are down two in the prelims," said George.

Ginny said, “Well, what can you expect, their draft was pish.”

Draco flipped a page. “Bet he wants to get it out before the election, then.”

“Do you think Fudge is that worried?” said Percy with interest. “I wouldn’t be.”

“What’s this that Fudge is doing?” said George. “Outlawing beards longer than eight inches? Bureaucratizing the trolls?”

“The Magical Securities Act is *seminal,* ” said Percy, in scandalized tones. “It would imbue the Department of Magical Law Enforcement with legislatively vested executive authority—”

“And defenestrate the flibbertigibbets?” George agreed, nodding, while Ginny covered a giggle. “Absquatulate the bibbles? Impignorate the aglets, surely.”

“This is no joking matter! It would let them put the Trace on people convicted of a crime.”

“Charged,” Draco corrected, absently.

“It’d be a great thing for the Ministry. Dad thinks it’s not a half-bad idea, since it’d let Bones finally nail a whole lot of former Death Eaters. He thinks loads of them are still up to anti-muggle activity, we just can’t catch them… No offense, Malfoy," he added thoughtfully.

Draco looked up indignantly. “None was being taken, until that.”

Percy made an apologetic face, which happened to be congruent to a face of indigestion. At that point, Draco decided it was time to find a compartment with a better Weasley-to-non-Weasley ratio, and took his leave.

The second years rode up to the castle in horseless carriages. It was a calm, clear night, and the sky over the Great Hall glistened with the silver pepper of stars. The Sorting Hat sang a song about unity,

which Draco thought was a bit rich for an object whose purpose was to Sort people, and then the ceremony began. His ears pricked up at the name “Lovegood,” though he didn’t remember why until Dean Thomas murmured, “Isn’t that the quack who runs *The Quibbler?* ”

The young Lovegood, a tiny blonde girl in a pillbox hat bedazzled to resemble a bumblebee (which she removed at McGonagall’s request), took the stool with an expression of perfect serenity. She sat there for ten subsequent minutes while the Hat’s silence became more and more tense, her legs kicking idly in the air, until finally it said, in a very unhappy tone: “Well then — I *suppose* — Ravenclaw,” and she skipped off to cheers that were more relieved than jubilant.

“Longest sort I’ve ever seen,” shouted Oliver Wood, applauding. “I should’ve timed it. I think she beat Katie’s record.”

“Hope nobody else tries, I’m starving,” said Ron.

A few more first years came and went, and then McGonagall called, “PARKINSON, PANSY!” and a familiar pug nose pressed its way out of the line. She stomped up to the stool like it was the electric chair and sat down, her jaw jutting out, arms folded.

The Hat never even touched her perfect pigtails.

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” murmured Hermione, as Pansy hurried (“sprinted” was a better word) to the Slytherin table. Draco saw Theodore Nott stand up and start to say something, laughingly, but he was interrupted by Pansy rocketing into his stomach with such force that he doubled over. Her arms went around his waist, and the Slytherin crowd swallowed them in cheers.

There were only three students left when McGonagall cried: “WEASLEY, GINEVRA.”

The whole redheaded clan woke up and stood at alert. Ginny tugged her skirt straight, squared her shoulders, and hopped onto the stage with a passable impression of someone *not* about to feint in fright.

“Last again,” said Percy anxiously. “We’re always next to last, every year. Why does it have to be alphabetical?”

“Attagirl, Ginny!” Fred shouted, and the whole Great Hall turned momentarily to scowl at him. “Attagirl! WHOO!”

Ginny shot him a quavering smile.

The Sorting Hat dropped neatly onto her head. She swallowed and stared resolutely at the opposite wall.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

It was like someone had been shot. Fred and George both leapt onto the table, seemingly buoyed by the sheer force of the air being expelled from their lungs. Ron roared his approval directly into Draco’s ear. Percy, overwhelmed by emotion, stood up and shouted: “THAT’S RIGHT!” after which he immediately blushed, shuddered, and sat back down again. Harry and Hermione leapt up and applauded vigorously, while the violent desiccation of Gryffindor’s meager supply of dignity continued all around them.

Ginny, grinning like mad, ripped the hat off her own head, tossed it to McGonagall, and flew to the Gryffindor table. It surged forth to receive her. Fred vaulted the table like a sprinter’s hurdle, snatched her up, and mounted her swiftly on his shoulders, and so situated, he paraded her down the table. It took McGonagall five minutes of persistent bellowing to calm them down.

“SILENCE! SILENCE! Your enthusiasm for Miss Weasley is admirable, but—”

She could not finish, because at the words “Miss Weasley,” George had banged his cup on the table and roared: “MISS WEASLEY!” and the table erupted again.

Miraculously, Draco caught Ginny’s eye. He rolled his eyes and mouthed, *Told you.*

She saw, and beamed. Then she dismounted her brother and shoved her way in at the table, wedging herself beside Draco.

“You were right,” she shouted.

“Could do without the tone of surprise, She-Weasley. Welcome, I suppose.”

“Thank you!” she said, and then — Draco gave a cry of horror — she flung one arm around his shoulder and squeezed. Then, unconscious or uncaring of his distress, she skipped off to join the other first years at the end of the table.

“What did you say to her?” Hermione asked, still clapping.

“That the Hat tries to give you what you want. If you ask.”

“Is that true?” she said. “I never thought so.”

He watched Ginny flop down beside a mousy lad named Creevey and pump his hand.

“Why not? It gave you what you wanted,” he said, doing his best not to sound sour.

“Yes, but not you,” she said. “And I mean, imagine what would’ve happened if *you’d* gotten what you wanted.”

He watched Theodore Nott and Vincent Crabbe toast Pansy with goblets of pumpkin juice. The Slytherins were talking boisterously among themselves, impervious to the resentment of those around them, totally insulated by their own self-regard.

“Yes,” he said bitterly. “I suppose the world would end.”

Hermione was quiet for a moment.

“I meant me,” she said, belatedly. “That we wouldn’t have been friends. That’s what I meant.”

“You wouldn’t have known me. There’d be nothing to miss.”

“That’s not true.”

“Oh, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not.” She pointed at the Slytherin table with her chin. “You don’t know them, and you miss them like mad.”

Welcome to Year Two!

Next chapter: 9/27/22.

Tryouts

Chapter 10: Tryouts

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The first day of classes dawned dull and overcast. Draco woke far before any reasonable hour because of Ron's snoring, and resigning himself to the year ahead, he dressed in the cold, gray light of dawn, and went down to the Great Hall early. The only others at the table were some older girls who went jogging in the mornings, and they were sipping coffee together at the end of the table. He put on his headphones and thumbed the side of his walkman, injecting his breakfast with an infusion of melancholy guitar, and made himself a pot of tea, stewed loose-leaf, the way Dobby would have.

Sometimes, when this place gets kind of empty

Sound of their breath fades with the light

A pair of first years came skidding into the Great Hall, laughing obnoxiously at nothing, their cheeks flushed from running. Draco recognized one of them as a Gryffindor from last night, Colin Creevey: a small boy with a cherubic face, whose head rioted with yellow curls, and whose eyes were shiny, blue, and perfectly enormous. The other was a tall Hufflepuff with a narrow, homely face and an aquiline nose, dark-haired, and missing a front tooth.

Because Draco was one of the few at the Gryffindor table, the first years ambled towards him. He dropped his head and hoped they would mind their own business.

"All right, there!"

No such luck.

“I’m Colin! Colin Creevey! Gryffindor!” He climbed into the seat next to Draco’s. “Is this seat taken?”

Draco tipped his head at it, in a sort of ‘as you will’ gesture, and grunted.

“Thanks! Justin, you can sit down, too. This is Justin Finch-Fletchley. We met on the stairs. He got lost when the staircase moved and I found him and then we raced here. Isn’t this castle enormous? I’ve never seen anything this big in my life! I’m from Leeds, where are you from? I’m the first wizard in the family. My dad’s a milkman. Can I take your picture?”

A bulb exploded without warning in Draco’s face. He threw up his hand.

“Aw but please can I take your picture? I’m trying to take a picture of every Gryffindor and also every person I meet and everything I see so I can show my parents when they go home. They still don’t believe it’s actually magic, they think it’s a school for magicians, like people who play pretend? So I’m going to prove it to them. I want to be a photographer when I grow up, if I’m not a wizard that is, I mean being a wizard is my first choice but if I can’t hack it here my dad says it’s always good to have a day job. What do your parents do? Do you think it’s reasonable to plan on being a wizard? Also, where does the food come from during meals? Is it magic? It scared the living heck out of me when it appeared last night, and I’d had a lot of heck scared out of me already by the rest of it, the train and the boats and the cave and the big guy with the lantern, isn’t he huge? Justin, did you see him? Isn’t he huge?”

Justin had seen him, and thought he was huge.

“And now I have to find my way to Herbology in the greenhouses and I don’t know where the *heck* that is, Professor McGonagall told us to ask a prefect but I can’t find any and they didn’t give us a map which would be pretty useful.”

“There’s no map,” said Draco shortly.

“No map? Like anywhere? Like they didn’t make a map when they built it or they did but they lost it and didn’t make another one? Or—”

“Hogwarts is unplottable. The structures change. The map would need to move.”

“Oh okay. But hang on a minute. Why can’t you guys make moving maps? Is that like a rule, no moving maps? Are there other rules? Oh my gosh.”

“No,” Draco said, rubbing his temple. “You’d only have to explore enough of the castle that you could plot it. And you’d have to understand how the castle moves. Which is complicated.” At the risk of sounding like Hermione, he refrained from citing *Hogwarts: A History,* though the temptation lingered.

“Oh that makes sense. Thank you. Wait but also. Um, Peeves said that sometimes they feed first years to the Giant Squid if they don’t get to class on time? And um that was very scary but Percy said he was lying, was he lying?”

“No, that’s true,” Draco said immediately.

“What. Wait no really? Like are you being serious? You’re not being serious. Okay. Wait but are you being serious, though.”

“It’s usually Gryffindors,” he sighed.

The five stages of grief passed briskly over Colin’s face.

“Justin,” he said gravely, “we’ve got to go.”

“Okay,” said Justin simply, and he left in the middle of a perfectly good sausage.

Draco made a mental note to let Harry and Ron in on the joke, and put his headphones back on.

The Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom was an ample, vaulted chamber with wide windows and lots of sunlight. Blackboards still untouched from the long summer sat at the front of the room, and the excited burble of the first day of classes propelled students to their seats with a vigor that would not soon reappear. Draco, who was determined to beat Hermione in D.A.D.A. this year, found a seat near the front of the desk and took out a new dragonhide notebook with cream-colored pages, wet an eagle-feather quill, and stacked the textbooks neatly to his left. He was still waiting when most of the other Gryffindors came in.

The professor emerged from his office: a tall, broad-shouldered man with a straw-colored coif. He smiled, and crow's feet around his eyes gave his face a kindly affect, as did the twinkling green eyes that crowned his sculpted cheekbones. A long, slender scar ran from his right cheek to his scalp.

Hermione cleared her throat and tucked her hair behind her ear. Draco shot her a suspicious look.

"That's Sturgis *Pod*-more," whispered Susan Bones. *"He* was in the Order of the Phoenix. *He* got the Order of Merlin for saving a town of muggles from Death Eaters in Surrey. *I* heard—"

But they never learned what it was Susan heard, because Hermione shushed her.

"Good morning," the professor said. "I don't think you know who I am. That's fair enough, you didn't have me last year. I'm Sturgis Podmore — that's S-T-U-R-G-I-S, and yes, my mother hated me. You can call me Professor Podmore, or Professor Sturgis, or just Sturgis, to be honest, I won't stand on ceremony." He risked a grin, looking faintly nervous. A few students tittered politely, unsure if they were supposed to laugh. "I hope to learn all your names, eventually. I understand that not all of you may be fans of this class, and that's fair enough; I didn't give one hoot for it, when I was your age, personally speaking. I'd much rather have spent all my time in Charms. So I don't expect you to come hanging on my every word,

but so long as you're here, awake, and on time, I promise not to give you — well, *too* much trouble."

He grinned, and his teeth glinted. Susan Bones leaned over and whispered something to Hermione, who nodded.

"Anyway. I'm sorry I didn't have you last year. So if I retread any of that material, or if we jump too far ahead, you lot just let me know. There's no shame in asking to slow down, right? Good!" He rubbed his hands. "I see that the curriculum for first-through-third years focuses on Dark Creatures, instead of wizard-to-wizard combat. I think we'll start with something small, since it's the first day… and well, a house-elf *is* quite small, isn't it?"

Draco frowned. None of the Gryffindors or Hufflepuffs showed any sign of alarm.

The professor pointed his wand at the blackboard. A chalk sketch of a house-elf appeared, spread-eagle.

"Elvus farfadet," said Podmore, and a transcription of his words appeared on the board as he spoke. "The common house-elf. Distant cousins of the erkling, house-elves are by far the most common of the elvish species. They range between two to three feet tall, and can be identified by their oversized heads and bat-like ears — see right there, and there."

He waved his wand again, and the sketch revised itself to show the house-elf's back. "Breeding — was that a giggle, you there? In the back? I thought not — breeding tends to be rare for house-elves, as most are born sterile. Difficulties with conception, as well as other various health problems, come from centuries of selective breeding performed by wizards in order to produce a perfect… magical… slave."

Hermione gave a small gasp. Draco slumped in his chair, quill abandoned, arms tightly crossed.

“Not so funny, is it?” said Podmore crisply. “No. House-elves are conceived under the influence of powerful Dark Magic, and during their gestation period, several wards are laid on the dam to bind her offspring, inviolably, to whatever wizard casted them. When the elf is born, the wizard, usually a professional breeder, will then sell the house-elf into the keeping of its eventual master, and transfer ‘ownership’ by transferring the signature on these wards.

“A house-elf *must* obey any commands given to it by its masters. If they refuse, their wards punish them by forcing them to inflict grievous self-harm. If a house-elf’s master dies, ownership can be bequeathed legally to an heir of their choosing, or it will pass generally into the master’s family. If none of the wizard’s family survive them, the house-elf becomes part of the estate, and the Ministry deals with it as it would any other… material asset.”

Hermione’s hand shot into the air. Podmore nodded at her.

“How do you free them?” she demanded.

He smiled at her. “What a good question,” he said. “House-elves can be freed at their master’s will. It can take the form of a gift, or a ceremony, or some acknowledgement that the house-elf is a Being, unto itself. Clothes are a good example, but anything could work. You could use a scrap of paper with its name on it, and that’d be enough, if the master assents.”

Her hand went right back up. He waved to continue.

“But what if the master doesn’t want to let them go? How do you free them then?”

His smile lost some of its luster. “You don’t,” he said. “In Britain, it’s illegal to free someone else’s house-elf. It’s considered theft.”

“But they’re enslaved!”

“Yes, they are.”

“And — and that’s all right? Wizards just *do* that? Nobody stops them?”

Draco sank lower in his chair, scowling.

“I understand your distress, Miss…?”

“Hermione Granger, sir.”

“Miss Granger. Thank you. To frame the question, house-elves are not terribly common. Because of the difficulty in breeding them, they tend to be very expensive, and their population has been declining since the nineteenth century.”

“That doesn’t explain why nobody’s done anything about it,” she said, tone sharp. “Just because there’s not a lot of them—”

“Quite right you are, Miss Granger. And to your question, I think that the Ministry’s position — and I’m entirely speculating, so forgive me — but I believe the Ministry’s position is that if it waits about, say, a hundred years, the last house-elves will die out, and the problem will solve itself.”

Several hands flew up now, including Hermione’s. Podmore called on Susan Bones.

“How many of them are there now?”

“Worldwide? Ten, twenty thousand, I suppose. They’re native to Europe, although some of them were exported to the United States. Yes?”

It was Hermione again. “Is anyone *trying* to free them?” she snapped. “Have these people been prosecuted at all? Is the production of house-elves even regulated? Or is the whole world all right with a race of creatures that exist to be abused?”

Draco finally couldn’t stand it. He threw up his hand.

“Yes, Mister…?”

“You haven’t given us the whole picture, though,” he argued. “You make it sound like house-elves are miserable.”

Podmore blinked, leaning against his desk. “Do I?” he said. “I don’t think I’ve used the word ‘miserable’ once. Perhaps there’s something about a lifetime of chattel slavery that… implies a certain degree of misery.”

Draco bristled. “Yeah, but have you ever talked to one?” he accused. “They love being servants. They’re delighted. They adore their — the people they work for. They feel like part of the family.”

Hermione scoffed.

“And,” he continued, louder, “most of them don’t want to be freed.”

A rustling of uncomfortable snickers began at the back of the classroom.

Podmore was implacable. “Do you think so?” he inquired, rolling his wand between his fingers.

“I know so. Ask one, if you don’t believe me, Hogwarts has loads of them in the kitchens.”

Hermione’s head whipped around.

“I’m not saying it’s this *great* thing,” Draco added, uncomfortably, as the whispers intensified. “I wouldn’t… prefer they exist. But they do, and people have them, and most of them aren’t unhappy. And there’s a lot of complicated emotions involved. It’s not black-and-white. Especially if they’ve been with a family for generations, if they’ve watched children grow up—”

“Young man—”

“I’m just saying, it’s silly to be teaching this in Defense Against the Dark Arts,” he said, sweeping his arm angrily around the classroom, “as if it’s Dark magic to own a house-elf. It’s not!”

Sturgis Podmore waited for him to finish. The whispers had reached an intolerable volume, almost a roar. Hermione was staring at him, her shock tinged with horror.

Podmore raised his hand, silencing them.

“Thank you,” he told Draco simply. “I appreciate you sharing your opinion with the class.”

Then he announced, “Page two hundred and seven, everyone. I’d like a volunteer to read…”

When it ended, Draco was the first one out of the room. He shoved through the door and surged down the hallway without waiting for the others, even Hermione.

He was halfway down the staircase before anyone caught up to him. “Malfoy! Malfoy, wait!”

“Leave me alone.”

“I need to talk to you! P-P-P-Please slow down! I can’t — hff, hff — run that fast!”

He paused on the landing, and spun around the banister. Neville Longbottom came trotting down after him, taking the steps as fast as his short legs would carry him.

“Not a word about the lesson,” he said darkly. “Not a word.”

“But I didn’t want to talk to you about that!” Neville doubled over, huffing. “I wanted to tell you — they’re letting me take second-year Potions!”

He rocked back on his heels, his frustration drowned out in a genuine wave of surprise and pleasure. “And how on earth did you finagle that?” he said, almost cheered.

“It’s a funny story,” he said, as if it could have been anything else. “So over the s-s-s-summer my gran wrote a letter to McGonagall, asking her to move me up even though I didn’t p-p-pass Potions I. She didn’t want to, but my gran wore her down, and so she said if I could pass a p-p-placement exam at the end of August, she would let me take P-Potions with the other second years.”

“And you *passed* it?”

“Right, that’s the thing. Over the summer, my gran brought in this tutor who’s applying for his b-b-board certs, and he was really nice, I really liked him, we spent all summer when I took the test I got an Acceptable!”

“Fair enough,” said Draco, marginally impressed. “That’s one embarrassment you’ll be spared. Well done to your grandmother, I expect she could sell water to a fish.”

“Thank you! So, s-so, I was wondering — f-f-for this year, would you still want to d-d-do that extra Potions stuff? Like last year?”

He could imagine any number of things he’d rather do with his time, and several involved coitus with a hippogriff. “I don’t know,” he deferred, “I’m really quite busy—”

“Gran says she’ll pay you,” Neville blurted. “Name your price! Sh-sh-she said to tell you money’s no object—”

“Do I look like someone who can be bought?”

“I know! I know. But it’s just, it was so helpful, a-a-a-and — and the thing is, I really need to pass Potions the normal way this year, b-b-because McGonagall won’t make another exception for me.” Neville wrung his hands as if trying to shuck the skin from bone. “Gran said

if I couldn’t get it right this t-t-time, she’d pull me out and send me to Durmstrang.”

Draco grimaced. “Don’t they still use the rod?”

“Yes! Yes, that’s what everyone s-s-s-says!” wailed Neville. “I’ll b-b-be toast!”

“All right! All right, pack up the waterworks. I’ll do it.”

“You will?”

“Yes. Don’t make a thing of it.”

“Thank you! Oh, but by the way, also — if it’s not too much b-b-bother, I mean, only if it’s no trouble.”

“What.”

“Could my friend Leanne come?” asked Neville tentatively. “When I mentioned I might do more of these lessons with you, she asked me to ask you if she could come.”

“No.”

“But she’d be so grateful! She’s rubbish at Potions, too. Only her parents are muggles, and they can’t afford to hire tutors for her…”

“Tough. I’m not running a charity.”

“I’d pay for her!”

“There are a lot of people at this school who are good at Potions,” he said flatly. “She can hire one of them.”

Neville, who could see his window of opportunity shrinking, grew desperate. “I’ll do your Herbology homework,” he blurted.

“I don’t want you to do my Herbology homework.”

“Fine. I’ll help with your Herbology, then.”

Draco clucked his tongue. “And why do you think I need help in Herbology?”

This was something of a misdirection. In fact, he did need help in Herbology, because—

“Because it was the only subject last year where you didn’t make top three.”

He looked sharply at Neville. A specter of animal cunning lurked in the boy’s round face.

“And it wouldn’t matter,” he added, “except I know it probably ticked you off. Because you and Hermione are always competing, and *her* grade was better than yours.”

Well, then. Apparently it ran in the family. Draco struggled not to be impressed.

“Good pull, Longbottom,” he drawled. “If you only applied it to brewing instructions, we’d be in business.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Well, is that a deal?”

“Does your gran negotiate like this? I understand why McGonagall broke down.”

“Is that an answer?”

He sighed. Neville beamed.

Aside from Podmore's classes, the first few weeks of second year passed much quicker than last year's. Draco fell into a routine he'd forgotten having, and to his chagrin, found himself enjoying it. He and Hermione were silently competing for first rank in Charms, a contest that led both of them to strain their arms from raising them, and led Harry and Ron to strain their eyeballs from rolling them. In Transfiguration, McGonagall had them start working on the transformation of live flora, a noxiously difficult subject in which Hermione had to haul Draco, Harry, and Ron altogether up to standard before every quiz. In History of Magic, Hermione wore quilltip after quilltip down to nubbins while Draco napped on her shoulder, and in Astronomy, she fell asleep under their telescope while he drew star-charts she couldn't be bothered to transcribe. ("It's not observation, it's math," she said, "if math already tells me where they are, why bother with the telescope?") ("Because you can't math your way through *magic,* Granger.") ("Watch me!")

In Potions, they so cleanly annihilated everyone that even Snape couldn't begrudge them a few points to Gryffindor every now and then. When a long inspection of their Floriforous Potion yielded a reluctant, "Competent" from the Potions Master, it put Draco in such good spirits that he allowed Hermione to coax him into a muggle "high five."

On the morning of quidditch tryouts, Harry didn't touch a morsel of food. He sat with his elbows on the table, staring into the middle distance with an expression split between nausea and thrill.

Draco, in contrast, ate both their servings of hashbrowns and sausage, and washed it down with two goblets of pumpkin juice.

"Come on, Potter, have a pastry. You ought to eat something, or you'll be a sitting duck in the air."

"Can't," droned Harry. "Already will be."

"Don't be dramatic. I've seen you fly. Mark me: This is your game to lose."

“What if it isn’t?”

“Well, in that case—”

“What if I fall off?”

Draco decided to give it to him straight. He said, “Well, you definitely won’t make the team, that’s certain. So try to avoid it.”

Harry breathed heavily.

“Buck up. You won’t fall off,” Ron said, thumping him on the back. “Barely ever happens. Anyway, George says it’s not so hard. You fly some suicides, you hock the ball around, you shoot a little. Wood blows the whistle, you go home.”

Draco nodded. “You coming, Granger?” he asked, nudging the witch in question, who was buttering her toast with crisp, short strokes.

“Do I have to?” she sighed.

“Only if you want to be a good friend,” said Ron.

“But it’s boring.”

“Bite your tongue,” Draco said indignantly. “You’re talking about the sport of kings.”

“That’s tennis.”

“Fine. It’s the sport of *wizards,* which is better, anyway. And you don’t even have to watch. Just bring your book.”

“In the cold?” she said weakly. “And the wet?”

“‘And the wet’? I’m sorry, are you lost? This is the Gryffindor table, Hufflepuff’s over there.”

He knocked his knee against hers, chastising. She knocked him right back.

“Yeah, and what if Harry does fall off his broom?” Ron demanded. Harry turned several shades paler and spit up a mouthful of pumpkin juice. “How’ll you feel then? What if Draco bashes his head in on the goalhoop? I bet you’ll be sorry you weren’t there to watch!”

“I certainly won’t be!” she cried, and the insistence in her voice ended the argument; but when the three boys tromped down to the quidditch pitch after breakfast, she tagged along, complaining under her breath.

The evening rains had churned a thick layer of mud on the pitch, and the mist knit a silver crown around the hoops, just starting to glow at the touch of the midmorning sun. Hermione and Ron sat in the bleachers while Draco and Harry queued on the pitch, up to their ankles in mud and grass. Ginny came up and sat next to Ron, bringing with her steaming paper cups of something hot. Hermione had swaddled herself in a wool scarf and a puffball hat, and the wind kept sweeping her hair into her face.

Oliver Wood gave them training pinnies with a number on them and directed them to take a loaner broom. Students weren’t allowed to use their own brooms during tryouts (something insipid about it “not being fair”), so they all clambered onto dingy Comets and did a warm-up lap of the stands. (Harry outpaced them all easily, weaving through the upperclassmen with the ease of someone born in the air, but he was so nervous he didn’t hear the command to stop, and Wood had to go chasing after him.)

The team only had slots for a chaser and the seeker, so Wood didn’t bother having them practice with the beaters’ bats. Each student had to fly the length of the field, passing the ball back and forth with one of the chasers, and then make a shot on Wood at the hoop. Draco got paired with Katie Bell.

Katie was the kind of person one recognized easily. She had choppy black hair and wore a studded choker with matching leather wristcuffs, and she put lots of muggle makeup on her face, great swooping rings of black around her eyes. Despite her alarming appearance, she grinned at him when he pulled up alongside her, and threw a snappy pass into his chest. “All right, Malfoy?” she called.

He snapped it back to her, and she caught it with a grunt. “Just getting old, here, Bell.”

They volleyed easily across the field, steering their broomsticks with their legs, and he lobbed the quaffle at Wood from behind his back. Wood dove and snapped it up, but it was clear he’d had to move quickly.

“Not too flashy, Malfoy,” warned Wood. “This is a tryout, not an exhibition. Next?”

Harry didn’t do as well with the volleying drill. He was paired with Angelina Johnson, who tried to take it easy on him, but he accidentally lobbed the quaffle high over her shoulder and made her dive to go fetch it. His attempt to score on Wood was a hard pitch into the center goal-hoop, which Wood caught as easily as if it’d been a pass.

From the stands, Ron applauded stoutly, anyway.

The last drills were seeker drills. Each hopeful was given sixty seconds to find and catch the snitch, once it was released, and to make it harder, Fred and George were allowed to heckle.

“Oi, Blondie!”

“Over here!”

“Is that a flying ferret?”

“I didn’t know mongooses could have albinism! Mongooses? Mongeese?”

“Hey Malfoy! What’s the plural of mongoose?”

“Oh my God, what is that?”

“It’s a bird! It’s a plane! It’s—”

“Fred Weasley! Duck!”

Fred dive-bombed him, forcing him to swerve and roll.

Even with their harrying, Draco caught the snitch in twenty-seven seconds. He delivered it to Wood with a triumphant expression.

Then it was Harry’s turn. To Draco’s ear, the twins were a bit more soft on him, but it didn’t end up mattering. As soon as he took off, he shot into the clouds, clinging to the Comet like a lifeline, and disappeared into a puff of fog.

“Damn,” marveled Katie, kicking off and hovering. “D’you reckon he lost control of his broom?”

“I don’t like how long he’s been up there,” said Wood, scanning the sky. “Fred, George, take Katie and go see—”

Just then, Harry plunged down from the clouds, soaked to his skin, clutching something gold in one outstretched fist.

“I’ve got it!” he shouted. His glasses were opaque with droplets, and he seesawed wildly across the pitch before sliding off in a clumsy crumple of limbs. “I did it! I caught it! I’ve got it! Wood, I’ve got it!”

“Good Lord,” gasped Angelina. “He *does* have it.”

And he did: he leapt off his broom and ran the rest of the way across the field, brandishing the ball over his head. Ron, Ginny, and Hermione were all on their feet, clapping.

Hermione cupped her hands around her mouth and cheered, and Draco felt slightly sour. She hadn't done any cheering when he'd caught the snitch. Then again, he thought to himself, it wasn't like she knew anything about quidditch. She wouldn't recognize a Wronski feint if he did one over her head. She was probably just clapping because Ron was.

Oliver Wood had them do a few more flying drills before they wrapped up. They finished around noon, and the five of them met at the foot of the stands to walk back to the castle.

"Well done, Harry," managed Ginny. This was the longest sentence Draco had ever heard her utter in Harry's presence, and she seemed proud of it.

"Thanks, Gin," said Harry, grinning at her, and her face flushed redder than summer roses. She hid her face in her hair.

"You've got it made, Harry!" exclaimed Ron. He might as well have been skipping. "That was amazing! I think Wood was drooling!"

"Draco did really well, too," protested Harry.

"Oh, yeah," he amended, "you, too, Draco. But Harry—"

Draco scowled. He strode ahead of them, shoving a hank of sweat-slick hair out of his eyes.

Hermione hurried after him. He wished she wouldn't. It nearly impossible to sulk when Hermione was after him about something.

"Ron doesn't mean it like that," she said. "He's proud of you, too, he's just excited. He and Harry are — well, *you* know how they are."

He did. Everyone knew. Ron had been Harry's shadow ever since they stepped off the boats in first year; they did everything together, like two heads of the same being, always snickering together in the common room and tussling with each other in the dorms. You

couldn’t say a harsh word about Harry when Ron was in the room. And Harry pretended to love all his friends equally, but in his heart of hearts, in the deepest vault, behind a locked door, there sat Ronald Weasley, reigning from a throne nobody else would ever touch.

“I don’t care,” he lied.

“Besides, you did quite well.”

“And how would you know?”

“Oh, fine,” she sighed. “Be unhappy, then! There’s no dealing with you when you get like this.”

“When ‘I’ get like this? You’re the one insisting I’m upset.”

“I don’t understand you at all,” she said, exasperated. “You insist on pretending that nobody can read you, but you’re a terrible liar, what you’re feeling is written all over your face.”

His cheeks turned warm.

They were interrupted by a group of Slytherins picking their way down to the field, clearly en route to their own tryouts. Among them was Theodore Nott, wearing green-and-silver quidditch robes and carrying a gleaming black Nimbus 2002. Beside him trotted Pansy Parkinson, who was wearing a pair of furry black earmuffs the size of oranges.

“Oh, Pans, look,” said Theodore drolly. “The competition.”

He drew to a halt on the hill above them. Behind him stood Pucey and Bletchley, chasers sporting twin buzzcuts and sneers, as well as Goyle, who — to Draco’s astonishment — was carrying a Cleansweep 9.

“Greg,” he said, incredulously, “you’re not trying out?”

Goyle’s lip curled. “What’s it to you, Malfoy?”

He sincerely hadn't meant it as an insult. He'd been too surprised by the idea of Goyle playing quidditch to moderate his tone. In particular, he was recalling a rather traumatic Christmas in 1986, when a certain someone had broken Draco's toy broomstick by sitting on it wrong.

He hadn't spoken to Goyle since the start of first year.

Harry, Ron, and Ginny, seeing the group of green robes, came hurrying up the hill behind Draco and Hermione. "Nothing, he's just surprised you found a broomstick that can carry you," said Ron, leaning on Harry's shoulder. "Or do you plan on using two?"

Draco winced. Goyle was sensitive about his size. Crabbe wasn't, but Crabbe's mother was a lot nicer to him than Goyle's was.

Goyle shoved past Pucey and Bletchley. "Got something to say, do you? Think it's funny? At least some of us can afford a broomstick."

"I'm gonna think it's hilarious," retorted Ron, "when Flint manages to bag the world's only flying troll."

Goyle lunged, but Pucey and Bletchley both got fistfuls of his robes and hauled him back. Theodore made a show of yawning. "Heel, Greg," he said. "He's a Weasley, remember? He's not worth the snot you'd beat out of him."

"Don't you dare touch Ron," said Hermione, stepping in front of him.

"Don't speak that way to Teddy," snapped Pansy.

"Then you watch your tone with Hermione," said Ginny, shouldering her way to the front.

"Back off, she-weasel," sneered Pansy. "I don't want these robes to smell like blood traitor."

Immediately, Ron drew his wand. Seeing so, Harry did the same. In response, Pucey, Bletchley, and Goyle all drew back, although

Theodore did not. He shot Draco a nonplussed look that said: *Are we really doing this?*

“Do we have a problem, Parkinson?” Draco said, trying to keep his voice dry and disinterested. “I’d remind you that Weasley’s done nothing to offend you.”

Pansy scowled. “She’s a *Weasley,”* she said to Draco. “The fact that she’s even here, at Hogwarts, is insulting. Almost as insulting as *her* being here.”

She pointed at Hermione, who startled.

“Watch it,” said Draco warningly, more to Theodore than to Pansy. The boy was starting to look uncomfortable, and opened his mouth, but Hermione spoke before he could.

“I know what you think about me,” she told Pansy coldly. “But it’s far more embarrassing for the school to have students like you than students like me.”

Pansy screeched, “Nobody asked what you think, mudblood!”

Draco moved — he wasn’t quite sure what he was going to do, but he was going to do something — but others moved faster. There was a flash of red, and a flash of green, and a horrible, feminine yowl went up: Ginny had tackled Pansy into the dirt.

The two went rolling down the hill a ways, and Ginny ended up straddling Pansy’s chest. Pinning her arms down with her knees, she slapped Pansy back and forth across the face like an angry rider laying the crop on a disobedient horse. “Don’t! You! Ever! Say! That! Again!”

“Help!” screamed Pansy. “Help! Help! Get her off! She’s feral! She’s going to kill me!”

“Don’t! You! Ever! Use! That! Word!”

The girl had a surprisingly powerful arm. Eleven years and six brothers had schooled her in the arts of martial discipline, and despite her prey's wriggling, she was immovable. The others put away their wands, relieved: Harry hid a bark of laughter in a cough, and Ron looked like it was Christmas and his birthday, all at once.

Theodore was less amused. He dropped his broomstick — the Nimbus went clattering, and Draco mourned, thinking of the scratches — and swept down on the squabbling pair.

"Let her go," he shouted, and his voice boomed like thunder. Draco had never heard him raise his voice before.

Ginny popped up like a boxer, and was clearly deciding whether or not to swing for Theo when Draco intercepted her. He picked her up and plopped her down safely on the other side of himself from Pansy.

Pucey and Goyle had come running forward at the first strike, wands drawn, and Draco was just thinking nauseously how very small Ginny was compared to both of them when Theodore flung out his arm and stopped them. "Oh for Merlin's sake, would you stop it," he snapped, his brogue rising with his irritation, "you want to end up in Dumbledore's office, do you?"

Harry and Ron, who had been preparing a counteroffensive of wands and fists, saw the tension deflate and reluctantly retreated. Hermione was chewing fervently on one of her cuticles.

Theodore knelt by Pansy and helped her sit up. She was sobbing so hard she was about to be sick, cradling her face in her hands. Red welts flowered like rosacea across her cheeks. Draco winced.

"Come on, up with you," murmured Theodore. "You're all right. There's a girl. Stand up for me, or we'll get Greg to carry you."

"Take me to the Hospital Wing?" she asked tearfully.

Ginny stuck her head around Draco's shoulder. "Oh, don't be such a girl," she said scornfully. "You don't need the Hospital Wing."

At this, Pansy burst into tears again, and Theodore swept her out of sight, under his arm. "Draco, get your weasel back on a leash," he said, much colder than he'd been before.

"Talk about my sister that way, and I'll give you a lot more to worry about than a smack in the face," said Ron angrily.

"I didn't start it," Draco said to Theo, taut with frustration. "You heard Parkinson—"

"Yes, I heard her, and I'm sure the headmaster will agree that was perfectly valid grounds for physical violence."

"She should be expelled," cried Pansy, pointing at Ginny.

Theodore discreetly shouldered her further away from the Gryffindors. "Out of respect for your family alone," he warned Draco, "I'm not going to do anything about this, but if your posse comes near Pansy again—"

"His posse?" said Ron incredulously. *"His?"*

"Then I'm letting Pucey and Goyle have at it, and I might even join in. We understand each other?"

Pansy, her tears momentarily subsided, leaned out and spit at Ginny. The gob landed on Ginny's shoe. Ginny looked up.

In one movement, Harry, Ron, and Draco all lunged and caught her. She thrashed a bit, shouting: "Let me at her, oh, come on, let me go!"

"Get her out of here, or it'll be her own fault if she gets her teeth kicked in," Draco snarled at Theodore, indicating Pansy.

With a last glare at all persons involved, Theodore turned and whisked Pansy up to the castle, his arm laid around her shoulders.

“God, but I wish I could’ve punched him,” said Ginny, gazing after the pair like it was her life’s only wish.

Harry stared at her. She noticed, blushed, and said, “What?”

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s just that I’ve never heard you — *talk* before.”

“She talks loads,” said Ron comfortably, slinging his arm around her shoulders. “Just never around big famous wizards with pretty hair. Is that right, Gin?”

“Gerroff,” she said, pained, “I hate you,” but he laughed and tweaked her ear.

The others started cracking jokes about it on the way back, and in each retelling, the gravity and scope of heroism performed by both Weasleys increased tenfold. But Hermione was subdued while they walked up to the castle.

“Granger,” he said gruffly. “About what Parkinson said—”

“I’m very fine,” she said tightly. “And thank you for your concern, but we all knew she was thinking it, so it was honestly refreshing that she came out and made it clear.”

“Yes, but it was… she oughtn’t to have said it.” He didn’t know how to explain his feelings about it, but of that much, he was certain. She had been very wrong to say it, and Ginny had given her more or less what she deserved.

“No, but she did,” said Hermione crisply, “and I’m sure I’d be cut up about it, if I gave a split what she thinks about me.”

Unduly relieved, he said, “Good. It scarcely matters, anyway.”

They picked their way up through the frosted grass, their shoes crunching on the stiff blades.

“Sorry,” he said, “did you say ‘split’?”

She cleared her throat. “It’s a word for — you know, when you don’t care about something. At all. It’s a strong word for that.”

“You’re kidding me. This — this is a joke. You’re having me on.”

“Don’t say it.”

“Hermione Granger,” he said, in dumbfounded joy, “did you mean ‘give a shit’?”

“Oh *don’t* make that face, Ron made that same stupid face, and I told him too, it’s not my fault my parents don’t let me swear!”

“Give a split? How old are you, again?”

“I have young cousins!”

“No, seriously, you’re having me on. You know it’s not actually—?”

“I know what the word is.”

September came and went like a burglar in the night. Draco woke to Ron’s snores or Finnigan’s CDs, and dressed in companionable jockeying with the other boys, making fun of Neville’s haircut and Dean Thomas’s un-subtle attempts to show off his new white trainers, arguing about homework and teachers and quidditch. Seamus Finnigan was putting together a small betting league for the season among the boys, and Draco, in an effort to be sporting, put twenty galleons on Puddlemere United to take the whole thing. Ron consulted his pockets and put four knuts on the Cannons. Harry consulted them both as to where his money should go, and the resulting argument lasted for the better part of three days. By the third night, the original question of Pud U or Cannons had been almost forgotten, so intricately had the tangents bred and braided together.

“...you’re mad, and I mean you’re *barking* mad, if you think Firch could have taken Erkstein. In his prime? In his *prime?"*

“This is what Cannons fans don’t understand. You’re delusional about this. You actually are. You’re delusional if you think Erkstein was anywhere *near* Firch, when he was playing two decades later, and the broom technology was whole fathoms better. It’d be like pitting a thoroughbred against a mule…”

Hermione groaned and buried her head in her arms.

“You two,” said Harry sternly, interrupting them. “Either write a book together or shut up about it. I’m putting five sickles on the Kestrels, and that’s all I’m going to hear on the subject.”

Draco and Ron looked at each other.

“Might as well just give five sickles away.”

“Yeah, I don’t know where I lost you, mate—”

“Entirely wrong, and I’ll tell you why…”

Hermione went up to the common room early, declaring her tolerance had reached its limit. Draco and Ron kept up through dinner and all the way back to the Pink Lady, whereupon Draco split off from the others for Neville’s Potions lesson.

He had booked one of the workrooms in the dungeons, and to save himself time, he took one of the secret staircases down from Gryffindor Tower, emerging behind a tapestry of Aggripus. From there he was within sight of the Potions classroom, where the door was ajar, and a yellow knife of light spilled into the dim hallway.

Feeling in uncharacteristically high spirits after his argument with Ron, Draco decided to say hello to his godfather. He stopped, however, when he heard voices behind the door.

“I fear I made a grievous mistake, Severus.”

That was Dumbledore. Draco stopped with his hand poised over the doorknob.

“Refusing to hire that farceur,” said Snape, “was not a mistake.”

“It would be a small sacrifice for the greater good.”

“And a reprehensible breach of your students’ trust. Answer this. Do you believe, for one minute, that he would have served as a competent teacher?”

“More easily than I can believe he would serve as a competent Minister of Magic.”

“Don’t be absurd. He won’t win.”

“I daresay not.”

“He’s a showboat. A grandstanding braggart. Announcing is a play for attention… he’ll stay in the race for a month or two, reap some free publicity for his next piece of drivel, and drop out to go sell more books… you think he wants to be Minister of Magic? He’s never held a real job in his life, he’d loathe it. These things simply happen in politics, Albus, you can’t be scared of them.”

“Everything that happens in politics scares me,” said Albus calmly, “and not without good reason. I should have given him the position… I could have controlled him, from here…”

“And what of your students?” Snape’s tone dwindled on the edge of anger. “What of their education? What of the seventh years taking N.E.W.T.s in Defense Against the Dark Arts? *Your* seventh years — our future Aurors, who will be your soldiers in the wars you think to come? What do you think they would have learned from Gilderoy Lockhart?”

Dumbledore did not reply.

“Less, do you suppose, than they would from Sturgis?”

“Sturgis did not want the job. I had to bully him into it.”

“And how very hard it is,” drawled Snape, moving to the door, “for *you* to compel people into things they would rather not do.”

“I have never had to compel you.”

“A dog that knows the length of its own leash does not pull it.”

“Severus.”

Snape moved closer to the door, and Draco scuttled further into the shadows. “Forget the business about Podmore. Lockhart will drop out before winter, and Fudge will scrape by with the votes, God help us all. In the meantime, you should try to soothe Asquith; I hear he grows frustrated with Fudge…”

The door closed, and Draco was left blinking in the darkness, totally unsure of what he just heard.

He was still reeling when Neville arrived for his lesson. He was so distracted that he failed to even scold Neville for being ten minutes late, and allowed him to set up his cauldron incorrectly, twice.

“Where’s your friend?” he said. “Lena, or what-have-you?” After all his begging and bartering, the boy had come alone.

“I don’t know,” Neville said, frowning. “I t-t-t-told Leanne to meet me outside the Pink Lady at seven f-f-forty-five, but at seven f-f-fifty she wasn’t there. S-s-so I wondered if she’d come early and m-missed me, and I asked the Pink Lady if she s-s-saw a Hufflepuff girl with f-f-fringe come by, but she said no… so I eventually gave up and came d-d-down.”

“Hm. A mystery,” said Draco disinterestedly, still mulling over Snape’s conversation with Dumbledore. “Perhaps she decided she didn’t need remedial potions, after all.”

“M-M-Maybe, but that’s totally unlike Leanne,” said Neville. “She’d never stand a-a-anybody up. She’s very s-s-sweet, and s-s-socially anxious. She’s never late for c-c-class…”

“Take it easy on the salamander blood, Longbottom, you’re not making a cocktail.”

“Oh, right you are. Sorry.”

One grueling trek through a Strengthening Solution later, and they climbed back to Gryffindor Tower. It was slow going, since Neville was carting his book and his cauldron with him, and had to stop every other flight of stairs to catch his breath. At this time of night, the halls were mostly empty, and black slabs of night pressed against each window. The torches flickered dimly, and long shadows scurried on the floor.

On the last flight, a first year came thundering down from the Tower, knocking into Neville, and sending the cauldron flying out over the banister. Neville gave a forlorn wail as it spiraled down nine flights of distance, and hit the bottom with a distant *crack.*

“Oi,” Draco said sharply, catching the first year by the scruff of his neck. “What’s the big idea? Apologize to Longbottom.”

It was Colin Creevey. He was shaking so badly he could have vibrated into another dimension.

“Let me go! Please! I’ve got to get a teacher!”

“Colin, what’s wrong?” cried Neville.

“She’s — she’s — I think she might be dead—”

Draco dropped him unceremoniously and sprinted up the last flight.

A crowd had gathered outside the portrait hole. There was shouting and weeping, and a lot of people were on their knees. The Pink Lady

was nowhere to be found. Something shone on the wall above the Pink Lady, barely legible in the torchlight.

As he drew closer, he could make out a row of letters, each a foot high, daubed in dark red on the stone.

NO MORE MUDBLOODS

The crowd parted, and he realized someone was lying on the floor beneath the portrait-hole.

He shouldered through, and saw it was a small girl in a Hufflepuff tie. She had a long, dark fringe, and she clutched a used copy of *Magical Drafts and Potions* to her chest. She was pale, her skin leeched of color, and stiff as stone.

NEXT CHAPTER: 9/30/22

Samhain

Chapter 11: Samhain

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Petrified,” announced Madam Pomfrey, and the Hufflepuffs broke out in cries of relief.

“Thank *goodness,* ” said Hermione, squeezing Draco’s wrist. They and several other Gryffindors had joined in the long sigil of the Hospital Wing. Draco was sure they’d been a bother to Madam Pomfrey during her examination, but the matron hadn’t the heart to turn them out. “My, but she looked dead.”

Harry rubbed his face. He was still in yesterday’s clothes. “I’m going back to help scrub off the lettering,” he said.

“McGonagall said Filch would do it,” murmured Hermione. She had dark bags in her eyes and wrinkles in her shirt. Ron had borrowed her jumper to use as a pillow.

“Yeah, in the morning, but I’m not going to sleep until it’s gone. Ron?”

Ron jerked awake. “Hm?”

“You any good at Scouring Charms?”

“Reckon so,” he yawned, shoving himself upright. “Can always borrow a mop from the broom closet, if that doesn’t do the trick.”

“I’ll come, too,” said Lavender Brown, who was sitting on the floor nearby. Her hair was in curlers, and she wore a baggy blue sweatshirt instead of robes; her eyes were red and puffy from crying. “I have some acetone and hydrogen peroxide, they’re both good for

stains. I don’t know if it works on stone, but I know it gets blood out of clothes.”

“How d’you know that?” Ron said, bewildered. Lavender stared at him.

“Ron,” said Hermione, exasperated.

“What?”

“You have a sister.”

“Wh— oh! Sorry, Lav, I didn’t think.”

“It’s been a long night,” said Lavender in a small voice, and he helped her to her feet.

“We should all go back,” Hermione agreed, pushing herself off the wall. The Hufflepuffs showed no sign of leaving: some had unrolled sleeping bags, while some of the older students were passing out blankets. The hallway outside the Hospital Wing was rapidly turning into an encampment. “It’ll be better in the morning. Madam Pomfrey will take care of her.”

But she was wrong. The next morning, Leanne had not returned to the Hufflepuff table, and Madam Pomfrey announced at breakfast that she would lie in residence at the Hospital Wing until Professor Snape could brew the cure for her condition.

“How long will that take?” Hermione said worriedly. “If Madam Pomfrey can’t cure it, she must have been seriously cursed.”

Dismayed cries erupted from the Hufflepuffs. Madam Pomfrey labored to assure them that Leanne was in no pain, merely a dreamless, comatose state, and that she would be perfectly well once the cure was administered, but this did little to soothe them.

“About six months, give or take,” said Neville sadly. “Poor Leanne. She’s going to m-m-miss so much of second year… maybe they’ll let

her do summer classes to catch up, like me."

Draco, who had been about to say the same thing, dropped his bacon.

"How did you know that?" he asked.

Neville blinked. "I don't, exactly," he admitted. "I assumed P-P-Professor Snape is making a Restorative Draught, and he needs m-m-mandrakes for those, which take nine months to grow. And P-P-Professor Sprout's crop just finished their first trimester."

"Rare form, Longbottom," he said, surprised. "That's correct."

"Yeah?" said Neville, with a cheeky little twitch of his eyebrow. "Well, anyone could t-t-tell you that, if they p-p-paid attention in Herbology."

"Don't get saucy."

"Sorry."

"Do they have any leads on who did it?" Harry wondered.

"I'm sure Dumbledore is doing nothing else," said Hermione, upending half the pitcher of maple syrup on her pancakes. Draco tried to take it from her, and she deftly avoided him. "And McGonagall. All the Gryffindor muggle-borns are supposed to go see her after breakfast… I think she means to try and comfort us. I expect all the heads of house are doing the same."

Draco took a gulp of tea, neglecting to state the obvious: for at least one head of house, there would be no need.

"And how are you feeling about it?" said Harry gently.

Hermione tossed her hair. "Well, it's not the sort of thing one likes to find above one's front door," she said coolly, though her voice was trembling. "But I'm not going to let it bother me. That's just what the

culprit wants, is for me to feel like I'm not welcome. But it'll take more than a cruel prank to scare me off."

Draco and Harry exchanged a glance that suggested neither of them would describe what happened to Leanne as a "prank." Saying this, though, seemed unlikely to help Hermione, so they changed the subject.

A flurry of movement occurred in the entryway. Students of all houses started to throng the Announcements board near the door.

"Quidditch rosters are going up," Ron said, craning his neck. "I can't read them at this distance. Wood's handwriting is so damn small… why can't he write nice and big like Davies, I could tell you the Ravenclaw seeker from here…"

"I'm going to be sick," mumbled Harry.

"Would you like me to go look f-for you?" offered Neville courteously.

"Yes. No, no, I'll... Actually, would you?"

"Finish your crumpets," said Draco, tossing his napkin on the table. "I'll look, I'm going up anyway."

He elbowed his way through the crowd of disappointed hopefuls in front of the Announcements board, hip-checking a third year Hufflepuff out of the way. The rosters had been pinned on top of the board, identical except for the names and the stamps on the bottom.

TEAM ROSTER FOR VARSITY QUIDDITCH

HOUSE: Gryffindor

YEAR: 1992-93

CAPTAIN: Oliver Wood

FIRST CHASER: *Katie Bell (3)*

SECOND CHASER: *Angelina Johnson (4)*

THIRD CHASER: *Alicia Spinnet (4)*

RESERVE CHASER: *Ishika Gupta (7)*

FIRST BEATER: *Fred Weasley (4)*

SECOND BEATER: *George Weasley (4)*

RESERVE BEATER: *Andrew Kirke (4)*

KEEPER: *Oliver Wood (6)*

RESERVE KEEPER: *N/A*

SEEKER: *Harry Potter (2)*

Before Draco could work up the resentment to feel properly snubbed, his eyes fell on the last line.

RESERVE SEEKER: *Draco Malfoy (2)*

“I confess I’m relieved,” said a droll, familiar voice behind him, “though it’s bad form. I’ll take far more satisfaction from thrashing Potter than thrashing you.”

Draco said nothing. Theodore cocked his head, scanning the Gryffindor roster. “Reserve,” he said, clucking his tongue. “Almost worse than a rejection, isn’t it? Knowing they wanted you *just* a bit less than the other man?”

Draco bit down on his tongue. Then he turned, smoothly, and said, “Yes, it’s quite the slap in the face.”

Theodore’s mouth flattened. “You know, Pansy’s scared of going to Potions, now. Because it’s a double block with Gryffindor.”

“The luxury of a stress-free life,” said Draco, “is cheaply purchased by learning to watch one’s mouth.”

“Are we going to be enemies? Because I’d rather we not be enemies, especially over something as silly as this. Let’s at least have an argument of substance before we start being brats to each other.”

Privately, Draco agreed; outwardly, he wasn’t going to give Theodore the satisfaction of playing peacemaker.

“Nott, I’m flattered, but I don’t think about you half enough for us to be enemies,” he drawled. “I apologize if that’s a disappointment.”

“Well, it’s no ‘Reserve Seeker,’ but I can’t say it doesn’t sting.” He snapped his fingers. “Here’s your daily dose of miracles. Greg made the team. He and I are going to be Beaters.”

“Good for him,” said Draco, so surprised he forgot to sound ironic. “He’s certainly got the arms. Is he pleased?”

“As punch. Of course, he’s trying to be stoic about it, but the big lump’s been giggling to himself all morning.”

“Greg never could lie for love nor money.”

“No, indeed. Vince is sulking; I think he’s jealous.”

“Vince wouldn’t want it, anyway,” he said absently. “He’d hate the practices. Getting up early *and* exercising, they’re his perfect nightmare.”

“I think that’s right,” said Theodore after a moment. Draco shrugged. Of course it was. He’d had Crabbe over for sleepovers, and it took a small army to get the goon out of bed.

“Tell you what, Malfoy,” said Theodore suddenly, slipping his hands in his pockets. “What are you doing for Samhain?”

“What, Halloween?”

“Don’t be a pleb. I’m talking about Samhain, the proper holiday. Are you doing a bonfire?”

“I hadn’t planned on it.”

“Would you like to?”

Draco arched an eyebrow. “Are you throwing?”

He grinned. The expression was rather wicked. “Nah. Slytherin is, though. Didn’t you go last year?”

“Couldn’t make it. Got tied up fighting a troll.”

He also hadn’t been invited, but Theodore didn’t need to know that.

“All right, don’t tell me, then,” Theodore said easily. “But if you happen to find yourself troll-free on the night of, swing by the Whomping Willow around eight. *Sans* entourage, if you please, I don’t want any problems with Pans.”

“I’ll think about it,” he said, noncommittal, and strolled back to the Gryffindor table.

He had no particular intentions of going; he knew full well that most of Slytherin still viewed him with disdain. Nor, frankly, did he trust the intentions of Theodore Nott, who struck him as perhaps the least trustworthy member of a uniformly untrustworthy bunch. But nevertheless, as the end of October rolled around, he found himself making excuses not to attend the Gryffindor Halloween Party being planned by Fred and George.

Autumn spread her damp, cold fingers through the castle. After the attack, Prefects were assigned to walk first years to their classes,

and it became commonplace to see Percy Weasley sprinting, red-faced and puffing, from one side of the castle to another to pick up his group. Madam Pomfrey churned out batch after batch of extra-strength Pepperup Potions, which left the imbibers smoking from the ears for hours, and so a smoky scent began to linger in the hallways, along with the odor of damp stone and rain-soaked earth. Raindrops the size of fists pelted the castle windows, and the lake overflowed its beaches, laving up the pebble banks and turning the hills above it into a marsh. The flower beds drowned, and Hagrid's pumpkins reached the size of carriages.

Harry, who spent many of these rainy afternoons at practices, took to trailing mud all over the common room. While everyone felt very sorry for him in practice, Draco did less than most, because every muddy footprint became a reminder of the position he held and Draco did not.

"I spoke to Wood about it," Harry told him. "He says that reserves are really important, and you shouldn't give up. He wants you to try again next year."

"Like hell," Draco said immediately.

"No, he does! And there's other things he has to consider. It doesn't look so good for him to have two second years on the team. It makes us look inexperienced. And Ron says when you're picking a Chaser, you typically want someone bigger, like Ishika—"

"So what you're telling me," he said, "is *you're* the reason I'm not on the team."

"The Reserve Seeker is still part of the team," said Harry. "And if you do want Wood to take you seriously, you should probably come to practice."

"I say again: like. Hell."

Draco had not attended a single practice that October, and had no intention of doing so. If Wood wanted him to slog out at the crack of dawn, in the cold, rainy muck, and spend two hours working himself to the bone, he should have given him a real position. He told Harry as much.

“I understand,” said Harry, “but Draco, I’m just saying, it doesn’t make you look like much of a team player, does it?”

“I’ll be a *team* player once he puts me on the actual *team,* ” snapped Draco, and went to go read somewhere else.

On Halloween night, he feigned a cold. The other boys dressed for the Gryffindor party while he reclined in his four-poster, hacking and sniffling, and generally had a wonderful time pretending to be sick.

“You sure you d-d-don’t need anything?” said Neville, peering at him from a safe, antibacterial distance. “Soup from the kitchens? Hot t-t-towel?”

“No, thank you.” He coughed so violently into his elbow that Neville balked.

“If I were you, I’d chug a Pepperup Potion and push through,” advised Ron. “It’s going to be a madhouse. Fred and George have been plotting for weeks. They’re bringing food up to the Astronomy Tower from the kitchens, and Lee Jordan’s deejaying.”

“Does this look right?” said Dean Thomas, turning in the mirror. He wore a puffy red vest over a denim jacket and a pair of muggle jeans. “I charmed the color to match, but it doesn’t look like the film…”

“Of course it doesn’t look like the film, Michael Fox has two feet on you,” said Seamus. “Check my zip.” He was wearing a hideous beige jumpsuit and carrying some kind of backpack-cum-vacuum cleaner.

Draco didn’t know what they were doing, and didn’t want to ask.

Ron made a final press. “Everyone’s going to be there, mate. The twins say everyone shows up for Gryffindor parties, even Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Percy’s coming. Hermione’s coming!”

“Granger? Really?”

“Well, she said she’d stop by,” he amended. “She had a meeting with Podmore, before, I think. Wanted to talk house-elves.”

Draco scowled. “I expect she’ll have a liberation movement going by All Hallow’s Day.”

“Yeah, most likely,” Ron said amicably. “Anyway, you sure?”

“Quite.” He blew his nose pointedly.

The others trailed out, and he waited for the sounds of their voices to fade from the common room before climbing out of bed.

He pulled on a dark green cardigan, traded out his Gryffindor tie for a black one, and pinned his cloak with an emerald broach he hadn’t yet occasioned to wear at school. It was hardly the Royal Caledonian, but it wouldn’t do to come underdressed.

The last drops of sunlight suffused through the mists and vanished into a blue twilight. Its last fires burned low behind the trees, and the castle’s silhouette turned shadowy against the purple velvet of night. The air smelled of wood and dew and fallen leaves, and a pack of crows migrated musically from tree to tree, cawing. Draco’s shoes crunched over a carpet of fallen leaves and twigs. Down by the lake, near the foot of the Whomping Willow, a trio of Slytherins floated out of the gloom like phantoms, their murmuring voices echoing queerly over the field.

Draco called out. The tallest of the three turned, and revealed himself to be Theodore, his dark hair windblown, wearing a black tailcoat and an encrustment of rings on his fingers. He carried a lantern and a horned mask carved from what looked like bone.

Beside him was Pansy, her hair in braids instead of pigtails, wearing a black babydoll dress with a round collar and knee-high socks. In addition to a bone mask of her own, she carried a picnic basket.

The third Slytherin was a stranger. She was almost as tall as Theodore, with heavy dark-blonde hair and a hard, beautiful, androgynous face, lips full, eyes lidded. She wore the most unusual costume of the three — beside two dark-haired wraiths in black, the fair girl wore a white dress, cinched with a pale brown corset. In the gloom, the contrast between the three was as stark as gargoyles and cherubs.

“Hail and well-met,” said Theodore, swinging high the lantern. “Glad you can make it. We weren’t sure if you were going to come.”

“I hope you weren’t waiting,” said Draco, glancing at his watch. It was ten past eight. He’d made a point not to leave the dorm until five after.

“Not at all. Draco, have you met…?”

“I don’t think so.”

“This is Daphne Greengrass,” said Theodore. “Daphne, meet Draco Malfoy.”

The blonde girl stuck her hand out, fingers-down, and he touched it lightly.

“Is it true that Gryffindor Tower has a cat?” she said, without preamble.

“Daph,” laughed Theodore.

“What? I’m curious. *I* wanted to bring Duchess to Hogwarts, but they wouldn’t let me keep him in the commons. And I overheard a seventh year Gryffindor telling Marcus that the Tower has its own cat.”

“I’m not aware of one,” said Draco, though now he thought about it, he did remember noticing a tabby cat slinking around the common room on sunny afternoons. Neville liked to feed it biscuits.

“Oh. That’s a shame. I keep telling everybody that we should petition Snape to let us get one. I think it would be good for morale. And more importantly, we need pest control in the dungeons. I’m sick to death of the sound of rats. Millie found one in the bathroom the other day and screamed so loud I think she woke the mermaids.”

Draco, who had never once encountered a rat in Gryffindor Tower, repressed a shudder.

“But *you’re* Draco Malfoy,” Daphne said suddenly, as if alerting Draco to the fact. “Did you see the *Witch Weekly* article about your mother?”

His hackles sprang up on instinct. “I don’t follow tabloids.”

“It came out last week. ‘Lies, Spies, and Bloodlines: An Oral History of the House of Black.’ It’s trash, but I ate it up like candy. It says Bellatrix Black had an illegitimate child with the Dark Lord, and Rodolphus and Narcissa were planning to elope after the war.”

His hand went to the pocket where his wand rested. Daphne’s eyes followed it.

“That’s my mother you’re talking about,” he said coldly.

“Well *I* didn’t write the article,” she said brazenly. “Besides, my mother and father were second cousins. *I* think it’s perfectly normal.”

“Let’s get to the party first,” suggested Theodore, “and we can sort out whose mothers were bedding whose cousins later.”

They set off for the Forbidden Forest, trailing the beam of Theodore’s lantern.

They picked their way through the scrubby glades on the edge of the forest and winnowed deeper into the trees, down a worn footpath that only Theodore seemed to particularly recognize. Past the first row of pines, it was dark as midnight.

Daphne and Pansy walked on either side of him, unbothered by the darkness.

“Not to be a total marplot,” Draco drawled, “and not that I’m objecting, but isn’t this all *verboten?”*

“Being in the Forbidden Forest? Yeah, usually,” said Theodore. “But we get special permissions for Samhain. Religious observance, you know, means you can bend the rules.”

“They don’t want us setting the lawns on fire,” added Pansy.

“That, too. Besides, it’s more fun in the forest. Pucey says a long time ago, there used to be three or four bonfires going on every Samhain, all in different places, and you’d hop from one to one as the night went on… Dumbledore put the kibosh on that when some seventh years tried to sacrifice a goat. Bit of an overreaction, if you ask me, it was only one goat. But the townsman they stole it from kicked up *such* a fuss.”

“Woe is us,” sighed Daphne, “that we’ve just one fabulous party, instead of four.”

“Are you faking? Because I’m sincerely distressed.”

Music began to strain through the trees ahead. An uptempo drumline thudded, and a medley of fiddles and woodwinds played a fast, harsh melody. Light flickered from behind the trees, drawing them towards a clearing up ahead.

In the center of the clearing roared the greatest bonfire he had ever seen. A pillar of flame surged skyward, singing the highest boughs of the pines, pumping voluminous bellows of smoke into the sky like the

unrolling of a gray silk bedsheet. It fed on a hearth the size of a collapsed house, ringed by a bed of ruby-red coals, and around the fire danced rings and rings of wizards in horned bone masks, whirling and clapping to the music, their robes undulating in an unbroken chain of dark silks. The trees were strung with garlands of red leaves, and skulls hung from their branches like baubles, each carrying a lit candle in its jaws. In one corner of the clearing, a band of enchanted skeletons hammered on kettle-drums with mallets made of their own ribs, and a scarecrow with a jack-o-lantern head sawed furiously on its violin.

The air was full of smoke and sparks and cackling cries. Those who did not dance sat on benches made from hay-bales and fallen logs, or drifted on broomsticks overhead, sipping from goblets of wine, and nibbling on roast apples or hazelnuts or slices of pumpkin pie. Every so often, one of the dancers would break off, and seize the hands of someone sitting — there would be cheers, protests, a brief and meaningless struggle — and then the victim would be hauled into the circle.

As Theodore stepped into the clearing, he lowered the lantern, sighing. No sooner had his foot touched the clearing than a skeleton melted out of the trees and seized him by the shoulders. Pansy shrieked.

“Not to fret, it’s only helping,” said Theodore, shrugging off his coat. The skeleton folded it over one arm, and then held out its other hand to Draco. He realized it was asking for his cardigan. He shook his head, and it retreated into the trees.

Another skeleton bobbed out of the smoke, carrying a tray of wood goblets. “Drinks!” said Theodore gladly, and took two. “At last! I’m tired of that bilgewater they call pumpkin juice. I want to toast properly.”

He handed one of the goblets to Pansy, and another to Daphne. Draco took one from the skeleton, peering curiously at the contents; they were dark red, and left ruddy stains on the mug. He glanced at

Theodore, who was taking a long, contented drag from his own, and putting aside his apprehension, he raised it to his lips. The drink was hot and spiced and sweet, fragrant with cinnamon and ginger and nutmeg and cloves, fused with the sweet sting of brandy. It was mulled wine, he realized, with more relief than he was proud of.

“To Samhain,” said Theodore, lifting his goblet. “To the living, who join us here tonight, and to the dead, whom we invite to do the same; and in particular, to our dearly departed ancestors, whose spirits we shall immortalize by indulging in their very favorite kinds of bad behavior.”

They toasted and drank. Draco and Pansy took moderate sips; Daphne drained her goblet and threw it into the trees. “I want to dance,” she announced. “Theo, lead me in.”

“Splendid idea. Draco, keep an eye on Pans for me?”

“I don’t need babysitting,” snipped Pansy.

“Certainly not. But it would be the height of discourtesy to abandon a lady at a party, especially one you’d come with.”

Draco and Pansy eyed each other without affection.

“It’s that, or Draco has to lead Daphne in,” added Theo, “because *one* of us gents has to be good for something. It doesn’t have to be me, but I refuse to let down the sex.”

“All right,” said Pansy unhappily.

Theo proffered his hand to Daphne and bowed. She snickered, and folded into an over-elaborate curtsy, full of frivolous hand-twirling and shimmying, ending with her nose nearly flush to the ground; then they joined hands, and went galloping into the ring, where they were soon whisked into the whirling crowd.

Draco and Pansy stood in silence, sipping their wine. He had no idea what to say to her, and she seemed even less inclined to speak to him. The preponderance of masks made it hard to recognize anyone else, and he doubted he would, in any case.

By and by, she said, “Would you like some food?”

“Yes, thank you.”

They fetched plates from another skeleton attendant, and sat at the foot of a giant, gnarled oak tree, whose roots erupted from the earth and fashioned makeshift chairs. The heat from the bonfire warmed their cheeks, and Draco had lost the ability to smell anything but smoke. He and Pansy took thick slices of barmbrack — a sweet bread stuffed with dried fruit and nuts — smothered in yellow butter, and highball glasses of cranachan, a whipped trifle of raspberries, honey, rum, and toasted oats. A skeleton carried around a fat cauldronful of roast hazelnuts, fresh from the fire, and they each took a handful for themselves.

When the sound of wordless chewing became too much to bear, he ventured: “You and Nott seem to know each other well.”

She snorted. “Our fathers have worked together since before either of us were alive.”

Which answered the question of how the Parkinsons spent the war.

“What does your father do?” he said politely.

“He’s an Unspeakable.”

He frowned. “Nott’s father doesn’t work in the Department of Mysteries.”

“I didn’t say they had the *same* job,” she snapped. “His dad’s in the Wizengamot. He’s on the Committee for Economic Affairs, he oversees the Department’s budget.”

“Silenas, wasn’t it?” he said, trying to remember. “Silenas Nott?”

The eleven-year-old crossed her legs at the ankle and pursed her lips.

“If I were trapped in a room with Sibelius Nott and a hungry werewolf,” she said, “and you gave me two doses of poison, I’d pour the man a double.”

“Parkinson,” he said, surprised. “You’re talking about a member of the government.”

“So?” She lifted her chin. “I would. Theo knows it.”

“Doesn’t he like his father, either?”

To Draco, if one had the good luck to get a father, it seemed ungrateful in the extreme to resent him. He would much prefer the imperfect ministrations of an unsatisfactory father over the absence of his own.

“It’s complicated,” she snapped. “Theo’s mum died, and he hasn’t got siblings, only… I mean, my dad’s no prince, either, but I’d kill anyone who came after him.”

“That’s the second death threat you’ve made in as many minutes.”

“I’m aware.”

“Do you feel you should slow down?”

“Why.”

“People might get ideas.”

“I’m not a nice person,” she said matter-of-factly. “People already think I’m rude. Why should I waste time convincing them?”

He blinked. “I didn’t say you weren’t nice.”

“No, but you think so,” she pointed out. “You think I’m rude. And I am. I’m not charming, and I can’t make people like me, and I get bored to death trying, so I might as well say what I think.”

“That,” he said, “is one strategy.”

She shrugged. “Why should I care? I’m rich and well-bred and probably going to grow up pretty, so I’ll just graduate and get married and have some babies, and then I’ll be free to do whatever I want.”

“That being…?”

“I don’t know. I’ll figure that out when I get there. There’s no point in thinking about it now.” She picked at some barmbrack and threw it on the ground, where a squirrel snapped it up.

“It’s early for you to be trawling the market,” he said, leaning back on the root. His head tipped against the trunk of the tree, and he took in a comfortable eyeful of smoke and stars. “Are you accepting applications now, or will there be a posting on the Announcements board?”

She smoothed her skirts. “My mother debuted at sixteen. I think that’s a perfectly appropriate age.”

“To be married?”

“To debut, you dolt, check your ears. Your mother did it the same way. Come out at sixteen, have your Season, meet a man, have a nine-month engagement, you’re married at seventeen. Quick and painless.”

“Ah, romance,” he said dryly. Draco thought the whole concept of a Season sounded dreadful: stuffy balls with girls in old-fashioned gowns throwing themselves at you, or worse, prowling the sides of the dance floor, performing the mysterious female art of crowd-conduction to isolate and corner the bachelor of her choice. The idea of meeting the person he’d end up marrying there, while every

wizard of any significance watched him like hawks, did nothing to warm him to the prospect of matrimony.

She shot an amused look at him. “Don’t tell me you’re a romantic.”

He crossed his arms behind his head, reclining. “Why shouldn’t I be?” he said lazily. “My parents were a love match.”

“Your parents were heirs to the biggest families in Wizarding Britain, and your mother was *in*- famously beautiful. If it was a love match, that’s only because they had the good sense to fall in love before someone told them to.”

“So young, and so cynical.”

“I’m just telling it like it is. My mum always said if you wanted romance, you should sleep with the help.”

Draco choked. “And this is advice she took?”

“I think she actually meant you shouldn’t do either,” she said, frowning, “but I admit, it’s unclear.”

Theo came bounding out of the circle, hauled off his mask, and collapsed onto the root between them. Sweat slicked his hair to his face, and his cheeks shone. “There you are,” he laughed. “What are you two conspiring about?”

“We’re gossiping about your mother,” said Pansy.

He turned to Draco. “Is she being mean?”

“Exceedingly.”

“Good girl.” He stole a piece of barmbrack off her plate, and she hoisted it out of his reach too late.

“Get your own!”

“Mm-hm. Does this little number sound familiar? ‘I don’t want my own, I want some of yours.’”

“It’s all right when I do that, I’m a girl.” She lifted her nose. “It’s unchivalrous to take a lady’s food.”

Theo dunked the barmbrack in his mulled wine. “And it’s not ladylike to gossip, but I like you anyway.”

Daphne stumbled out of the circle, laughing like mad. “I need a new partner,” she said, “I wore mine out.” Her eyes alighted on Draco. “Malfoy!”

He shook his head. But she came forward, holding out her hands, and Theo and Pansy began jeering. “Go on, why don’t you,” said Theo, “it’s a tradition, if a witch asks, it’s terrible luck to refuse…”

He was manhandled to his feet, and Daphne seized his hands. “It’s easy,” she said, “you’ll see, it’s just a chain, nothing fancy at all—”

“I know how to dance, Greengrass,” he said, with infinite dignity. “I wasn’t raised in a barn.”

And taking her hand, he led them into the ring.

This confidence vanished in a nonce when he had to take a lurching double-step to avoid being bowled over. The ring moved far faster than he’d expected, and he nearly went down under the stampede. But Daphne, who was surprisingly strong for such a small girl, dragged him upright and spun him neatly under her arm, looping them into the ring with such grace it made his own mistake look deliberate. He suspected she could have danced just as well with one of the skeleton servants, or perhaps an anthropoid rock.

For the first several seconds of the dance, his brain took leave of his skull, triggering a panic response from his limbs, which were quite understandably relying on it to tell them what to do. Seven years of dance lessons vanished in the stagger of a heartbeat. Someone

looped their arm through his, and he was hauled into the first set of claps and twirls, and by the third turn about the bonfire his brain re-established residence between his ears, eager to claim credit for the hard work being done in its absence.

Daphne swung herself around and jumped. One of the other dancers caught her seamlessly and spun her, and she landed again, cackling, her blonde hair scything a pale arc through the air. She linked arms with Draco and spun herself hard around on the axis of their elbows, giggling, and he found that dancing and flying weren't so different, when you got down to it: a series of calculations and movements in space, a game of bodies where the prize was thrill.

He went to spin her. Willingly she went, turning under his arm, as neatly and elegantly as any princess ever born — and he didn't see what happened next, but there was a cry, and her right ankle folded where it should have held firm, and she disappeared under the crowd.

He lurched after her. She had rolled out of the path of the dancers, curling up close to the coals, so she wouldn't be stepped on, and was cradling her right leg with a grimace of frustration and with poorly mastered pain. "Damn," she said. "Damn, damn, damn! Stupid old thing."

"Greengrass, look, I'm sorry—"

"It's not your fault," she snapped, "don't apologize, you didn't do a thing wrong. Damn, damn, DAMN! Daddy's going to be so mad."

"That's ridiculous. He can't very well be mad at you for tripping." He knelt and helped her hop upright, bracing her weight on his shoulder. "Come on. Don't put weight on it, now, don't be stupid."

"You sound like Daddy."

"He sounds like a smart man. Can you walk? Don't lie."

“Yes.”

“Right, so that’s lying,” he said, when she took a wobbling step and almost went down again. “We discussed this, I thought.”

“I *can* walk,” she said stubbornly.

“You look like a drunk ostrich. Look me in the eye and tell me you can stand on your own.”

She set her jaw and shook her head, pain bringing out the vein in her temple.

“Thank you. Now step here, and here…”

He navigated her back to the oak tree. Theo and Pansy swarmed her at once. “Daph! What happened? I saw you go down, but we didn’t see…”

“Oh, I’m fine,” Daphne twittered, flapping her hand. “Must have slipped on a rock. Goes to show you, dancing’s serious business. Did you save me a drink? You did? I love you.”

“We’re all due a break from dancing, I think,” said Theo. “Time for cake and sweets.”

“Pish. All I need’s a quick *Episkey,* and I’ll be right as rain.”

“If it’s broken, you’ll need more than *Episkey,* ” said Pansy severely.

“You could out-weep Niobe, Pans. I’m fine.” Daphne glugged half the cup of mulled wine in one go. “But I’ll take a break. For cake and sweets.”

They reclined and watched the dancers for a while. Theo and Pansy amused Daphne by keeping up commentary on the dancers’ skill, and then speculating on who might lie beneath each mask. This period of repose gave Draco the opportunity to look at the other partygoers, and among those few without masks, he recognized a

few: Adrian Pucey sat on his broomstick a few meters above the fray, eating a roast apple; Tracey Davis and Terrence Higgs were chatting on a log, looking quite cozy; Gemma Farley, Millicent Bulstrode, and Bridget Gogol were perched under an elm tree, braiding each other's hair. As the night moved on, these groups dissolved, reformed, traded partners, and otherwise thoroughly cross-pollinated each other, giving everyone an opportunity to see and be seen by everyone else. There was laughter, and cheering, and none of the sneering coldness that possessed them when they walked the Hogwarts halls.

"Cracking, isn't it?" said Theo. He sighed, and tipped his head on Draco's shoulder. "Wouldn't it be nice if Hogwarts was always like this?"

Draco moved his shoulder, pointedly, and Theo removed his head.

"On fire?" he inquired.

"This *way* ." He gestured at the circle with his goblet. "Fun. Easy. Everyone here knows each other, everyone respects everyone else. Everyone's playing by the same rules."

"It's a big fire," said Draco, playing dumb. "There's not very much to get."

"You know what I mean. You notice how nothing here stinks of muggle?"

Draco swirled his cup. He had known what Theo meant.

"Careful, Nott," he said instead. "They keep an eye on people who talk like that."

"No one who can hear me disagrees." Theo's eyes slid sidelong. "Unless, of course, you do."

Draco took a sip of wine, swallowed, and wet his lips.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” he said.

“Well, you spend a lot of time with them, up in Gryffindor Tower. It’d be understandable if it made you something of a sympathizer.”

“With whom? There are certainly no muggles in Gryffindor.”

“No, mudbloods,” said Theo casually. “They’re all over the place, aren’t they?”

“I don’t ask.”

“Yes, but you can tell.”

He couldn’t, actually. He knew most of his year because they’d said something, but for those who hadn’t, he had no clue.

He made a noncommittal noise and drank again.

“I didn’t know Granger was a mudblood,” said Theo, after a beat. “That came as a surprise, I’ll be honest. Figured she’d be half-blood, at least, with marks like hers. Bit of a shame, I might’ve fancied her otherwise—”

Draco choked.

“Oh, don’t be that way. It’s not the sixties, we can acknowledge when a mudblood is fit. I wouldn’t *do* anything with her, obviously. She’s no Daphne, of course, what with the teeth, but there’s something about clever girls—”

“You can talk about something else now.”

“All right, fine. Didn’t realize you were so old-school, but have it your way. Speaking of,” he said, sitting up, “have you heard about Thompson?”

He meant Leanne.

“That she’s in the Hospital Wing?” said Draco, carefully neutral.

“For half the year! Snape told us in confidence. What a windfall. Wish whoever did it would come out and say, even just to other Slytherins, I think we’d all like to buy him a drink.”

The phrase — *just to other Slytherins* — stuck in Draco’s mind. “You think it’s a Slytherin?”

Theo gave him a look that plainly said what a stupid question this was. “It’s vexing. I’ve gone around asking all the upperclassmen, and nobody will own to it. I suppose they’re being cautious, and for good reason. The consequences of getting caught would be tremendous.”

“I can’t imagine they wouldn’t be expelled.”

“Expelled? Bother that, you’re in for the lawsuit of your life,” said Theo mildly. “Luckily, her parents are muggles, so they wouldn’t know how to sue, but there’s all sorts of dribbly advocacy groups... The Allegiance of Muggle-Born Wizards, the British Anti-Discrimination League, Coalition for the Protection of Magical Rights…”

“It doesn’t seem worth the risk.”

“That’s what I thought,” he admitted. “Certainly not for a Slytherin, because everyone suspects us. That’s why I thought it was you, at first.”

Draco’s head snapped up.

“It wasn’t.”

“No, I don’t think it was,” Theo agreed. “Doesn’t seem like your style, now I know you better. But I wondered there, for a moment. I mean, wouldn’t it be the perfect crime? No one would suspect you. You’re a Gryffindor. You’ve got the headmaster and deputy headmistress *both* around your pinky finger.”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“Sure it doesn’t,” said Theo, unconvinced. “At any rate, I told Pansy: if it was him, then we’ve really done him a disservice, because that’s the funniest thing that’s happened all year. I mean, here we are in the dungeons, doing nothing, hurting no one, and still getting pulled aside for lectures about ‘muggle-born equality’ from McGonagall, and meanwhile, the kid who did it is sitting pretty up *in her own house !* And she doesn’t suspect! It would’ve been Christmas.”

His tone was wistful.

Draco found something distasteful about the conversation. Something tasted sour about it. He was, of course, a staunch traditionalist, in his mother’s fashion and his father’s, but tradition was one thing, and harm was another altogether. One didn’t have to like muggle-borns to think there was something unseemly about wanting to do violence to them. It wasn’t — mannered. It was ill-bred.

His lips thinned. “Funny,” he said.

“Yeah. Pipe dream, I suppose.” Theo lifted his goblet. “To our faceless friend.”

Draco knocked his cup against Theo’s. He lifted it to his lips, but did not drink.

NEXT CHAPTER: 10/3/2022

House-Elves and Marigolds

Chapter 12: House-Elves and Marigolds

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Mister Malfoy,” said Snape, “are you aware of when class starts?”

There were few more dangerous phrases Snape could utter. Draco was not actually sure he wouldn’t have preferred the Cruciatus Curse.

He closed the door behind him. The assembled second years of Gryffindor and Slytherin House watched with macabre interest. “Yes, professor.”

Ritual humiliation was Snape’s favored style of punishment. It was, in fairness, no more than Draco had earned. He had overslept after the bonfire, and woke up five minutes past the bell, his hair rumpled, the smell of woodsmoke still clinging to his clothes.

There were two empty seats left. The first, near the front of the room, sat to Hermione’s left. The other was at a four-top with Theo, Crabbe, and Goyle, who had sequestered near the back. Theo caught his eye, and nodded to it.

Hermione turned over her shoulder and grimaced sympathetically at him. She indicated his seat.

“Ten points from Gryffindor,” announced Snape, and Draco’s housemates grumbled and sighed. “Consider it leniency that I do not take more. In the future, expect more serious repercussions for disrespecting your professors’ time.”

He didn’t know precisely why he did it — whether it was embarrassment, and a desire to sit as far from Snape’s glare as possible, or whether something Theo had said at the bonfire was still

percolating in the back of his mind — but Draco dropped his bag at Theo's table and sat down quickly, before anyone could give him any more strange looks.

"Don't look so wretched, it could have been worse," said Theo, as Draco sat down. "For any other Gryffindor, it would've been twenty."

"That makes me feel ever so much better, thank you."

"Have a sulk if you like. McGonagall will give the points back in Transfiguration, anyway."

He was not wrong. McGonagall tended to hand a lot of points to Gryffindor, but that was only because Hermione routinely ran circles around the rest of the class, and with such flair it would be insulting not to award points for it. Last week, she had transformed a box of dandelion seeds into a four-foot ice sculpture of a swan so lifelike it seemed on the verge of flight, and then charmed it to waddle around the room, honking.

McGonagall had *clapped.* It was almost offensive.

"What's the potion?" he said briskly, flipping open his book. He wasn't interested in discussing inter-house politics any further.

"Swelling Solution. We're in teams. Shouldn't be too much work, but it calls for pufferfish eyes, and of course, we've only got whole pufferfish…"

He unbuckled his knife set. "Hand them over," he said curtly.

"No, I've got it," said Theo absently. "You measure the nettles and get the brew going."

He blinked. He was used to butchery because he usually worked with Hermione, and working with dead animals made her sick. She pretended it didn't, but she'd always volunteer to do the other tasks first, and he'd end up taking care of the butchery by default.

“Eyes can be tricky,” he said, eyeing Theo’s inexpert grip on the knife-handle.

“You don’t trust me to hack out an eyeball? Should I feel insulted?”

A muscle in his cheek twitched. Hermione wouldn’t have protested; she would have accepted that if he was asking to do something, it was because he knew he could do it better, and the potion would be better off for it. “I don’t care,” he said shortly. “Just don’t crush them while you’re getting them out, we only get two fish.”

“You make it sound like I’m trying to carve myself a carpaccio. I’m being careful, look. I can still — oh, *damn.*”

The first eyeball collapsed, severed by a stray nudge from his knifepoint.

“As I said,” Draco said irritably, “it’s tricky. We need three, so be more careful on the next one.”

“Someone’s quite fussy,” Theo said mildly. “You know, it won’t be the end of the world, if—”

“Excuse me?”

Hermione stood in front of their table. Draco’s heart sank. He wondered what the hell she thought she was doing, coming over here, as if Crabbe and Goyle didn’t already look prepared to spit fire at her for the audacity of showing her face.

She was holding a bag of dried nettles. “Sorry to bother,” she said tentatively, and deliberately not looking him in the eye, “but I wondered if you had any extra pufferfish eyes?”

His heart sank even further.

She hurried to explain, “I had some extra dried nettles, so I thought I could trade you, to save you some time—”

“And why would we do that?” Theo said coolly.

Hermione balked slightly. “Well,” she said, “apart from saving you time, as it happens, I’m not terribly fond of butchering, so I thought…”

“That you’d ask us to cover for your weakness?” Theo clucked his tongue. “Come now, Granger, that’s not how it works.”

“I’m not asking you to cover for anything,” she said indignantly. “It’s a perfectly fair trade. I didn’t come here hat-in-hand—”

“It seems to me like you’re getting something you need in exchange for something we don’t.”

She scowled. “I’m not talking to you, anyway,” she said haughtily. “I’m talking to Draco.”

“Yeah? Doesn’t seem like it benefits him, either.”

“I’ll let him answer that.”

Draco, who was staring at the floor, lifted his eyes. “We don’t have spare pufferfish eyes,” he told her. “Nott fudged one. Ask Potter for help cutting yours.”

He felt, rather than saw, her scowl of confusion. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You were late this morning, and you’re not sitting in your seat.”

“I fancied a change. You should sit down.”

“Is something wrong?” she said. “Did I do something?”

This was excruciating. If one could bottle the earnestness in her voice, they could use it for interrogations in Azkaban.

Unexpectedly, Goyle grunted, “She bothering you, Malfoy?”

Draco looked at him, alarmed. From Goyle, this was an unprecedented declaration of fidelity, and some part of him was warmed by it, at the same time as the rest of him was panicking about what to do.

“No,” he said. To Hermione, he said, “You really should sit down.”

“You haven’t answered me! Why are you sitting back here?”

“Granger—”

“I don’t think Malfoy’s been particularly unclear,” drawled Theo, resting an arm on Draco’s chair. “He’s asked you twice, nicely, to leave us alone. I think if it gets to a third time, I’d have cause to tell Snape you’re trying to distract us.”

“I’m not!”

“Professor?” said Theo, raising his hand. “Granger’s bothering us.”

Snape looked up from the lectern, his sneer cold. “Find your seat, Miss Granger,” he called. He spoke so loudly the whole class could hear him. “Let Mister Malfoy and Mister Nott finish their potion. I hope yours is not so mediocre that you feel the need to sabotage others’ work.”

“But I wasn’t, professor! I came over to ask—”

“You were asked to find your seat, not to explain yourself,” said Snape, examining his fingernails. “Five points for Gryffindor, for the inability to understand instructions.”

Hermione’s hands curled into fists at her sides. Her jaw hardened, and she blinked back tears of frustration. Stonily, she marched back to her seat.

“Knacker,” said Ron, in a low voice.

“What was that, Mister Weasley?”

Draco hoped against hope that Ron would take the chance, for once in his life, to simply let the thing be.

But Ron never missed an opportunity to prove Draco Malfoy a fool.

“I said, she was asking for help,” Ron said loudly, throwing down his knife. Harry nodded, his expression furious. “If you don’t want her to get up, maybe you ought to — I don’t know — offer to help her? Like a teacher would?”

Titters rose from the other Gryffindors. Hermione shrank in on herself, looking miserable. Theo muttered something about weasels under his breath.

Snape said silkily, “Twenty-five points from Gryffindor, for cheek. One word and it's detention, Weasley.”

“Shocker,” said Ron, undeterred. “Didn’t see that coming. Here’s another one: why don’t you ask what Nott and Malfoy were saying to her? You notice she’s looking pretty upset? Is that something you’re worried about, or can you only see it when the student’s wearing green?”

“Detention,” said Snape, with a stare that could have leveled castles. “Two weeks. If you continue to disrupt class, I will remove you from it.”

Ron blew out a long breath, and fell silent, folding his arms. Hermione covered her face in her hands.

Theo leaned over and gave a low whistle in Draco’s ear. “You have to admit, they bring it on themselves. Snape’s only being fair.”

He scowled. “You didn’t have to make a scene.”

“What are you talking about?” Theo was dumbfounded.

“With Granger. You didn’t have to go after her.”

“I didn’t go after her.”

“You were rude.”

“It was competitive banter,” said Theo, bemused. “It was — a bit of inter-house competition, that’s all. Daphne hears worse than that from me every morning—”

“Granger doesn’t,” Draco snapped. “And it’s not *inter-house* competition, Nott, need I remind you. That’s thirty points you just lost me.”

Then, spitefully, he seized the remaining pufferfish from Theo’s station, and freed the eyeball in three brisk cuts.

Draco arrived at second-period Defense Against the Dark Arts prepared to offer Hermione Granger two arguments, three excuses, and several very good lies explaining why she shouldn’t be angry with him. As it happened, he didn’t have the chance to try any of them: Harry and Ron had arrived first, and wedged an extra chair in at their desk, so she was sandwiched safely between them for the duration of the lesson, and Draco was left by himself.

It became apparent that he was being punished once the lesson started. He tried to get Hermione’s attention, first by waving, and then a harsh: *“Psst!”* and finally a written note, which he crumpled up and lobbed across the aisle at her head. But Harry snatched it out of the air without looking, and deliberately dropped it beneath his foot.

“Potter,” he hissed. Harry lifted an eyebrow at him.

“What?” he mouthed.

“Give that to Granger.”

He frowned and shook his head.

“What? Why not?”

Harry glanced at the professor — Podmore was occupied answering a Hufflepuff’s question about gnomes — and leaned over. “Because you’re a git,” he informed him.

“Me? I didn’t do anything!”

Harry gave him a flat look.

“I sat with someone else! Is that a crime?”

He rolled his eyes and turned back to his book.

“Hey! Potter!” Draco threw another wad of parchment at him. “Listen!”

This one smacked him on the side of the head. He glowered.

“I didn’t mean for Snape to dock her points,” he said in a low voice. “Nott called him down, not me.”

Harry stared at him.

“That’s it?” he said. “You think we’re cross because you lost points?”

“Well, in point of fact, Weasley was the one who—”

“You’re barking if you think that’s all it is. If you really don’t understand, then I *really* don’t want anything to do with you.”

“I *don’t* understand,” said Draco, only half lying. “I didn’t do anything to *you.* ”

Harry shook his head.

Draco sat back in his seat, huffing. Podmore was saying cheerfully, “Now, of course, the curse you’ll want is a clever little spell called

Rictosempra Minor, which will slow its heartbeat to a state of slumber…"

"Much like this class," he muttered, loud enough for others to hear. Susan Bones gave him a dark look and pressed her finger to her lips, but Hermione gave a little snort that might have been a chuckle.

For the rest of the day, Harry and Ron flanked Hermione like a pair of guardsmen.

It was intolerable. He hadn't even done anything wrong. And he was expected to apologize — well, he wouldn't, not to them. His father never would have let himself be bullied into an apology, and neither would he.

Now, for Granger, perhaps, some amends might be in order. But only because she had been trying to ask him an innocent question, and because Nott had been a tosser. That wasn't her fault, and she had a bad time of it. It didn't seem fair that her day ought to be ruined on account of Nott's bad judgment, or Snape's preference for Slytherins.

At dinner, he sat by himself, stewing. After the meal was over, he hopped up and dashed up to the common room early, taking the stairs two by two. Hermione would be there before anyone else. She always left dinner early on Mondays, because she did her Charms homework for Friday on Monday evenings, like the maniacal little over-achiever she was, and Harry and Ron always stayed late for pudding. Ron's appetite was a constant more reliable than gravity.

Her habits didn't fail him; as the bell struck seven, she came hurrying through the portrait hole, absent either of the boys.

"Granger," he said briskly, striding out of the shadows. "This is silly."

"Draco!" She dropped her books, and they landed with a punctuating *thump.* "Why are you lurking in the common room?"

He paused, put out.

“I live here,” he said indignantly.

“Yes, I know that, but—”

“And here’s another thing, I object to that term, ‘lurking,’ when I’m only standing here—”

“Lurk,” she said, “verb: ‘be or remain hidden, so as to wait.’ Is that not what you’re doing?”

“It connotes some sort of ambush.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“I’m not trying to ambush you.”

“Aren’t you?” she asked.

There was a pause.

“Are we going to talk about this morning?” she said stiffly. “Because if we’re not, I’d — I’d rather like to go up to bed, please. I have reading to do.”

“Charms,” he said automatically.

“…Yes.”

“I know.”

“Right. Well, that’s what it is.”

She adjusted her grip on her books. He shuffled his feet. For some reason, neither of them did anything.

“Merlin. Come on, then,” he snapped. He strode past her and hauled open the portrait door.

“No,” she said, blinking. “Where are you going?”

“Where we’re going. Let’s go.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you unless you explain yourself!”

“Yes, you are.” He stepped down the portrait-hole and held the door.

“I’m not! And here’s another thing,” she said, stepping after him. “I think I ought to make you apologize for this morning before we go anywhere. I didn’t do anything to you, and it was horrid, and I felt incredibly stupid, and you didn’t say a word.”

She continued to explain herself, in his wake, as he trotted down a back-staircase to the ground floor, and cut through a secluded courtyard to the lawns.

“...and I really did feel awful about it, not to mention the thirty points, which might have been Ron but he wouldn’t have done them if you’d only been a little more decent, and I don’t think —” She stopped. “Where are we going?”

“No, keep going, we’re almost there,” he said, feeling almost cheerful. He headed down the gentle slope of the lawns from the castle, down a set of stone steps, past the place where Ginny had knocked down Pansy.

“Well, as I was saying,” she huffed, “I’m not going anywhere with you until I get an apology.”

“Right. This morning was an unmitigated disaster, and it won’t happen again.” He would do a better job of keeping Theo apart from Hermione in the future. They clearly couldn’t be trusted to interact on their own.

She frowned. “That’s not really an apology.”

“Isn’t it close enough?” he said irritably, as they drew up to the quidditch pitch. “I’m not going to drop on my knees and beg your

forgiveness, for anything, and least of all a little tiff with Nott. Besides, if you'd pay attention, I'm about to make it up to you."

"That's not — you're what?"

"*Alohamora.* Making it up to you. Keep up."

"Making it up how?" she said suspiciously.

"Doing something nice. Merlin knows why, it's never once helped me."

Hermione seemed to notice where she was for the first time. "I'm not sure that we're supposed to be here," she fretted. "If we're not practicing for quidditch…"

"Nonsense. Students can use the pitch whenever there's no practice or a game on, so long as it's their own broom and they're not breaking curfew."

"Those rules only apply to members of the quidditch team," she said doubtfully.

He hip-checked open the door to the Gryffindor locker room, and grinned at her. "Right you are, Granger," he said. "And you're looking at Gryffindor's only Reserve Seeker."

The locker room was dustier and smellier than Slytherin's, but otherwise the same. He noticed one of Fred's robes draped over a bench, and a bespelled speaker that Wood used to give orders at practice. His Nimbus was tucked in the back of the spare broom closet, locked in its case, to discourage sticky fingers.

She eyed it warily. "I told Harry," she said, "I'm not watching you practice flying. It's all fun and games for you, but it's terribly boring for those of us on the ground."

"I quite agree." He hauled out the set of practice balls and mounted his broom on his shoulder.

“Oh, no,” she said, alarmed. “I’m not — I don’t like it. I’m no use with sports. I’ve no interest in them. It’s helpless. My mother enrolled me in girls’ football, it was disastrous, I scored twice on my own goal and got hit in the head.”

“Were the two events related?”

“What?”

“Nothing. And anyway, of course you didn’t like that rubbish, it’s muggle sports.”

“It’s not rubbish,” she said unconvincingly. “I'm just not interested in it. And anyway, wizarding sports aren’t any better, they’re loads more dangerous, and flying is a nightmare—”

“How do you know?” He flexed his fingers, warming the leather glove.

“Because I’ve tried it, and I loathed it utterly!”

“You haven’t.”

“I have, in fact, Madam Hooch made us all spend a miserable forty-five minutes—”

“That’s not real flying.”

“Was so. I was twelve feet in the air,” she said primly, “and hated every second.”

“That doesn’t count,” he said. “The only person you’ve ever flown with is you, and you’re rubbish. You ought to try it with someone who knows how.”

“You mean — oh, no.” She shook her head forcefully. “No. No, Draco, no.”

“Don’t be such a priss.”

“It’s dangerous! And don’t tell me it’s safe, because I’ve seen you fly, and you’re not careful.”

“Well I’m not going to do barrel rolls with you on the back, am I,” he said, irked. “Listen. If you try it, and you really hate it, you’ll get to hand me a big stinking ‘I told you so.’ Won’t that be a treat?”

She pouted. But she followed him onto the pitch, muttering that she could do that just as well with both feet on the ground.

November’s first evening bloomed cool and still, and her sky was veined with clouds and stars like a piece of lapis lazuli. The grass crackled wet beneath their feet. Draco set down the practice set and unlatched the trunk. “Pay attention,” he said, “because I’m tired of explaining the score every time there’s a game. Quaffle, bludger, snitch. Quaffle: goes in the hoop, ten points. Snitch: you catch it, one hundred and fifty points, game over. Quite simple.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” she pointed out. “Why wouldn’t everyone just dash after the snitch?”

“Because then you wouldn’t have a game, first off, and second off, it’s an automatic forfeit if anyone but the seeker touches it. Anyway, they usually disappear for the first quarter or two — they go hide in the stands or something, give the Chasers a chance to rack up points.”

“So what if a spectator catches it?”

“Interesting question,” he said brightly, unbuckling the snitch from its berth. “Happened a couple of times in the major leagues. The first time, in 1947, the referees couldn’t figure out what to do; they ended up giving the points to the fan’s team. Obviously, this was heinous. So the League gets together and decides that it doesn’t count, and to discourage pilfering, anyone that tries to tell the seeker where it is incurs a penalty of seventy-five points on the seeker.” The snitch’s wings sprouted from its sides, and spun like a hummingbird’s. He

showed it to Hermione. “Rarely happens, anyway. Most people are too busy watching the match. Real snitchionados—”

She burst out laughing.

“What’s funny?”

“Snitch– snitchion– snitch-whats?”

“It’s a perfectly legitimate term,” he said crossly. “People who spend the match watching for the snitch instead of watching the game.”

“This is why I can’t take sports seriously, it’s so — I mean, honestly! And with a straight face, too!”

He scowled. “What, because that’s so much sillier than ‘football’? Foot-ball? That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. Do they call pottery ‘hand-clay’? Is music ‘sound-make’?”

“It’s certainly not worse than ‘quaffle’!”

“Go on, then, have a laugh. We’ll see who’s laughing when we’re in the air.” He released the snitch, and it darted off into the blue night.

“Oh, don’t say that, I’ll puke,” she said, sobering.

“Do it and I’ll drop you,” he said, swinging his leg over the Nimbus. “On my father’s house, I will drop you. If I feel so much as an intimation that vomit may be at any time approaching my person, I’m offloading all passenger cargo, immediately.”

“Draco!”

“You think I’m joking? This is cashmere.”

He kicked off, and hovered at waist height. She stood at his hip, dithering. “There’s not much room on the broom,” she said hesitantly.

“No, it’s not a tandem bicycle. You’ll have to hold on to me, I’m steering.”

“And — and it won’t be too hard for you to do? With the extra weight? It’ll change the center of balance.”

“I’ll manage.”

“Have you done this before?”

“Why, you’re stalling,” he said, intrigued. “And you, being a lion and all.”

She wrung her hands. “But it’s really not safe—”

“I understand,” he said sympathetically, shaking his head. “And you know what, when we get back to the castle, I’ll help you find Flitwick, so you can ask if there are any slots left in Ravenclaw.”

She gave an indignant cry, and said, “Oh — you *sneak,* don’t think I don’t see what you’re — hold it still, I’m coming up!”

He grinned and held out his arm, which she grasped to haul herself up. She did it remarkably smoothly, for her first time, straddling the broomstick with only a slight wobble, and then sat down hard behind his hips. He gripped the handle to keep it from bucking.

“There,” she said tightly, putting her hands on her knees. “I did it. See? Not scared.”

“Masterfully done. You’re going to want to lean forward, now, unless you fancy sliding off the back.” He pulled the broom a few feet higher, and his toes lifted off the ground.

She lurched forward, whimpering.

“That’ll do, I suppose. Arms around my waist.”

“What?”

“My waist, Granger, do I have to explain everything? Haven’t you ever seen — never mind, stupid question. Just… here, give me your hands.”

He fastened her hands around his sternum like buckling a harness. She scooted forward, and her cheek pressed against his shoulder.

“You’ll have to speak up if you want me to hear something,” he said. “The wind kicks up and it’s rather loud.”

“Actually,” she said, “I’ve changed my mind. This was a terrible idea, and I’d like to go down, please.”

“Oh, certainly,” he agreed. “Eventually.”

“Oh, no, no, no—”

He took off, and her scream lifted a flock of starlings from the trees across the lake.

They soared to the crest of the quidditch towers and did a loop around the pitch, slow, crawling by Draco’s standards, but Hermione didn’t stop screaming until they leveled out and flew parallel to the ground again. Handling the broomstick was more difficult with someone else on the back, and he couldn’t move as fast, but that was perhaps for the better, because every time he changed direction, she gave a scream and clutched his waist like a liferaft in a monsoon. In so doing, she drove the breath from his lungs, and he grunted, “Easy,” at which she would lessen her grip, but not by much.

He drifted out of the pitch and drew an S-curve over the treetops, careful to turn slowly, so the witch wouldn’t try to put out his eardrums again. She had buried her face in his back when they took off and had not looked up since.

“Granger, you’re missing the view.” The sun was crawling beneath the lake, and shards of gold bloodied the sky around it in a carnage

of gilded pink.

“No, I’m not.”

“You are. Your eyes are closed.”

“You can’t know that.”

“What am I pointing at?”

“The sky,” she said. “A tree. The lake.”

“Trick question, I wasn’t. Open them up.”

“You can’t make me.”

“You’re perfectly safe. I haven’t dropped you yet, have I?”

He felt her head rise. “That’s a fallacy,” she informed him. “Actually, a rather common one, and quite insidious. It’s called the gambler’s fallacy, and it refers to the belief that separate, independent events can jointly affect the probability of future independent — *oh God.”*

She headbutted him in the back.

“You see it?”

“Why did you take us so high! There’s no need for us to be up here!”

“No need?” he repeated, as the valley of Hogwarts unfolded beneath them like a diorama. The sunset crowned the castle parapets in deep shadows. “Well, there’s no need for the Elgin Marbles, either. But you’d still like to see them, every now and then.”

“Not if it could kill me!”

“People have died for beauty. Take Hector.”

“In the context of war,” she said, “and also, incidentally, not his *choice,* which is the point of — oh, you did it again!” And she buried her head back in his shoulder.

“I’m actually rather proud of this,” he said, to no one in particular. “Flying with a passenger isn’t difficult at all. I thought it’d be harder.”

“YOU’VE NEVER DONE IT?”

“Ow. We’re the only ones up here, there’s no need to shout.”

“YOU SAID YOU KNEW HOW!”

“I do know how,” he said, proudly. “I’ve seen it done loads of times, and I’ve ridden tandem before. It didn’t look that complicated, and it’s not.”

She moaned nauseously. He sent a suspicious look over his shoulder, but the vomit forecast seemed clear.

“I’m going to jinx you,” she said, into the back of his neck. Her fingers dug into his waist like she was imagining his neck between them. “When I get down from here, just wait till I get my wand, and I’ll jinx you. I’ll find that nasty one Fred was talking about, the one that makes you puke slugs.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“I’m trapped on a floating twig three hundred feet in the air, Draco Lucius Malfoy, do *not* tell me what I would and wouldn’t dare.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Don’t do that, you sound like my mother,” he said. Banking, he cut a lazy swoop down to the canopy level, and coasted around the edge of the lake. Hermione, clinging tightly, peeked over his shoulder.

“There it is,” he said, pointing. “Do you see it?”

The snitch was speeding steadily along the surface of the lake, its wings skimming a line of foam up from the surf.

“The ball?” she said. “You’re not going to try to catch it, are you? Oh!”

He dipped and sped along the water, so low that sprays of foam brushed their ankles. A wind off the water hopped up and ruffled his hair, and he bent low, forcing Hermione to bend with him, his arm outstretched.

The snitch swerved hard, and he turned, following the arc of the ball. The end of the broom drifted close to the water, kicking up a splash, and Hermione shrieked.

Cool metal struck the surface of his palm. He hauled it in, and pulled up, and they rose from the surface, spilling lakewater and mist. The trail of his broom drew a rainbow over the lake.

“Did you see that?” he called, exhilarated. “Did you see it? Now, that was a catch!”

She didn’t answer, being reduced to inchoate muttering.

“Reserve Seeker, my arse,” he announced. “Goes to show you. If Wood had seen that, he’d be sorry. He’d be begging me to take Potter’s place. What’s that? Oh, don’t whinge, we’re going back down.”

“You know, that really wasn’t so bad,” she said brightly. “It’s not my sport, but I can see the appeal.”

“Sorry, what was that? I’m a bit deaf.”

“Oh, excuse me. I said ‘nice try, I’m not repeating myself.’”

They ended up in the kitchens afterward, because Hermione kept complaining that flying made her cold, and he promised to get her a hot drink if it would shut her up.

They stooped through the portrait door. The kitchens were a warm, brassy space, filled with steam and wood and copper pots and pans, with a roaring fireplace at the back that filled the room with light. A host of house-elves animated it, and filled it with a breathless energy: everywhere one looked, there was an elf chopping vegetables, stirring sauces, carrying dishes, all of them chatting jovially in a series of clicks and squeaks.

One of them greeted Draco at the door. The elf wore a potato sack with the Hogwarts embroidered on the shoulder, and epaulets.

“Evening, Spratt.”

“Good evening, sir,” it said, in a voice that was slow, sad, and deeply nasal. “Might we interest you in some nibbles?”

Draco rubbed his hands together, trying to work the chill out of them. “That sounds excellent. Something simple, we’d like it quick.”

“Very good, sir. And would sir like some hot cocoa with his nibbles?”

“If it wouldn’t trouble you.”

They sat at a low wooden table near the fireplace. Draco wriggled out of his shoes and set them by the hearth, so they could dry, and hung his robe over a rack close to the fire. Hermione followed slowly, staring at everything with naked astonishment.

“Come on and sit down,” he urged, nudging the other stool with his foot. “It’s warm over here, and you were the one fussing about the chill.”

“Draco,” she whispered, “these are house-elves.”

“What about it?”

“You remember what Podmore said about them!” She stumbled onto the stool, still staring. “Do you think they’re all… I mean, they can’t *all* … Dumbledore wouldn’t let them be enslaved, would he?”

He rolled his eyes. “Spare me.”

“I’m serious!” she whispered. “It’s horrible, what wizards do to the house-elves, and it’s even more horrible that no one seems to care about it! I’ve asked every professor since that lesson what’s being done at Hogwarts to advance house-elf rights, and none of them have an answer! There’s no student groups, no activism, no nothing!”

“That’s not true.”

“What do you mean?”

“There *are* lobbyists for house-elves,” he said. “It’s just that they’re all nutters, and nobody pays attention to them.”

“It’s not nutters to want to free slaves!”

He leaned on his knees, impatient. “First of all, Hogwarts elves aren’t bound, they’re paid. You see those little badges?”

“Yes, what about them?”

“That means they were given clothes. They’re not chained to Hogwarts. They can leave if they like. But where will they go? They’re house-elves. They can’t own property. They can’t hold a job. They can’t very well open a Gringotts account to keep their savings, even if they could, not with goblin-elf relations being what they are, and anyway, they couldn’t spend the money, even if they wanted to. If you’re a house-elf, Hogwarts is the best life you’re likely to get.”

While he spoke, Hermione had grown more and more excited.

“But that’s exactly why people need to advocate for them!” she exclaimed. “Because they can’t do any of those things! *Because* they

ought to be able to own property, and get jobs, and spend money on their own! Can't you see?"

He thought about Dobby, at home, carefully wrapping a box of gifts to ship off to Hogwarts. He wondered if Hermione would think differently if she met him, and then immediately nixed the idea. That would require Hermione coming to the Manor, and meeting his mother, and there was a myriad of diversely catastrophic reasons *that* couldn't happen.

"I can see that you have a lot of feelings about this."

Spratt reappeared with two tall mugs of cocoa and a silver cloche. "Bruschette, with a balsamic reduction, sun-dried tomatoes, and fresh mozzarella," he intoned drearily. "And: cocoa."

"Thank you, Spratt," Hermione said stiffly. "We appreciate that very much."

Draco lifted an eyebrow at her.

"At ease," he mumbled.

"Shut up."

Spratt bowed, and left them.

"These are so posh," Hermione said, marveling at the little canoes of bread, which were each piled high with a flotilla of greenery, a rosebud of a tomato, and a pillow of mozzarella. "My parents always gave me string cheese or graham crackers."

Draco shrugged, sipping his cocoa. It was hot and creamy, with a hint of espresso. "Spratt knows what I like," he said.

She shook her head ruefully. "I bet you've never even had a graham cracker."

"I don't know what those are, so odds are slim."

“So you’ve never had a s’more, either!” The prospect appalled her.

“You needn’t sound so surprised,” he said sourly. “You didn’t know what a Chocolate Frog was when I met you.”

“I knew what they *were*, I just didn’t know they could move. But you’ve never heard of a s’more at all? With the little Hershey’s bars, and marshmallows?”

He brightened. “Oh, I know what those are.”

“Marshmallows?”

“Yes. My mum likes them,” he said, carefully lifting one of the little towers.

Hermione hummed thoughtfully, and licked up a drift of whipped cream. “I don’t know why that surprises me,” she said, after a moment. “I suppose I don’t know much about your family, except that they’re wizards. And that they’re rather posh. So I wouldn’t see your mother as the marshmallow type.”

“She won’t admit it. My Aunt Andy — we’re not supposed to talk about her, she was disinherited — brought them home one summer, after her boyfriend gave her some to share. Mother told me they ate the whole pack in one go. Granny Black never knew.”

Hermione blinked, as if she wasn’t quite sure where to start. “Your aunt was disinherited?” she said. “That’s… dramatic.”

“Well, she married a muggle-born,” he said matter-of-factly.

There was a beat of silence, a powerful one, like someone had dropped something heavy.

“It was a long time ago,” he said, presently. “My grandfather was very traditional.”

“Of course.” Her tone was deliberately neutral.

He sighed. “Granger, it’s nothing to do with you. The Blacks have been pureblood for centuries; they're Sacred Twenty-Eight. My aunt would have put an end to all of that. Most wizards wouldn’t care. If it were Potter’s family, or Weasley’s, it wouldn’t matter.”

“But yours is different,” she said, rolling her mug between her hands. “For some reason.”

“Yes, it is. The Blacks were related to most pureblood families in Britain. They were *the* family, *the* magical line. It mattered what they did.” He paused. “It didn’t matter so much, for everyone else.”

“Past tense,” she said suddenly. Her eyes glinted like she’d caught a trick question.

“Hm?”

“You used the past tense. To talk about your family. Did something happen to them?”

He palmed his cup, and felt the warmth seep into his fingers. “My mother’s the last one,” he said shortly. “It’s a long story. The Blacks — there was something of a collapse, twenty years ago. A whole generation of them vanished, died, or left in disgrace.”

“Oh,” said Hermione softly. “I’m very sorry.”

He flinched. “I didn’t know them.”

“For your mother, I mean,” she said. “That must have been horrible for her. I very much hope she’s all right.”

He found himself staring at her knees, because he was certain her face was doing something earnest and kind and unendurable.

“Don’t let her hear you pitying her,” he said, aiming for flippancy, landing in weak sarcasm. “She’d have your tongue out for it.”

“I don’t pity her. Well, I suppose I do, a little bit,” she amended. “But mostly I was thinking how miserable my mum would be, if my dad died, and she didn't have any family to comfort her. I wouldn’t wish that on anybody. Even your mother, though I know she probably wouldn’t like me very much.”

It would not have comforted his mother in the least to hear herself compared, in any way, to a muggle. But he knew Hermione was trying to be kind, and a warm stir of gratitude was happening somewhere in his traitorous chest, despite his best efforts to stifle it.

He spun his signet ring. It had become something of a tic. His mother would have pinched his wrist and told him not to fidget.

“What’s that?” said Hermione.

“It’s a ring.”

“Is it? No, really?”

He smirked. “It’s a signet ring,” he said, slipping it off and handing it to her.

She held it to the firelight and inspected the stone. “It’s very intricate,” she remarked. “Oh! I recognize this from your letters. The wax.”

“I used it to seal them.” He took it back. “The signet is the mark of authenticity. So you know a letter is from the head of house.”

She frowned. “Why wouldn’t that be your mother?” she said. “She’s older than you. Or can’t women be heads of house, in the Wizarding World?”

He heard the suspicion in her tone, and he smiled. “They can,” he said. “But not by marrying in. Inheritance passes through strict primogeniture, girls or boys. Something to do with wards and blood signatures. Anyway, she’s head of the house of Black, and I’m head

of the house of Malfoy.” He slid the ring back on, and fluttered his fingers. “The last one.”

“For now,” she pointed out.

“Fair point. Although I haven’t any designs on that in the near future.”

“I should think not.” She sipped her cocoa, and said idly, “You know, I’m quite surprised by how backwards all your technology is. If it weren’t all backed up by magic, muggles would be miles ahead of you.”

He arched his eyebrow. “Really.”

“Yes. I mean, take wax sigils. They’re quite unsafe; if you take a hot knife and run them under the seal, you can pop them off and pop them back on again. It’s terribly insecure.” She daubed primly at her mouth with a napkin. “I’d imagine wizards get their mail stolen all the time.”

He rankled. “That’s still better than leaving your post in a *box* outside your house.”

“I’m not saying it isn’t, and if muggles and wizards put their heads together on this, I’m sure we could come up with something so *nobody* got their letters stolen.”

He acknowledged this with a grunt. “It’s not the *most* secure thing in the world,” he admitted. “But you’re not the first to think of it.” He paused, and then — without fully knowing why — he added, “My mother and I write in code to each other, sometimes.”

She looked up in interest. The full weight of Hermione’s attention was a palpable thing, heavy, and pleasurable, like a warm blanket. He felt the quantity of intelligence being concentrated on him, and it made him glow with self-importance.

“Really? Like a cipher?”

“Nothing that complex. It’s all symbology. She’ll write to me about her ‘garden,’ and references to different flowers mean different things.”

“Like Victorian flower language,” she said, delighted.

“Conceptually, I suppose. White roses mean safety; red, danger; yellow indicates a question… carnations mean an insult, marigolds, forgiveness, and so on. Jasmine means me, so she might write, ‘I’m putting red roses in with the jasmines, this year,’ and it would mean ‘you’re in danger.’”

“Jasmine,” she said thoughtfully. “Where does that come from?”

“Sincerely no idea. She came up with it all.” He drained his cup. “Are you finished? I’m knackered, and you’ve still got your Charms for Friday to do.”

“Goodness, I forgot about that,” she said, smacking her forehead. “I’m so behind! I’m wrecked. I won’t finish before midnight, and then I’ll be tired, and then I won’t do well in Transfiguration tomorrow, which is really such a shame; I was so excited, we’re starting on animal transfig, that’s supposed to be really hard—”

“True,” he said blithely, helping her to her feet. “You’re probably screwed. I’ll be shocked if you pass the year.”

“Draco! You don’t mean it? Oh, you’re joking.”

“No, I’m serious. Your academic career is done for,” he said, as they picked their way to the door. Hermione insisted on saying thank-you to every house-elf they passed, which slowed them down considerably. “You’ll have to take a Kwikspell course. In fact, you might as well pack your bags tonight, instead of wasting your time with Charms.”

She hit his shoulder. “Don’t say that! Knock on wood!”

He reached for her head, and she swatted his hand away, laughing. “Git.”

“Madwoman. Do your Charms on Thursday, like the rest of us.”

“But Thursday’s when I do my Potions.”

“For Monday?”

“Naturally.”

“And on Sunday night…?”

“Wednesday’s Astronomy,” she said simply.

He gave a strangled laugh. “You should donate your brain to science, so they can study it for worms.”

“You should donate yours,” she said, breathless, and with the excitement of someone about to commit a violent crime: “Then at least someone would get to use it!”

She skittered out of reach and tumbled out the portrait-door, laughing. He gave chase, wrestling with his facial features to get them into some sort of dignified order.

Their laughter died as they crossed the threshold of the portrait-hole: not for lack of mirth, but because lying beneath the door was something so arresting that Hermione gave a shriek and leapt away. Draco scrambled to avoid stepping on it, and his foot crunched on something brittle. He checked under his foot, and the shattered remains of a flashbulb lay strewn across the floor, littered beside the rigid body of its owner.

It was Colin Creevey.

NEXT CHAPTER: 10/6/22

Yuletide

Chapter 13: Yuletide

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Tell me again, Mister Malfoy, what you and Miss Granger were doing when you found him?”

It was late. The candles guttered low in McGonagall’s office, and two pieces of hair hung loose somewhat from her scalp-straining bun, suggesting that she had been indulging in some version of leisure before Filch hauled them in.

“We were getting some food,” blurted Hermione, ever incapable of leaving a teacher’s question unanswered. “We’d just come back from a walk around the grounds, and we were hungry. Percy said the kitchens were open to students.”

Draco marveled proudly at the dexterity with which she (1) lied, and (2) punted Percy Weasley unceremoniously under the bus. He could’ve done no better himself.

“And you were alone? Just the two of you, no other students?”

“No one. Ask the house-elves,” he assured McGonagall. “Spratt will remember us.”

McGonagall paced. “And you heard nothing, while you were in the kitchens? No disturbances? No sound of a fight?”

“It’s rather loud in the kitchens, professor,” Draco objected. “And the possibility of nonverbal magic—”

“I know.” She sank into her chair, massaging her temples. “My apologies. You understand the extraordinary worry that this has caused among the faculty.”

“Of course,” said Hermione. Her voice was wooden. “He was muggle-born, wasn’t he? Colin? That’s why he was attacked.”

Draco had known that, but he hadn’t remembered it until she brought it up.

“He was.” McGonagall’s tone, while far from soft, lost a fraction of its usual steel. “I assure you, Miss Granger, Hogwarts will do everything possible to ensure the safety of its muggle-born students.”

He couldn’t imagine this was a very comforting promise, considering what had just happened. Hermione didn’t seem assured either.

“In the meantime, we are concentrating on measures to secure the school. Curfew will be moved up to sunset; professors will escort students of all ages to and from their classes. You will be required to check in with a prefect at mealtimes—”

“That’s not fair!”

“Mister Malfoy, restrain yourself.”

He scowled.

“Other security measures will be taken,” she continued, “as we continue to investigate. I acknowledge that these are sacrifices. I apologize to both of you, on behalf of the school, and on my own behalf, for the fear and worry that has been inflicted on both of you tonight. If you would like to discuss these events at length, I would offer my office hours as a place to do so.”

A knock came at the door. McGonagall said, “That will be Filch. Mister Malfoy, he will escort you back to Gryffindor Tower. Miss Granger, if you would linger for a moment; I would like a word.”

Draco almost objected, but Hermione’s face was still white as a sheet. She glanced at him and nodded.

He decided not to raise a fuss. “See you tomorrow,” he muttered to Hermione, and slunk out of the office.

As he was shutting the door, he heard McGonagall murmur, “Have a biscuit, Granger.”

The new rules came down hard and fast. Ron complained loudly of how breakfast check-ins forced everyone to get up earlier. Percy Weasley planted himself on the grand staircase with a massive scroll, crossing off names, and editorializing whenever someone was late: “Safety is no laughing matter, Mister Jordan!” or “Spending a little too much time in the powder room, are we, Miss Patil?”

“Should’ve been a Slytherin,” Ron muttered one afternoon, when he and Draco were three minutes late to lunch. “Righteous git. Bet he’s glad this all happened — who cares if someone’s in the Hospital Wing, so long as he feels important?”

“He would’ve done quite well in Slytherin,” Draco agreed.

“Don’t say it like a compliment.”

They laid Creevey next to Thompson, and the Gryffindors took turns keeping him company. On Monday, Fred and George played a game of Exploding Snap at his bedside, pretending to let the immobile Creevey win; on Tuesday, Lavender and Parvati painted his nails, and fastened a friendship bracelet around his tiny wrist. On Wednesday, Seamus Finnigan somehow snuck in his boombox, and played him a new album called “Rage Against the Machine,” or as much of it as he could finish before Madam Pomfrey chased him out.

Besides these visits, one guest remained an erstwhile presence at Creevey’s side. A first year Hufflepuff named Justin Finch-Fletchley had parked himself by the bed and refused to leave. Evidence suggested he slept in his chair, and subsisted on whatever food Madam Pomfrey could force on him. When Harry and Draco visited later in the week, Finch-Fletchley was still there, reading aloud from *The Standard Book of Spells.*

“I don’t want him to get behind,” he explained, when Harry asked what he was doing. He had a low, dull voice, and Draco was reminded of how much louder Creevey had been when they’d met. “Mum says people in comas can hear what people are saying, sometimes, even if they can’t talk back.”

Draco was about to point out that even if Creevey could hear, listening to someone read a description of a spell he’d never cast wouldn’t help him with exams. But Harry, perhaps intuiting that his next remark would be along these lines, stepped on Draco’s foot, and said, “That’s really nice, Justin. Let us know if you need anything, yeah?”

“Okay,” said Finch-Fletchley dully, in the tone of someone who had heard this dozens, if not hundreds of times, and went back to his reading.

Ginny Weasley, who sat next to Creevey in Charms, had become agitated by the changes. She rallied some of the other pureblood and half-blood first years and traveled in a phalanx around the muggle-borns. Rarely did a muggle-born first year request to use the bathroom without Ginny or one of her friends springing up and begging to go, too.

Meanwhile, hidden from the teachers, a roaring trade in talismans, amulets, and other protective devices was sweeping the school. Neville Longbottom had taken to hanging a fat, odiferous green onion from the foot of his bed, and allowed a newt tail to rot on his bedside table, before the smell finally drove Percy to put his foot down and Vanished both with a judicious sweep of his wand.

“Neville, you’re a pureblood,” Hermione sighed, when Neville complained of the loss. “If anyone’s safe…”

“That’s no help. It’s muggle-borns first, but squibs next,” said Neville miserably. “That’s the way it always goes. I’ve read history books.”

He had been acting gloomy of late because his Potions score had dropped ten points on the last assignment, and despite Draco's coaching, and he was once more within range of a failing grade.

In the second week of December, Professor McGonagall collected the names of those staying for Christmas. Harry and Ron signed up immediately, as did Fred, George, and Ginny (who sprang for a quill once she saw Harry's name on the list). Draco and Hermione numbered among the few Gryffindors going home.

They trained down to London together, while the first snow descended on the countryside like a curtain of goose-down.

"What are you going to tell your muggles?"

She wanted to use her last few hours on the train to practice spells, and they were taking turns shooting sparks into the air.

"Verdimillious. I don't know," she said, as red constellations flowered on her wand-tip. "I know it's bad of me, but I'm rather tempted not to. They'll get worried, and they'll want to keep me from going back, but they won't really be able to do anything about it. Then I'll have to reassure them, which is awfully hard… it might be easier not to say anything."

She glanced at him furtively, as though she expected a reprimand, but he shrugged.

"Why don't you?"

"Because they're my parents?" she said slowly. "And lying is wrong? Usually?"

"Only if you get caught and it hurts someone. And in this case, it's impossible for you to get caught, because your muggles will never know anything about Hogwarts that you don't tell them." He polished some soot from the tip of his wand. "Anyway, they can't help. All they can do is keep you from going back, and then we'll have to stage

another extraction, like we did for Potter. Personally, I'd dodge the hassle and take the train."

She smiled. "It's true. I don't think they'd like it if I got kidnapped by strange wizards in the middle of the night."

"Who are you calling a strange wizard? *Verdimillious."* His sparks leapt up in a profusion of lime green. "Plus, it'll hardly make them feel better, will it? Knowing it's their fault their daughter has it rough."

She frowned. "It's not their fault," she corrected, sternly. "My parents aren't the problem. It's the people who hate them."

He rolled his eyes. "Wizards are not the problem."

"The person who paralyzed Colin wasn't a muggle," she reminded him. "Zero students have gone to the Hospital Wing because of muggles. Wizards, on the other hand…"

"It's not that simp— look. Agree to disagree on this, Granger?"

"If you like, but you ought to know I'm right," she said primly. "McGonagall says so."

"And if *McGonagall* says so," he muttered. But by then they were pulling up on King's Cross.

The Manor was alight with music when he returned: his mother had enchanted the piano to play Christmas carols, and she and Dobby were decorating the tree when he came in. At the sight of him, his mother dropped the star she'd been levitating (Dobby apparated to catch it).

"Darling!" she exclaimed. "I missed you *so* much I nearly perished. Do you know, I wanted to write to you, but that beastly Severus didn't come visit once, all term? No matter how I begged and begged! I mean to send him a Howler."

“Things have been rather busy at Hogwarts, Mother. The professors have much more to do.”

She kissed his cheeks, and snuck a third onto his forehead before he swatted her away. “So I’ve heard,” she laughed. “What a *silly* business it all is! Dumbledore couldn’t be handling it worse.”

“I quite agree. Mother, it’s the most ludicrous thing, we’ve got to check in with prefects at meals.”

“Oh, horrid!”

“We can’t even leave the common room after dark, not even in groups.”

“What have they done to that school?” Narcissa sighed, smoothing one hand over her temple. A bit of glitter from the garlands clung to her fingertips and streaked her scalp, where he noticed a rim of gray hairs edging the black. “It’s enough to make one think about Durmstrang — not seriously, darling, don’t fret. I’m only making a point. Two students in the Hospital Wing, and the whole place falls to pieces… in my day… well, mudbloods had more serious things to worry about, I’ll leave it there.” She kissed him on the forehead, absent-minded, and said: “Now tell me everything you would have written me. Leave nothing out. Is it true they’ve stolen your rightful spot on the team and given it to Harry Potter?”

The Manor sparkled at Christmas, as it always did. In the drawing room, eight-foot candelabras of burnished brass wore stoles of silver and gold garlands, braided with emerald chains of greenery, and drooping fingers of mistletoe lurked from every eve. Red wool stockings, fat with presents, swung pendulous from the mantlepiece, and through the great bay windows, a constant gentleness of snow paraded past the windows, cloaking the ribbed fields in a gloss of white. At dawn on Christmas morning, Draco woke and ran down to the drawing room in time to see a family of reindeer tiptoe across the great lawn, leaving delicate constellations of hoofprints in the fresh snowfall.

Then his mother came down, yawning and rubbing her eyes, looking disheveled and dramatic in her black silk dressing-gown. She rang the breakfast bell, and soon platter after platter of French toast emerged from the kitchens, fat dark slices drooling syrup and coronated with powdered sugar, and spotted with bloody slices of caramelized strawberry. Draco ate two plates and begged off finishing the rest, and thought fondly of how Ron could have managed it without hesitation; and then he set to eviscerating the stack of presents under the fir tree, while his mother reclined on her chaise and sipped espresso.

Narcissa had given him a pair of dragon-hide gloves, scaled in green so dark it looked black. The lining was velvet and unicorn fur, and it was soft as anything. From Snape, he received a copy of *Moste Potente Potions,* the inscription of which read: *For an aspiring potioneer.* The rest of the book was covered in the same slanted longhand, comments scrawled thick in the margins and spilling over the footnotes.

“He’s given me a second-hand book,” Draco said, mildly outraged. He hadn’t expected a set of crystal gobstones, but his presents from Snape were usually much better than this.

“Surely not, darling.”

“He has, look. It’s full of scribbling. Practically useless, you can’t even read the recipes. And we don’t start on anything in this book until fourth year, anyway.”

Around ten, a pair of owls came fluttering up to the balcony doors, and Dobby let them in. One was Ulysses, a great horned owl approximately the size of a spaniel. The other was a much smaller barn owl, which went by the unfortunate callsign Thucydides, because its owner was a ridiculous witch. Both carried a package and a letter apiece, and joined forces to pester Draco until, grumbling, he fed them some crumbs of French toast; taking these, they roosted together on the mantelpiece, preening. Thucydides liked to bite Ulysses on the tail when she wanted something, and the

fact that Ulysses tolerated this with the long-suffering hoot of the resigned, rather than attempting to annihilate her, showed the extent to which captivity at Hogwarts had broken his owl.

He'd sent Ulysses back to Hogwarts a few days ago. He'd carried a box of German chocolates filled with cherry liqueurs, some sweetmeats, and a deluxe package of special edition Chocolate Frogs, along with a note: *Dear Mssrs. Potter and Weasley. Please find enclosed an opportunity to educate your palates. Sincerely, your generous benefactor, Mssr. Malfoy.* (A postscript, scrawled in a different ink: *Merry Christmas, or what have you. DM.*

He hadn't expected anything back; he'd meant it almost as a joke: *Wouldn't it be hilarious if I sent you a present?* But when he opened Ulysses' letter, he found it covered in familiar chicken-scratch.

Dear Mssr. Malfoy,

Please find enclosed an opportunity to pull your frankly enormous head out of your woeful arse.

OK seriously though. Thanks very much for the chocolates & choc frog cards. We shared them with the other boys and everybody says thanks. Unprecedented levels of goodwill for Mssr. Malfoy currently running wild in Gryffindor Tower. Must correct soon. Return pronto!

To be honest our present isn't anything very good, but hopefully it's better than nothing. Ron won them in a game of chess w/ Percy. I can't wear them and Ron says they're too posh for him.

Hermione says you made up. Really glad to hear it. It would have sucked to pick a side, I hate it when friends fight. (Ron is reading over my shoulder & says I should make sure you know that part is just me talking and not him, and that he would not have any trouble picking a side and that it would be Hermione's. The rest of the letter is both of us though.)

Merry Christmas, dolt.

Love,

Harry & Ron

“What’s that, sweet one?” said Narcissa, sweet with false nonchalance.

“Letter from some people at school,” he said, tucking it safely into the breast pocket of his pajamas. No use leaving it around for her to snoop. He loved his mother, but he knew from the glint in her eyes that any scrap of information left unguarded would find its way into her possession.

“Oh, but how darling,” she cooed, as he snapped the twine on Harry and Ron’s package. “They sent you presents!”

“We’ll see,” he sniffed. “Knowing them, it might be rat droppings.”

She tittered. “When he started courting Bella, Rodolphus would send Christmas presents for the whole family. Andy and I both got bouquets of six white roses apiece, and I got a set of pearl earrings with gold thread. Hers were pearl and silver.”

Draco went still. They rarely, if ever, mentioned either of his mother’s sisters, albeit for very different reasons.

“And Bella got twenty red roses, and a diamond necklace worth six thousand galleons,” said Narcissa dreamily. “She made *such* a fuss when Mother wouldn’t let her wear it to Christmas dinner. Lord, how those women could fight! But then Rodolphus showed up that evening with fifty roses and a set of mother-of-pearl caviar spoons for Mother and Father, and Mother went sweet as a lamb…”

She faded, as if drifting back to earth, and broke off.

Draco cleared his throat. “I don’t think these blokes are trying to court me, Mum.”

“No? Their loss,” she said, coming back to herself. “They would be lucky to have you. What did they send?”

It was a set of round gold reading glasses, the sort that might hang by a chain from one’s waistcoat. One lens was red, the other blue. He put them on, doubtfully, and they sank down to the tip of his nose. Narcissa broke out giggling.

“Mother.”

“No, I like them! So stately and dignified. You look like Lucius.”

“Mother, please.”

“I swear it’s true.” She squinted through a pair of lenses made from thumb and forefinger. “He had these fishbowl spectacles for reading. He loathed them! I had to carry them in my purse at restaurants, because he wouldn’t bring them himself, but he’d not be able to read the menu otherwise.” Sadness tinged the edges of her laughter. “He’d give me that same scowl when I brought it up, too.”

Draco set the glasses aside. He hoped Percy didn’t need them to see.

He knew what Hermione’s gift was as soon as he shook the package: the rattle of a cassette deck made him grin. It was a tape called “Substance,” by a muggle group called New Order. Attached was a short note from Hermione, wishing him a Merry Christmas and thanking him for the book *Social Sorcery: An Encyclopedia of British Wizarding Customs,* by Nicodemus Scrimgeour.

“And that?” teased Narcissa. “More rat droppings?”

“It’s nothing,” he said, sticking the cassette into his pockets. “An inside joke, Mother.”

“I like inside jokes.”

“It wouldn’t be funny if I explained it.”

She sighed, pillowing her chin in her palm. “How soon they grow up and have secrets,” she said. “It was only yesterday my boy told me everything. Dobby, wasn’t it just yesterday?”

“Quite so,” squeaked Dobby, who was furtively trying to corral the strewn wrapping paper into a manageable pile for removal. “The young master is so tall now, and Dobby is always remembering when he was two and three, and shorter than Dobby!”

“Oh, yes. Do you remember that, Draco? You were always after Dobby to play trains.”

“Dobby was the blue conductor,” said Dobby proudly. “He was second-in-command of the whole railroad.”

“That’s enough. Both of you.”

“Dobby,” said Narcissa delightedly, sitting up, “do you still have the hat?”

“Mother. No.”

“Dobby knows for certain where it is, miss!” agreed the little traitor, slyly. “Dobby put it away with Master Draco’s baby clothes. Dobby can fetch it now, if she likes!”

He glared at his elf. “Et tu, Dobby?”

Dobby’s ears snapped back to his skull, and his eyes grew wide, evoking a very small, very sad basset hound. “Dobby would never try to embarrass Master Draco,” he said earnestly. “Dobby only wanted to reminisce about the small master, who was a little boy so recently, and who he misses so much…”

“I think that’s enough Christmas for today,” Draco announced, climbing to his feet. “I’m going flying. Don’t wait for me; if I don’t hurl myself from the roof, I should be back around noon.”

“My little dramaturg,” said Narcissa wistfully, beaming at him. “I always thought that you might make a great actor, in another life. I told Constance that you would do a splendid Coriolanus…”

A thump came at the window. Another owl alighted on the balcony, even bigger than Ulysses, with sabled feathers and talons the size of razors, between which dangled a small envelope sealed in red wax.

The bird gave a horrible, rattling cry, and Dobby hurried to let it in.

Narcissa took the letter from Dobby’s hands, but almost immediately handed it to Draco, who moved to sit with her on the chaise. “It’s for you,” she said, in a voice of queer formality.

He took it. It was addressed in curling, ornate green script, so thick he could barely read it:

The Most Noble and Most Ancient

House of Malfoy

Malfoy Manor

Wiltshire

The crest was a sword plunged through a hangman’s knot. Draco broke it and slipped out the card, which was a thick sheaf of cardstock, embossed in green and black.

Mr. Sibelius Nott

requests the honor of your presence at his annual

YULE HUNT

Tuesday, the 26th of December, 1992

At five o'clock in the evening

At his ancestral home of

KNOTSCLIFF PEAK

reception to follow

Narcissa read over his shoulder. "The Notts?" she said in surprise. "Or 'Nott,' rather, I suppose? That's a small wonder."

"Why?" Draco flipped over the card, which had an R.S.V.P. form, and the simple order: *Come!,* scrawled in a different hand from the rest of the card. He could guess whose it was.

"They haven't thrown in some time. After the wife died, that house shut up like a lockbox. Not that they were ever at the *heart* of the scene to begin with… Sibelius Nott was an odd duck, I always thought." Narcissa tucked her hair behind her ear and cleared her throat.

"Odd how?"

"Oh, I hesitate to say."

"No, you don't," he said in amusement. She gave a tinkling laugh.

"Well, I wish I did! Gossip was always my vice, I could never help it. All right, I'll tell you, since my cover's blown. Governesses seemed to come and go *very* quickly in that household. If you get the idea."

Draco wrinkled his nose. "Eugh," he said. "Is that what you meant, 'odd'? He's a lecher?"

“Sort of. They were an arranged marriage, Sibelius and Cassandra — she was a Greengrass, if I’m not wrong, and I rarely am — and they married when she was seventeen. Sibelius was over fifty. It was almost unseemly; at the wedding, he looked like her father. Of course, it was a good match, and he was the family heir, but it wasn’t as if there were no bachelors her own age… you know, I, for one, always thought there was something going on between her and Rabastan? But at any rate, she gave birth the next year, and as far as anyone knows, they never shared a bed again.” She sniffed and lifted her espresso to her lips. “Some of those governesses left the house a lot rounder than they were when they came in.” She drank.

“How squalid.”

Her lips twitched. “Society was like that,” she said, “back in the day. We had a scandal with every meal. I think your father was one of the few who ever managed to keep his nose clean, and even then…”

“Mother, please.”

“Don’t be such a puritan, Draco. I was a modern woman, I understood the way of things. I wasn’t a saint at Hogwarts, either—”

“Dobby! Where are you? I need a glass of bleach at *once!”*

Narcissa cackled, and snatched him into an embrace. He squirmed like a chained octopus, but this served only to rumple his hair and his pajamas. His mother’s grip was unyielding. Finally, he went slack, like a fish falling limp on a hook, and resigned himself in beleaguered moaning to the cuddle assault.

“Do you want to go, then?” he said, once she’d freed him. “It seems rather an insult to refuse. But I don’t know. We might say we’ve a standing commitment, or something.”

Narcissa paused, and then said in delicate tones: “An invitation to a house is meant for its head, dear. What do you think?”

He read the invitation once more, frowning. “Is there a game here I’m not seeing?”

“Oh, almost certainly,” she said airily. “But that’s no reason to turn down a nice party.”

Knotscliff Peak, fulfilling the promise of its name, perched astride a white sheet of stone, ensconced by several hundred feet of air from a black froth of waves below. The side of the estate not facing the sea overlooked a dense skirt of forests, which ran from the house gates down several miles of unbroken woodland, and ensconced the house soundly from any neighbors. The power of the wind cresting the cliff’s edge could be gauged by the severe angle at which the first line of these trees peeled away from the house, as if reeling from a heavy blow. In response to the natural challenges of location, the architect had built it low, square, and strong, with stone washed dark by the perpetual fog, and from its belly three turrets impaled the hostile sky.

Theo met them at the gate. Draco, his stomach still queasy from side-along apparition, nevertheless stepped forward first to shake his hand, while his mother hung back.

“Welcome, Lord Malfoy,” Theo said, with a toothy smile of appraisal. “A pleasure to see you out of uniform.”

Draco wore an ash-gray three piece suit, with a tie striped in green and gold, and a fur-lined cloak of black mink. His mother’s dress, a high-collared evening gown, matched the green of his tie, and for jewelry, she wore only a gold hairpiece and her rings: wedding and signet. *Sword and shield,* he thought.

“Mister Nott,” he said pleasantly, and enjoyed how Theo’s face flickered with irritation. “Allow me to introduce my mother, Narcissa Black Malfoy.”

Theo bowed. “Mrs. Malfoy. An incomparable pleasure.”

Narcissa extended her hand. “Hello, Theodore. Draco’s spoken well of you.”

“My dear lady, you have charm enough without such lies,” he said solemnly, taking it.

“That’ll be a handshake, not a kiss, mind you,” Draco said sharply. Theo laughed.

“No, I’m on my best behavior tonight. I’ll not be seducing any widows, unless they seduce me first. Now, we’re having cocktails in the sitting room, and the hunters will set off in a quarter-hour; would either of you care for a saddle?”

Narcissa smoothed her skirts demurely. “No, thank you. My hunting days are quite behind me, and I’m not at all dressed for riding.”

“I’m certain we could find a habit for you, but I won’t badger. Draco? You could borrow my jodhpurs, we’re about the same size.” He looked Draco up and down. “Though on second thought, they’re perhaps a bit large.”

“Next year, perhaps,” Draco deadpanned, and for some reason that made Theo chuckle, too.

Inside, the sitting room bloomed red with firelight. From atop the gnarled stone mantle gazed a trifecta of deer’s heads, each one festively collared in a Christmas wreath, while oil paintings of giant stags and dark-haired wizards on horseback chased each other across the walls, shining muted in the firelight. Witches and wizards in glittering finery promenaded around the room, holding flutes of champagne and hors d'oeuvres harvested from the silver platters that orbited the room, levitating, like a celestial host. A floating orchestra, moved by the hands of an invisible virtuoso, rendered a selection from *The Nutcracker.*

There were a startling number of faces there. Brutus Travers stood at a table with Corban Yaxley. Sibelius Nott held court on a sofa in

front of the fireplace, surrounded by the Parkinsons, the Goyles, and a pair of Rowles. With a start, Draco recognized the sallow profile of Severus Snape, lurking in the corner with Constance Crabbe and Pius Thicknesse, looking bored to the point of violence.

“Let me seat you,” Theo said courteously, leading Narcissa to a free armchair. “Can I offer you a drink? Champagne, firewhiskey?”

“If you force a glass down my throat, darling, I won’t stop you,” Narcissa said idly, settling her skirts. “But I warn you, I won’t respond to anything less than absolute force.”

“Back in a nonce, then,” said Theo, and with a wink at Draco, he was gone.

The woman beside her, a steel-haired witch whose nose strongly evoked a hawk, did a double-take when Narcissa sat down. Then she leaned in and clamped her bony fingers on Narcissa’s arm. “Narcissa *Black,*” she screeched. “You homely, thankless wretch! How *dare* you!”

Draco surged forward, his hand moving to his wand, but before he touched it, something hard smacked his shin. He stumbled, cursing: Narcissa had kicked him.

“Aradia,” she said, turning to the other woman. “You starveling matchstick. All these years, and you still can’t afford a dress that flatters your hips.”

“If I’d married Lucius Malfoy, I’m sure I could have. Though apparently even his millions couldn’t buy his wife a tolerable personality!”

Draco made a noise of shock, but Narcissa merely tossed her hair and said blithely, “But it’s strange you say that, darling, because your beaux always tolerated me quite well.”

She smiled, all teeth, at the gray-haired woman. The woman's scowl deepened, hardened — and then cracked open into a cheek-splitting beam.

"You deplorable bitch," she said, and seizing Narcissa's face, she kissed her cheek so hard it left a flush. Narcissa, laughing, returned kisses on both cheeks, and then they were wrapped so tightly around each other that their faces vanished into each other's hair.

"...can't *believe* you! I haven't seen you for years—"

"—come to visit me *ever,* I should have you hanged—"

"—shut up in that big old house like a poltergeist—"

"—always did take an army to get you to answer an owl—"

Theo reappeared, holding two flutes of champagne. "Ah," he said pleasantly. "Good. They've found each other."

"Who's that?" Draco demanded. His mother and the other woman had plunged into chatter so fast and furious that he feared losing a finger if he tried to intercede. "And why is she so…"

"Rude?" Theo handed one of the flutes to Draco, clinked it, and drank from the other. "Aradia Burke. Slytherin, Class of 1975."

"I've never heard of her."

"No, I suppose not," Theo said mildly, steering Draco away. "She doesn't come to these things often, she spends half the year in France. Never married, you see. Some people — not me, mind you, but some very scurrilous people I'd never claim to know — will tell you she's a friend of Artemis. Wink, wink, et cetera. Fantastic witch, though. Hunts like a bloodhound, drinks like a fish. Would you like to see the kiddie table? We've made a home of it, Pansy and I."

In a secluded corner, a sapphire sofa foamed with cushions, and Pansy Parkinson sprawled across it like a sensuously toppled box of

hatpins. She wore a frilly pink dress which flattered precisely nothing, and was brutalizing a monstrous slice of chocolate cake.

“I am warning you now, Teddy,” she said, tonguing her fork, “if one more pimply brat asks me to dance, I shall rend my clothes and scream.”

“Forgive them,” Theo sighed, flopping down beside her. “Hypnotized by your beauty, they know not what they do.”

“Har de har. Why don’t you dance with me, if I’m so pretty?”

“I’m not half worthy of the honor,” said Theo, swiping a fingerful of frosting. “And I wouldn’t want to discourage the pimply brats. My good looks might afflict them with a jealous rage.”

Draco leaned against the wall. Pansy lifted an eyebrow at him. “Malfoy.”

“Parkinson.”

“I like your outfit,” she said.

“Thanks. I don’t like yours.”

She guffawed. “It’s dreadful, isn’t it?” she admitted, plucking a frill. “My mother picked it out. I wanted to wear pants.”

“Jealous wretches, mothers,” said Daphne, emerging at Draco’s elbow, wearing an unusually girlish pouf dress of red tartan. “You’d think they don’t want us to have *any* fun. Mum has Tori in gingham. Merlin wept. Hello, Draco. Smashing tie.”

“Thank you. My mother chose it.”

“Narcissa? Is she here?”

“Squirreled her off with Aradia,” said Theo, waving his hand. “We’ll have Draco for an hour or so.”

“More like a week,” said Pansy, spearing a rose of frosting with vim. “She cornered me earlier. If I hear the phrase ‘when I was your age’ one more time tonight, I swear…”

“You’ll rend your clothes and scream?” suggested Draco drily.

Daphne said, “You might as well, it can’t possibly make that dress any worse. Oh, Tori, there you are. You remember the name Draco Malfoy?”

The child squinting up from under Daphne’s arm was a copy of her in miniature: lovely and round-faced, with a sheaf of silken hair a few shades darker than Daphne’s. “Hullo,” she said shyly. “I’m Athtoria.” Her tongue slipped thickly over a pair of missing teeth.

“Tori’s seven,” said Daphne. “She’s going to be eight in three days. Aren’t you, Riri?”

“Two dayth and theventeen hourth,” said the girl proudly.

Theo kicked up his legs lazily. “And you haven’t a beau yet?” he demanded, looking at Astoria severely. “No courtiers? Almost eight, and no marriage prospects? Goodness, you’re practically a spinster.”

Astoria trembled with the rage of the unfairly treated. “Daphne’th never had a beau!” she cried. “And I don’t get to have one until thee doeth!”

“Well, Daphne’s a lost cause, obviously,” Theo said, gesturing at her. “I mean, look at her. What man could possibly bring himself to come home to that every night?”

Daphne gave him a smile and a lonely finger. “In fact I have had one,” she said sweetly, “so suck it, Nott. Tori, don’t tell Mummy, or I’ll turn Duchess into a spider.”

Astoria gave a cry of dismay, and clung to Draco’s leg. Draco looked down in disgruntlement.

“Remove yourself,” he told her. She did not.

Theo sat up straight. “You have not,” he said to Daphne, half in disbelief, half excitement.

“Have too.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think?” Pansy said, bored. “He only trailed her like a duckling all first year.”

“...Stefan? Stefan *Petrovsky?* That rat-faced one, with the mouth?” Theo gave a rude bark of laughter. “He got shipped up to Durmstrang for breaking that kid’s nose.”

Draco had heard something about that secondhand, from Harry; there had been an altercation in the stands during a Ravenclaw vs. Slytherin quidditch match, and a third-year Ravenclaw had “tripped” down two sets of bleachers.

He lifted an eyebrow at Daphne.

“Allegedly,” insisted Daphne.

“Did you kiss him?” demanded Theo.

“A lady never tells.”

“Yes, she did,” said Pansy, tossing her plate aside. “Twice. In the Astronomy Tower.”

“Rat! The moment you get a boyfriend, I’m telling your mother.”

“Do it, she’ll be thrilled. I wish I could go to Durmstrang,” Pansy sighed, abruptly changing the subject. “They’ve much better faculty. And they don’t make you take Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“Podmore isn’t so bad,” Daphne piped up. “His politics are rubbish, but he’s so dreamy you almost don’t care.”

“I hate him,” Pansy spat. “He’s horrible. I’d go to Durmstrang just to get away from him. At least there they wouldn’t — wouldn’t bully you around, like him.”

“Yeah, except for the corporal punishment, Pans,” said Theo, slinging his arm around the back of her seat. “One smack, and you’d be running back to Hogwarts.”

One of the adults broke away from the floor and stepped into their corner. He was thin, short, thin of muscle and hair, and wore an ascot of white-and-gold stripes. Looming behind Theo’s chair, he pressed his hand down on Theo’s shoulder, and Theo went stiff as a board.

“Theodore,” he said. His brogue was a thicker, colder version of Theo’s, like the same melody in a minor key. “Happy Yule. I hope your friends have yet to grow bored of your chatter.”

Daphne tittered, uncomfortably. She was the only one. Pansy had found something terribly fascinating in the crown molding.

“Thanks, Da,” said Theo flatly. “Happy happy. You remember Daph and Tori. Pans, obviously. Have you met Draco? He’s our token Gryffindor.”

They shook hands. “Forgive my son’s disrespect, I beg you,” Sibelius ordered, in such a way that it did not sound like begging at all. “He means well.”

“Slander. Libel,” said Theo dully, staring at his shoes. “No, one of those is written. Someone get him a cocktail napkin, then he can libel me.”

Sibelius squeezed his shoulder. “Haranguing is Theodore’s language of affection,” he said coldly. “Among the perennial joys of raising

one’s children is to be so often reminded of one’s spouse.”

“Zing,” said Theo. “Aren’t you menfolk supposed to be hunting something? Leave the women and the children to our girlish devices.”

“I offered you a mount this year.”

“In fact he did,” said Theo, speaking to Draco. “But negotiations fell apart over the condition that I not embarrass him. It was simply too steep a price to pay.”

Sibelius’s fingernails were carving dents in the fabric of Theo’s tailcoat.

A bell rang, and the music stopped. The crowd in hunting gear migrated to the door, while the others followed in their wake, murmuring excitedly. Sibelius excused himself, and cut through the crowd to lead them out of the manor.

Draco cleared his throat, but Theo refused to meet his eyes.

“Well, that’s the hunt,” he said, slapping his knees. “Fancy watching?”

“Nothing better to do,” muttered Pansy, and that served to motivate the group. They rose and followed the crowd out to the great lawn, where a row of thoroughbred stallions snorted and clawed the turf, reined by struggling groomsmen. The hunters mounted these with varying degrees of success: while Garrett Goyle hauled his ample bulk astride the horse without difficulty, Brutus Travers flailed and toppled from the stirrup, and had to be boosted up by a pair of horsemen.

Sibelius Nott spurred his horse ahead of the others, and drew them all to attention with a piercing blast from a silver whistle. Lifting his wand, he shot a firework of green and silver sparks into the air, which exploded into the shape of a stag; the crowd cooed and

applauded politely. Then he gave another short blast on the whistle, and with a bevy of cries, the riders charged from the lawn, and rode cheering into the forest.

The crowd whooped and jostled merrily. Draco found himself and Theo boxed in next to a pair of gentlemen who'd stayed behind.

"He's getting stronger in the South, you know. There are new numbers coming out of Lancashire…"

"Let's not inflate our expectations." This was Corban Yaxley, a stern wizard in his late forties, with a buzzcut and a tendency to speak through his teeth.

"No, but these numbers! You wouldn't have believed them, a year ago! I don't know where all of Nott's money is going, but I hope it stays there."

"It's because Fudge is getting steamrolled in the Wizengamot. He promised to have the MSA on the floor by December, but after Dumbledore's editorial, the thing ground to a standstill..."

"Bless Dumbledore. Age-addled fool. I suppose he thinks it's a great victory for deliberative democracy, when all he's done is prove to the world that the Pops like to run their mouths and then sit on their thumbs..."

"Don't underestimate him," said Yaxley coldly. "Once Fudge and Asquith rally the block, the act will pass, and the polls will rebound. If that happens, Runcorn is dead in the water. And Nott will be, too."

"Sibelius is no idiot. He never commits unless he sees a path to victory."

"Sibelius is excitable," intoned Yaxley, moving away. "He smells the winds of change, and goes rowing after them, instead of waiting for them to come fill his sails… excuse me, Orpheus. I promised a word to Prescott…"

Theo snapped his fingers in Draco's face. "Word of warning," he said. "I do love a good eavesdrop, but I'm reliably informed that it's rude to stare."

Draco swatted his hand away. "It was interesting," he said irritably. "I haven't heard anything about the election. They don't talk about it much at school."

Theo sighed, "Yaxley's got the right of it on this one, I fear. My dad's prone to get carried away. I just hope there's some of my inheritance left once Fudge wins."

Daphne appeared at their side, holding a glass of something pink and bubbly. "What's happened to Theo's inheritance?" she inquired. "If it's gone, I have to leave, I can't be seen with poors."

Draco snorted. She grinned at him. "Hello," she said. "That's the first time I've heard you laugh, I think, stoneface."

"Maybe that's the first time you've been funny."

"No, he only laughs at the misfortune of others," said Theo plaintively. "Like me, for instance, now my inheritance is going to Runcorn."

"That is hilarious," Daphne agreed. "Is Runcorn that fellow Daddy keeps prattling about?"

"Theo thinks he's going to lose," Draco said, searching the crowd for Yaxley. He and the other man seemed to have disappeared. Draco thought this was odd, and he wanted to keep listening to their conversation.

"Because he hasn't got a chance."

"What about Lockhart?" said Draco, remembering the conversation he'd overheard between Snape and Dumbledore.

“That joke?” Theo snorted. “He’s polling single-digits. Even *Witch Weekly* is too embarrassed to shill for him, anymore, and that tells you something.”

They floated through the crowd of bedazzled witches and wizards, as the winter sun slipped down over the sea. Torchlight flowered along the walls, and garlands of fairy lights gleamed to life in the hedges. Music resumed, and some danced, although Daphne made no attempt to coerce Theo nor Draco into a bout; her ankle was still wrapped in surgical tape, and she demurred that her father had quite forbidden all calisthenic activity.

“Which wouldn’t stop me for a moment,” she whispered to Draco, “if he weren’t about ten feet away and ready to jinx my legs together if I tried.”

Another round of hors’d’ouvres came floating out of the parlor, and they rescued Pansy from an encounter with an amorous thirteen-year-old from Romania, and then Draco (after much badgering) danced not one but two pavanes with her, to fully dissuade her suitor from his quest; this job being accomplished, he parked her at a table with Astoria and her mother, and excused himself to get a drink. On his way back, Draco saw Snape standing with Narcissa alone under one of the eaves, murmuring to each other in tones so low they verged conspiratorial, and Draco decided, somewhat spitefully, to interrupt them.

“Uncle Severus,” he called. He sauntered over with a fingerbowl of sparkling cider cocked in his fingers. “Happy Yule.”

Snape greeted him with a meager grunt.

“I received your Christmas present,” Draco continued, unfazed. “I must say, after last year’s, it was something of a letdown. Are you perhaps still cross with me for being late to class?”

Narcissa clucked her tongue. “Now, Draco—”

Snape's mouth twitched. "I apologize for having disappointed you," he said silkily. "And have you attempted to brew anything from that book?"

"Certainly not, I've been on holiday."

"So you have judged it wanting without using it."

"Not 'wanting,' but—"

Narcissa said, "Draco is *very* grateful for all your gifts, Severus. As am I. Now, Draco, I'm terribly parched; if you could fetch me some champagne?"

"You're trying to get rid of me," he said, indignant. "What are you two gossiping about over here, anyway?"

"Not at all, darling. In fact, nothing could make me happier than a good long chat between the three of us. Severus was just filling me in about all the exciting things happening at Hogwarts, and explaining some of Dumbledore's decisions. It always helps to have the faculty perspective. Don't you think, Severus?"

Draco could not discern from either of their expressions whether Narcissa had been lying. He didn't get to ask, either, because someone cried, "Narcissa!"

They all turned. It was Brutus Travers, riding out of the forest at a full gallop, his hair mussed, his robe billowing behind him. His gray hair had tumbled free of its braid, and his wizened face blazed with excitement.

"Oh, good Lord," Narcissa muttered, and Draco shot a surprised look at his mother.

"Narcissa! We've got it! We've got it!" He pointed around the house, toward the great lawn. "Garrett got it on the run, they're herding it up

the lawn for the final drive — come quickly, we're going to bag it! Will you come to watch us?"

"In a moment, Brutus," she called, fluttering her fingers at him.

"I've a seat for you! It's near the front! It's a very good seat! Will you come?"

"Yes, of course. I'll be there in a heartbeat, I really will."

"Watch me, Narcissa!" he added, daringly. "It'll be me or Garrett! We're the fastest. You'll want to be watching Garrett or me!"

"As if I needed the invitation," she cooed, and with this reassurance, he wheeled his steed around to rejoin the others.

As soon as Brutus's back was turned, Narcissa's smile melted into a grimace. Snape chuckled to himself softly. This startled Draco even more than his mother's sneer.

"Does he want children, do you think?" inquired Snape, leaning leonine against the wall. "Or would he be content with Draco?"

She gave him a distraught look. *"Severus."*

"Why, Cissa, you must make haste. There is a *very* good seat waiting for you."

He watched with fascination as his mother turned pale, then pink. "Don't be blue," she said primly, and stalked past with a snap of her skirts.

He turned to Snape when she was gone. "What did you mean?"

"I hear you have still been helping Longbottom in Potions," said Snape suddenly, interrupting him.

Draco paused, confused. "...So what?"

“Have you?”

“Yes. He asked me to.”

“And what are you getting in return?”

He shuffled uncomfortably. “The confidence that he probably won’t blow up his cauldron while I’m sitting near it.”

Snape regarded him, calculating.

Again, seemingly at random, he said: “Granger is ordinarily your Potions partner.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why?”

The question confused him. “Because she’s brilliant,” he said. “She’s the only Gryffindor who’s half decent at Potions, besides me. And she’s good at working with me. I mean, we have a system.”

Snape hummed in thought. Draco thought about it. He thought of how Hermione sucked her lip between her teeth when she puzzled over a question; he considered the deep knot of her brows, the ceaseless drumroll of her fingers on the nearest available surface, including, if available, his arm. Then he thought of how she tugged frantically on his sleeve when she found the answer, or hit his shoulder, or knocked his knee; how familiar the glow on her cheeks as she rushed to tell him, rich red and thrilling, brighter than a sunburst. It was almost impossible not to smile back at her, when that happened; it would be like a mirror choosing not to reflect light.

“And,” said Draco, finding that he couldn’t stop, “she’s clever about — little things. She thinks about why things work, she understands it. She can work around holes in the recipe, she can think around them. And she remembers everything. I mean, if you’ve never seen — the witch has a brain like a library. She reads something, and she never

forgets it. It’s sickening. Arguing with her is like arguing with a wall. You can’t get anywhere. And she won’t stay quiet if she thinks you’re doing something wrong. She’ll tell you. Which is profoundly annoying —”

Snape said, “That’s enough.”

Draco shut his mouth quickly, embarrassed.

“You consider her your friend.”

“Yeah,” he said automatically. Then: “I mean, we just spend a lot of time together. It doesn’t… I mean, she *is* muggle-born, but there are worse things.”

Snape closed his eyes, and Draco tensed, wondering if he’d said something to upset his godfather. He’d never put his finger on where Snape landed politically; obviously, he ran with a certain crowd, but he didn’t come from any pureblood family that Draco knew.

“Be careful, Draco,” he said softly.

Draco’s brow furrowed. “Careful about what?”

Screaming erupted from the front pavilion. Draco instinctively started off for the front lawn, but realized after a few steps that his godfather had not joined him; when he looked over his shoulder, Snape was walking swiftly in the opposite direction.

When he reached the great lawn, the crowd had knit into a bustling mass near the treeline. The trees were trembling, and a chorus of shouts swelled from within the forest. As Draco watched, the trees broke apart, and a giant white stag erupted from their enclosure.

It was twice the size of a grown stallion, with antlers the size of scimitars, and a coat of shaggy white fur, matted with soot, earth, and blood. Arrows protruded from its back and peppered its flank. As

it broke the tree line, it reared up on its back hooves with a mighty low of pain.

He scanned the crowd for his mother. He found her near the front, folded elegantly into a lawn chair, and fanning herself with a napkin. Another woman was talking to her, but she seemed distracted; her eyes flit frantically from face to face, and her nails drummed on her armrest. As the stag screeched, she screwed her eyes shut.

When she opened them, they were distant, glassy, fastened on something far away. Her mouth went slack.

Draco dropped his glass and ran.

He smacked into a wall of bodies and shoved his way through, spilling drinks and bowling over guests wherever he went. Several gave indignant shouts when he pushed through, but these were lost to the bellow of cheers that erupted when the hunters broke through the treeline, their hoofbeats thundering on the turf. Glass cracked, and something wet and sticky slipped down Draco's neck, but he ignored it, pressed forward, threw an elbow, and squirmed back within sight of his mother.

One of the riders fired a green spell that missed the stag by a foot, and it let out a scream, galloping for the cliffs. A cry of dismay went up from the crowd, and they shot spells after it, crackling bursts of light that squealed and boomed like fireworks, scaring it away from the cliff's edge. "TOO SOON!" roared Brutus. "Too soon! Bring it back this way! Wear it out! Closer, men, closer!"

Narcissa had stood up, on trembling feet, and was trying to escape the crowd. But it pressed closer, a wall of bodies, herding her towards the great lawn, where the stag was sprinting back toward the forest.

Draco seized her arm. She didn't notice.

"Mother, are you all right?"

Narcissa whispered, “Lucius?”

“Mother, *no,* ” he said, panicking. They were in public; worse, they were in a crowded, formal setting, populated by most of the important people they would ever meet; if she had an episode, there would be no way to hide it. “It’s Draco. It’s 1992. What you’re seeing isn’t real.”

“Lucius?” She stared at him, unseeing. He gave up, and threw his arm around her, herding her away from the crowd.

“Come on. We’ve got to go.”

“Lucius, they’re going to kill it,” she said shrilly. “That poor innocent animal, they’re going to kill it.”

“I know, Mother. It’s tradition. Come this way.”

“It’s just a baby,” she said, and a tear slit the plane of her cheek. “It’s just a little baby animal, and they’re going to kill it.”

“That thing?” Draco glanced over his shoulder. The stag was a behemoth, and going by its horns, it’d been alive far longer than Draco had. “That’s no baby.”

“How could they be so cruel?” she demanded, ignoring him. “How can you bear it? Lucius, you have to stop them.”

“Okay, M– Narcissa. All right. After we get you out of here, I’ll go and stop them. How’s that.”

“Promise me? Promise you’ll save it?”

“I promise.”

She sagged against him suddenly, and he stumbled, going down on one knee in the grass.

“I knew you would,” she said dreamily. “And you did, too, didn’t you? You went and stopped them all… your father was furious, but you didn’t care. You said, I don’t care, it’s upsetting Cissa…”

“Please get up,” he begged. “Mother, people are going to see.”

“Draco?”

It was too late. They were halfway between the great lawn and the front gate, and Draco knew who it was.

He looked up into the stunned face of Theodore Nott. Behind him stood Daphne and Pansy.

His mother preempted him. “Lucius?” she said in a small voice, clinging to his sleeve.

Theo’s eyes flickered between Draco and Narcissa. The appraisal taking place behind them was swift and ruthless.

Draco pulled out his wand.

“Nott,” he said in a low voice.

Theo glanced down.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” said Draco.

“What a coincidence,” said Theo tonelessly. “I had the same thought.”

“If you stand aside, I won’t have to.”

“But if I don’t?”

The silence grew sharper than dragon fangs. He gripped his wand tightly.

“It’s my mother,” he said.

Theo pressed his lips together.

“Yeah,” he said, to no one in particular. “All right.”

Then he turned to Pansy and Daphne. “Either of you have a decent Muffling Charm?”

“We’re not allowed to use magic outside of school,” Pansy said immediately.

“It’s just the Trace, and there are about a million wizards here right now, you think the Ministry’ll notice if you cast a measly *Muffliato?* I say again: can either of you produce a Muffling Charm? For I cannot.”

“I can,” Daphne interrupted, drawing her wand. “And I don’t give a fig about the Trace, they can take me to court if they like. Daddy’s solicitors will make a snack out of them.”

“Good. Draw the boundaries from here to the pavilion, nice and big. Pansy, get the Lady Malfoy on her feet.”

Pansy whined, “But—”

“Pans,” said Theo. Something passed between them.

Wordlessly, Pansy stepped under Narcissa’s arm, and helped Draco drag her upright.

“This way,” Theo said, turning back to the house. “We’ll Floo you home. Dad keeps the powder in a hidden compartment under the grate. He uses it when he doesn’t want me to know he’s going out. He won’t notice if a pinch is gone.”

“Muffliato,” cried Daphne, and her wand cut an arc through the sky, leaving a queer ripple in the air. The cheers from the pavilion dulled as if submerged.

She turned, grinning. “I’ve never done magic outside of Hogwarts before,” she stage-whispered. “I feel naughty.”

“Nicely done,” Theo said admiringly. “This way.”

They carried Narcissa into the house and through the empty sitting room. Her head lolled on her neck, and the stray word slipped from her lips, but otherwise she was numb to the world. At the hearth, Theo pointed his wand at one of the bricks under the grate and said: *“Reducto,* ” and it exploded in a small crater of dust.

He plunged his hand into the remains and withdrew a small snuffbox of Floo powder. To Draco, almost apologetically, he said: “Dad uses a password to open it, but I don’t know what it is, and frankly, I’ve always wanted an excuse to use that spell.” He held out the snuffbox. “Bottoms up.”

Pansy, who had been struggling with all her might, leaned Narcissa against the mantelpiece. Daphne came hurrying after them, holding Narcissa’s cloak, and tucked it gently around her shoulders. She tucked a strand of hair behind Narcissa’s ear and said wistfully, “You’re so pretty. I hope we’ll meet properly someday, even if you are a raving nutter.”

“Andy, don’t be rude,” murmured Narcissa, her eyes rolling up. Daphne tut-tutted, fastened Narcissa’s cloak, and stepped back.

Draco took a handful of powder. He paused on the hearth.

“Thanks,” he said shortly. “You — you didn’t need to do this.”

There was much shuffling, pshaw-ing, and muttering of demurrals.

“Slytherins stick together,” said Theo. He looked Draco up and down. “Well. And honorary Slytherins, I suppose.”

“Honorary?” snorted Pansy. “Since when are we doing ‘honorary’? What’s this business about hall-pass Slytherins?”

“Have a heart, Parkinson, he’s a legacy admit.”

Draco was floored by a humiliation of gratitude.

“Piss off, you brats,” he said roughly. “If any of you think you can hold this over my head, you’ll regret it.”

“Draco Malfoy, you’re a remarkable fool,” Theo said. “Get the hell out of my house.”

He held out his hand. Draco shook it.

The Floo powder sizzled and turned the flames green. Narcissa leaned on his shoulder, her head pillowed on his collarbone.

“Malfoy Manor,” he called, and stepped into the fire.

NEXT CHAPTER: 10/9/22

The Unspeakable Word

Chapter 14: The Unspeakable Word

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“My goodness, that does all sound very embarrassing. But are you certain I wasn’t just in my cups?”

Draco sat cross-legged at his mother’s bedside. In the antechamber, Dobby laid out her clothes for the morning, whistling a carol under his breath.

“Quite certain. You called me Lucius.”

She covered her mouth. “No.”

“You did.”

“How many did I have?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t think it was—”

“We must be glad you have such caring school friends,” she said, and rang the bell on her nightstand. “Dobby! Some coffee, please? And bacon.”

“Oh, dear. We are having no more bacon from the morning, Mistress. Would she like some Christmas ham?”

“Out of bacon? What time is it?”

“It’s nearly noon,” said Draco.

“Impossible! The clocks are wrong,” she declared, flopping back on her pillow. “It’s seven-thirty. I’ve just decided. Dobby, go put on a

fresh pan of bacon and a pot of coffee, I'm starting the morning over."

"Would mistress like the clocks reset, as well?" said Dobby politely.

"Smashing idea!"

"No," said Draco. "That'll be all, thank you."

The elf bowed and apparated away.

Narcissa touched Draco's shoulder. "Darling," she whispered, "I'm really all right. It was a touch of Dionysus. Nothing more."

"Mother, I know you're lying."

"I wish I knew what about," said Narcissa hopelessly, opening her palms to the ceiling. "I swear. Perhaps I'm wrong, but if I am, I've no memory of the truth. If I'm mad, I really don't know it."

Her expression contained such a potent tincture of helplessness and anguish that Draco had to look away.

"I think we should talk about a Healer."

"Oh, no. It's not possible."

"We'll use private practice, it's discreet—"

"Yes, but I can't. I simply can't, darling, I won't."

"You're *sick."* It rattled the floorboards. "We had to *run* out of a party last night. You collapsed."

"So you say, but I've no reason to believe you," Narcissa snapped. "Honestly, you've no faith in me. What if I was merely drunk?"

"You were dead to the world! You were raving about Lucius, and you called Daphne 'Andy'—"

She was shaking her head. “No. No.”

“You looked me in the eye and you didn’t see me.”

“And I’m sorry for that,” she snapped. “But a Healer won’t help. You’re just like your pighead father, he was *always* trying to—”

But then she balked at whatever she saw in his expression. Changeable as the wind, she gentled. “Dar-ling,” she cooed, reaching for him. “I’m sorry. I’m tired, and I haven’t had my coffee yet. I didn’t mean that. Let’s not fight.”

He stood up. “I have to pack,” he said stonily.

Alarm flit across her face. “No,” she said, struggling upright. “Come, let’s make up. I can’t part on bad terms with my sweet boy. Sit down and let’s make up, shall we?”

“There’s nothing to make up. It’s fine. You should have breakfast.”

“Draco!” She reached for him again, and he stepped out of the way. “Please? Why won’t you speak to me? Don’t leave.”

Just then, Dobby appeared with a cloche and a silver carafe. “Bacon and coffee,” he squeaked, and then paused at the expression on both Malfoys’ faces. “Should Dobby come back?”

“No,” said Draco. He moved the chair away from the bed and strode to the door. “Serve the mistress. Then come help me with my trunks, once she’s dressed. Don’t dally.”

“Yes, Master Draco.”

“Draco!” Narcissa reached out longingly from the bed. “Don’t be like that,” she called. “Don’t walk away! Make up! Oh, be nice, please!”

She was still calling when he slammed the door behind him.

The sun clawed itself back to life in January, and the mood inside Hogwarts waxed hopeful. For the first few weeks of term, there were no attacks, and Neville reported that the mandrakes were attempting to sneak into each other's pots, which was a good sign.

"A few more weeks," he said cheerfully, as they shoveled dirt in Herbology. Draco, sweat-drenched and moody, failed to catch his enthusiasm. "They're maturing miles ahead of schedule. Sprout says we'll have Leanne and Colin b-b-back in no time. Oh, watch that, you'll break the root!"

"I don't care if I break the stupid root."

"Let me d-d-do it then, will you? These are ex-p-p-pensive b-b-bulbs, and Sprout can't get m-more of them."

With the thaw came a softening of tensions. The curfews remained in place, but prefects would look the other way if students slipped into mealtimes late, and professors no longer walked students to class. Percy chalked up the slippage to Dumbledore's absence; the headmaster spent several nights away from the faculty table.

"He's working in the Wizengamot, I'm sure," said Hermione. "With an election coming up, he must be quite busy."

"Doing what, it remains unclear," Draco said, disgruntled. She stole some of his *Daily Prophet,* and they were reading together over toast and jam.

She said, "He's a great wizard, I'm sure he can be helpful in all sorts of ways. Perhaps he's helping Fudge pass the Magical Security Act."

"Nah," said Ron. "Dumbledore hates it, remember? Dad said he wrote a whole column in the *Prophet* going after it."

"Aren't Dumbledore and Fudge in the same party?" said Hermione, confused.

“Yeah, but the Pops are huge, and they don’t always agree. ’Sides, Dumbledore doesn’t like it when the Wizengamot gives the Ministry more power. He tanked a bill three years ago that would double the size of the Auror force, said it was ‘unnecessary excess.’”

“‘Unnecessary excess’ is redundant phrasing,” yawned Draco, stealing a triangle of Hermione’s toast. He tapped off some globules of jam — she’d upended about half a pot on each slice — and nibbled it. “He’s right, of course, but that’s incidental.”

“Of course you think that, you’re in Runcorn’s party.”

“I’m not in anybody’s party, I’m a second year,” Draco said mildly. “I don’t vote. I can’t be held accountable for the state of our democracy until I’ve at least had the chance to ruin it personally.”

Harry said, “Maybe it’s because I don’t read the *Prophet,* but what’s his law about, anyway?”

“It would expand the purview of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” answered Hermione. Draco was proud of her; this was the sort of thing he wouldn’t have expected her to know, a year ago. “They could put the Trace on anyone charged of a crime. Dumbledore thinks it’s invasive.”

“And the other party thinks…?”

“That it’ll lead to a lot of former Death Eaters getting placed under twenty-four hour surveillance,” said Draco shortly. “Which is a problem, if ‘former Death Eaters’ is the largest voting bloc in your party.”

Harry looked up from his eggs. “Would you go under surveillance, Draco?” he asked earnestly.

“I regret disappointing you, Potter, but I have not, in fact, been charged with a crime.”

“Yeah, but your mum,” he said, and Draco swallowed.

“What about her?”

Harry and Ron traded a glance. Ron said, “Listen, you know we don’t mean anything by this, mate. I’m sure your mum’s… well, to be honest, I’m pretty sure she’s a weirdo, but no more of a weirdo than you are. But you know…”

“She was fully pardoned,” he said brusquely. “Cleared of all charges. My father made sure of it.”

“Did he?” said Hermione curiously. “How did that work?”

“Look at the time! I didn’t realize it was the Draco Malfoy Radio Hour. That’s my business, Granger, mind your own.”

“Fine, don’t tell me. Either way, it won’t pass,” said Hermione confidently. “Dumbledore is opposed to it, and everybody worships him.”

In Defense Against the Dark Arts, Podmore had moved from creatures to defensive spells. Draco welcomed this change, not least because it led to much fewer controversial conversations, and he found most of the spells useful. By mid-February, Podmore had them practicing in pairs.

“Excellent, Harry!” he roared. Harry had a knack for the Disarming Spell, and had used it to great success on Dean Thomas, whose wand now lay somewhere in the rafters. “That was Auror-quality, young man! You’re a natural! Very well done! Ten points to Gryffindor! And you know what? Another five, Granger, for an inspired use of *Ventus!* My, but you’re an impressive class!”

Hermione beamed at Draco, bouncing on the balls of her feet. He sent her a sarcastic salute, and then shot a jinx at Susan Bones that locked her wrists together. Naturally, the professor didn’t notice, having skipped off to effuse at some Hufflepuffs.

Podmore handed out points to Gryffindors like candy. This rankled some of the Slytherins, including Theo Nott, who would gladly say as much to anyone willing to listen.

“Say what you will about Snape, but he’s not over-generous,” Theo muttered, as they climbed the stairs up from the dungeons. “He gives Slytherin two points for every one to Gryffindor, but he only ever gives us as much as any other professor does.”

“It’s Podmore’s first time teaching,” said Draco, though he found it a bit hypocritical, himself. “He’s overeager.”

“Easy for you to say, but that doesn’t help us. If you lot didn’t rack up demerits like you need them to live, you’d have this year’s Cup locked up already. Pucey always said that House points were a crock of hippogriff dung, but I didn’t believe him until now…”

They approached the Great Hall. Podmore stood at the entrance, chatting sternly to the Slytherin prefect on attendance duty.

“...no excuse for lapse in judgment… I understand the temptation to go easy on younger students, but it’s that sort of laxness that leads to people getting hurt. I’m not blaming you, you understand, I’m just asking you to promise it won’t happen again.”

“What’s going on?” Theo said casually. “Hullo, Julia. Nott, with an ‘N.’”

The prefect, Julia, scratched his name off the list. “Pansy’s late,” she muttered.

Theo frowned. “That’s strange. D’you want me to find her?”

“No need, Mister Nott,” sighed Podmore. “We’ll not have students wandering the halls alone at a time like this. Tell me where the girl is, I’ll go get her.”

Draco glanced at Julia, who was glowering at the professor with vehemence. Her quill was digging into the parchment.

“That’s all right, sir, really,” said Theo in silken tones. “She wouldn’t want you to miss your lunch on her account.”

“Not a bother, and I insist. It’s a professor’s duty to protect the safety of his students.”

“Respectfully,” Theo said, with an ever-so-slight twang of sarcasm, “being that she’s likely in the Slytherin girls’ dorm, sir, I still think my suggestion is best.”

This was in the way of a conversation-ending argument. Podmore scowled. “Ten points from Slytherin, for Miss Parkinson’s tardiness,” he said. As Julia and Theo gave cries of protest, he added: “And five more for every minute she’s late. Tell her that I want to see her in my office after lunch.”

“But professor—!”

“No buts.”

“Tosser,” Theo muttered, once Podmore was out of earshot. “No wonder Pansy loathes him. I’ve half a mind to tell her to skip, and just take the demerits. We’re not going to win this year, anyway, what’s the point in trying?”

Draco frowned, rubbing his jaw.

Theo nudged him. “What?” he said drily. “You’re not even going to gloat?”

“Pansy’s a pureblood.”

“Right. In other news, mermaids swim.”

Draco ignored him. “So why is Podmore worried about her?”

Theo shrugged. “Good excuse to dock points,” he suggested. “Classic rule of war. Never miss an opportunity to kick your enemy when he’s down.”

Gryffindor’s fortunes were truly on the up-and-up, because their quidditch team was well on its way to victory in the House tournament. Harry was, to Draco’s misery, a sickeningly talented seeker, even on the miserable Cleansweep Five that Wood had him flying. Rarely had Lee Jordan had so much fun as when he got to commentate the Gryffindor matches, and even though he spent most of it playing a game of keep-away for the microphone with McGonagall.

“AND OH, HE’S MOVING, HE’S HUSTLING, HE’S A BULLET TRAIN, HE’S A PEREGRINE FALCON, HE’S MUSIC IN MOTION, HE’S A SCIENTIFICALLY PERFECT AERODYNAMIC OBJECT! LOOK AT HIM GO! FLY, POTTER! FLY!!”

“Jordan! The game!”

“What? Oh, yeah. Flint scores, rah, rah, ten points. Anyway, LET’S HAVE A HOLLER FOR HARRY POTTER, THE EMERALD-EYED KING OF—”

He broke off: McGonagall had tackled him.

In Gryffindor Tower, Jordan and the Weasley twins had invented a chant to be deployed whenever Harry caught the snitch, and taught it to the first years, who were too thrilled by the prospect of winning to have any fear of being annoying.

Let’s have a holler for Harry Potter!

The emerald-eyed king of the skies!

You’re in for a treat if you want to be beat

For he plays just as well as he flies!

To his credit, Harry gave every sign of loathing this chant, and turned the color of beetroots whenever it was deployed. Ron sang it in the shower for weeks.

In the last week of February, with only one game left in the year, Gryffindor took the lead. Loath to rest on his laurels, Wood doubled the number of practices, and gave Harry a practice snitch to drill with when he wasn't on the pitch. In Draco's opinion, this was the worst thing he could have possibly done — because Harry, either from eagerness to please or some mischievous impulse, started using it in the Gryffindor common room.

Ron was thrilled. "Fred says we haven't played like this in years," he said. "We're getting the Cup, Wood's sure of it. McGonagall's over the moon. Yesterday she gave me ten points for holding the door! Oh, hi, Harry."

Harry had come back from the pitch covered in mud and sweat, still wearing his quidditch robes, his hair sticking up electrically in all directions. Increasingly, these days, it was his default state. He flopped on the sofa next to Draco and Hermione, and said, "Wood's a madman. I can't feel my pelvis anymore."

"You're getting mud on the sofa," Draco informed him. Harry grinned and wiped his hand on the cushions.

"Eugh!"

"Scourgify," Hermione said primly, polishing off Harry's mess. "He's keeping you boys out there far too late, if you ask me. It's not safe flying in the dark."

"Boys *and* girls, Hermione, don't be rude," announced Katie Bell, as she clambered in the portrait hole with Angelina. She gave Hermione a chivalrous grin, to show she was joking, and slapped Harry on the back. "Alright, Harry? Not too sore, are you?"

“Nah,” said Harry quickly, sitting up. Draco snorted, and exchanged a snide look with Hermione.

“Attaboy. What’re we listening to? Something new from Seamus?”

The boombox, which lived on top of the hearth whenever Seamus wasn’t carrying it around, thumped placidly in the background. It was playing “Temptation,” a track from the album Hermione gave him for Christmas.

“Actually, it’s Draco’s.”

“Really?” She cocked her head at Draco, appraising. “You a fan of muggle music, Malfoy?”

He shrugged. “When it isn’t awful.”

“Yeah? You should come with George and me to Hogsmeade sometime, then,” she said casually. “There’s a music shop off Main Street, and they sell used CDs. Can get them for half price, quarter-price, sometimes.”

He looked her up and down. She vaguely resembled Harry, with mud on her face and black choppy hair standing all on its end, and there was something jaunty and boyish in the way she stood with her hip cocked, black nails drumming on her waist. She wasn’t remotely respectable, but she carried herself with such brassy confidence that she could have stood in file with a marquess. She was well-liked in Gryffindor.

“Alright, Bell,” he said slowly.

“Aces. I’ll let him know. Night, lads.”

She and Angelina tromped up the stairs to the girls’ dorm. Eyeing their muddy tracks, Hermione cast a muttered *“Scourgify”* after them.

“Oi, Draco,” said Ron, scratching his head with his quill. “I can’t get this one. What d’you get if you combine minotaur bone meal with

liquified azolla?”

He made a face. “Piss-all. And a dirty cauldron. Why?”

“Aw, no, I thought for sure I’d got it.” Ron sighed, grabbing a new scroll of parchment. “What about bunyip nails?”

Draco shut his book and rubbed the bridge of his nose.
“...Substituted for which?”

“I dunno. Either?”

“Well, it matters which, Weasley.”

Hermione stopped writing. “Why are you asking him?” she said, in tones so delicate he knew she was suspicious.

“Because he’s… the Potions bloke?” said Ron, helplessly. His eyes darted between Hermione and Draco, growing aware of the danger afoot. “Because he… likes it?”

“You asked me for help on that assignment just last night.”

“Right, yeah,” said Ron quickly, “which is why I asked Draco today. To give you a break. From answering.”

“Yes,” said Hermione, narrowing her eyes. “Which is why you had me do half of your Transfiguration at lunch.”

Draco sat back, enjoying himself. Harry was busy turning into a curdled ball of mortification, the same way he did whenever his friends fought.

“Do you think he’s better than me at Potions?”

“No! I mean, not *no,* but not *not* no—”

“Because our grades are *just* the same, and if Snape hadn’t docked me a point on the last exam for *handwriting ,* we’d be dead tied.”

Draco hid a snicker behind his hand. It was typical Hermione to care about something like this: not just who *was* better at potions, but who Ron *thought* was better. Hermione didn't even particularly like Potions. She had complained ceaselessly about the same assignment Ron was doing. Nevertheless, Draco liked that she had a competitive streak; apart from being delicious fun to provoke, it made him wonder what she would have been like in Slytherin.

A high *CRACK* split the air. Ron jumped, spilling ink everywhere, and Harry was on his feet at once, wand in hand.

A house-elf stood atop the coffee table. His ears were pressed low to his skull in fear.

"Dobby?" blurted Draco.

"Master Draco! Come at once, sir!" Dobby seized Draco's hands and tugged him to his feet. Distressed tears welled in his eyes. "You must come! Intruders at the Manor! Thieves! Burglars! The mistress has removed!"

A cold wave rolled down Draco's spine. He shot up. "The Manor? Who — when did it happen? Where's my mother?"

"The mistress has removed with Mister Snape, sir! It is happening just recently, sir! Dobby hears the house wards are being broken, and the alarms are ringing! And Dobby sees strange wizards in masks, and they are inside the Manor when they are not supposed to be, and when the wards do not want them there! And he remembers Master Draco's order, and goes to Mister Snape! And Mister Snape calls Mister Dumbledore, and says to alert Master Draco, and tells Dobby to bring him at once!"

Draco gripped the front of Dobby's pillowcase and hauled him up like a doll. The elf gave a shrill cry.

"Where is my mother?"

Dobby squeaked, hands scrabbling for purchase on Draco's arm. "Safe!" he cried. "Safe with Mister Snape! Dobby makes sure of it, sir! Dobby would not leave her, otherwise!"

Repenting, Draco slackened his grip, and lowered Dobby to the floor. He closed his eyes and took deep breaths.

He became aware that the other three were staring at him. He could feel Hermione's eyes on his back, and he dreaded turning around.

Ron was the first to speak.

"What the hell is that?" he said.

Dobby gasped, and quaffed a bow. "The young master's friends!" he said. "A thousand pardons from Dobby, who has not introduced himself. This is Dobby, and he is the loyal elf of the Most Ancient and Most Noble House of Malfoy."

Hermione inhaled sharply. Draco winced.

"And Dobby knows who you are!" exclaimed Dobby.

"You do?" said Harry, curiously.

"Master Draco has told Dobby about you! You are his Pooter and Wheezey!"

Harry choked. Ron gave a strangled belch of laughter.

Dobby turned to Hermione. "And Miss Grain Jar!" he said generously. "It is an honor to Dobby! Master Draco is told Dobby how clever his Grain Jar is." He bowed so deep his ears swept the floor.

"Hello, Dobby," Hermione said through gritted teeth. "It's very nice to meet you."

Draco risked a look at Hermione. She was rigid all over, and her hands fisted her skirts, white-knuckled. She did not look back at him.

Ron said weakly, “Draco, mate, I knew you were rich, but this is…”

“Is that a pillowcase?” interrupted Harry.

Dobby looked down at his shift, plucking at the hem. As the others goggled, Draco saw Dobby as if through fresh eyes: he saw the patchwork of miscellaneous stains on his grubby pillowcase, the trailing threads, the places where rips and tears had been stitched together by tiny hands. He saw, too, for the first time, the bandages Dobby wrapped around his feet in lieu of socks or shoes, and the long scar running up the back of his skull, where Draco had once, as a toddler, accidentally pushed him down the stairs. He recalled Dobby’s fretful declaration: *Mistress says he must knock his head very hard against the wall and be sorry…*

“Yes, sir,” the elf admitted, fidgeting. “Dobby is sorry. Dobby would have worn a nicer pillowcase, if he knew he would be representing the family…”

“A *nicer* pillowcase,” said Hermione, in a trembling voice.

Draco interrupted. “We have to go,” he said roughly. “I’ll — explain later. Dobby, take me to my mother.”

“Yes, Master Draco,” Dobby said pleasantly, and held out his hand. “Dobby will apparate us.”

He turned to Hermione. “I’ll explain later,” he said. “When I get back. Just don’t… jump to any conclusions, Granger. All right?” He tried to keep his tone light and practical. It really wasn’t a big deal, and he’d make her see that. She was a reasonable witch; if he explained things properly, she’d understand.

Hermione looked at him. Her eyes were narrow and breathtakingly cold.

“What conclusions?” she said, tonelessly. “I don’t think there’s anything to infer.”

“Don’t — just wait up, will you?”

A vein throbbed in her neck.

He gave her a beseeching look. Reluctantly, she nodded.

“Okay,” he said. “Dobby, let’s go.”

He took Dobby’s hand, and with another CRACK, and a terrible twist in his gut, the world flickered.

When it solidified again, he was standing in Snape’s office.

In an armchair by the fire sat his mother, dressed in a nightgown and slippers, a shaggy quilt draped around her shoulders. Her hair was loose and tumbled down her shoulders in a striking gradient from white at the crown to black at the tips. In one hand, she cradled a drawstring pouch, while in the other, she clutched her wand.

“Draco,” she cried, and surged up to embrace him. He flung his arms around her and buried his head in her shoulder. As one, they took a deep, jagged breath.

A cauldron bubbled on the Potion Master’s desk. Snape stepped away from the brew to greet them, brushing off his hands. “Draco,” he said shortly.

“Hello, Professor. Mother, are you all right—?”

“Fine,” she said, waving it away. “Fine, fine, all fine. I was quite asleep, when Dobby woke me; they were already in the library before I heard a thing.”

Draco quelled a spasm of panic at the thought. “You didn’t hear the wards go off?”

“No.” A shade of guilt flickered across her face. “I had — well, I had taken a dose of Dreamless Sleep, you see, and — you know, it is rather strong.”

“Have you been sleeping ill?” he murmured, frowning, but Snape interrupted them.

“It matters little. They did not come for your mother.”

“How do you know?” Draco demanded. “She’s a well-known witch. They could have been there to kidnap her, to ransom, or, or hurt her, or Merlin knows—”

“If they wanted your mother, they would have her,” Snape said crisply, picking up his knife. He began chopping greenery in a flurry of strokes. “They were inside your house well before the elf heard the alarm. If your mother was the object of their mission, why tarry with petty larceny?”

“How did they get through the wards?”

“I do not know. They were gone by the time I arrived.” He swept the greenery into the brew and replaced the cutting board. “I have notified Dumbledore, who has departed to assess the damages. If you wish to notify law enforcement, that is your prerogative, but I would advise you that Lucius always vehemently refused to let Ministry agents see the interior of the Manor, and to my understanding had good reasons for doing so.”

Narcissa shook her head. “No Aurors,” she ordered. “In fact, I would really prefer you hadn’t even told Dumbledore, Severus. I don’t trust that man.”

“It was not my choice.” Snape’s voice was flat. “You came to Hogwarts. You asked for my help. It comes at a cost.”

Draco swallowed. Not for the first time, he wondered what the nature of Snape and Dumbledore’s relationship was, that Snape spoke of him with such begrudging reverence; it went far beyond the usual respect of professor and headmaster.

The flames in the fireplace leapt up and turned green. Snape flicked his wand at the hearth, and the grate folded itself neatly to one side just in time for Albus Dumbledore to stride through the fireplace.

“Narcissa,” he said solemnly. “Welcome to Hogwarts. I cannot express my regret that you could not visit under more auspicious circumstances.”

“Professor Dumbledore,” she said coolly, and allowed him to clasp her hand between his own.

“I hope it is some comfort to you that the Manor is, for the most part, quite untouched. Only the library has been disturbed — although, I admit, it is a conspicuous disturbance…”

“What do you mean?” said Draco sharply. “What happened to it?”

Dumbledore looked down at him. “Hello, Draco,” he said kindly. Bits of ash clung to his hair from the Floo, giving it the color of cinders. “Thank you for joining us. I apologize for the upset. I know you must have been very worried for your mother.”

“Yes, yes, but what about the library?”

“It was ransacked,” Snape said shortly. “At least one shelf was pried off the wall. Evidence indicates it was a hasty search.”

“Of course it was,” said Narcissa, sitting down. She braced her forehead delicately on two fingers. Draco stepped to her side, and placed his hand protectively on her shoulder. “Once the wards broke, they would have been racing the clock.”

“To find what?” asked Draco incredulously. He looked from Narcissa to Snape to Dumbledore. “Why the library? It’s magnificent, certainly, but even the most expensive book in that collection… I could name fifty more expensive artifacts in the house.”

“I concur in full,” said Dumbledore gravely. “Whatever they took, I very much doubt they intended to sell. Narcissa, I warn you, I am about to ask a somewhat impolitical question.”

She arched her neck and leveled him with a stare that could freeze oceans.

“When Lucius was assembling his collection of… I will call them *antiques,”* said Dumbledore politely, “did he come into possession of a particular book, or perhaps a scroll, or volume, that would arouse malign interest?”

“Albus,” snapped Snape, setting down a bottle of hippogriff bile. “Of all times. Narcissa, don’t answer that.”

“I assure you, I mean nothing by it. I ask only to abet the course of our inquiry. You may answer in as much or as little detail as you like.”

Narcissa rubbed her forehead, deep in thought.

“Father collected lots of things,” Draco volunteered. Dumbledore turned to Draco, his eyes alight with interest and a glimmer of something hungrier. “He had an excellent library. He loved to read. He had a first edition of *Most Potente Potions,* and a box set of the Stoddard lectures, and a handwritten draft of Godelot…”

“And did others know of this collection? Was there any tome of which he was especially proud, or which he made a point of showing to others?”

“No. He wouldn’t have… not my father. No.”

“Nevertheless, someone might have known he possessed them?”

“I know what it was,” murmured Narcissa.

The men stared at her.

“...I imagine it would be very difficult,” said Dumbledore, “to say with confidence, at this juncture, considering the vast inventory…”

“Narcissa?” said Snape. She looked up at him, and her eyes were shiny.

“It was a diary,” she said quietly.

A beaker slipped through Snape’s fingers and shattered on the stone.

Cold fingers ran up Draco’s spine at the sight of the Potion Master’s face: he had never seen his godfather struck with terror.

Having lingered in the background for the wizards’ conversation, Dobby now hurried forward, producing a dustpan from the aether, and tried to sweep up the shards. Dumbledore noticed, and said kindly, “My dear little friend, I should never dream of allowing a guest to stoop to such work while at Hogwarts. *Reparo.”*

Dobby squeaked as the shards flew out of his grasp and reassembled themselves on the desk.

“You have done much for us all, tonight,” Dumbledore added, kneeling. He held out his hand to Dobby. “May I offer you something to soothe your tested nerves? A warm drink, perhaps?”

Dobby goggled at the hand like he’d grown a tentacle.

“I see you do not belabor yourself with chatter. Too wise, too wise! So many wizards who speak much say little.” He patted Dobby on the head. Dobby trembled. “Be well, and happy. You have earned, if not the gratitude of your lieges, then at the very least, the gratitude of my not-so-humble self.”

Snape cut the burner under his cauldron. “It’s finished,” he said. “For ideal performance, it should rest for several days, but on such short notice, you will simply have to accept an inferior product.”

“What’s that?” Draco asked, pointing at the cauldron. Everyone ignored him.

Dumbledore rose to his feet. “I’m sure it will do quite well, Severus. Narcissa, if we still have an understanding…?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. May I suggest, then, that we all retire to my office, where I have called for some hot chocolates and crumpets? I find it much easier to face the trials of the world when armed with a sweet snack.”

Nobody laughed. Snape and Narcissa remained stone-faced.

“Hang on,” said Draco aggressively. “I still don’t understand. What happened? What’s this diary Mum thinks they took? How do you know they took it?”

Severus and Dumbledore both looked at Narcissa.

She sighed, turning to Draco. “Darling, it’s a very long story,” she said. “I would tell you, but it’s late, and Professor Dumbledore and your godfather and I still have ever so much to talk about. I know how absolutely horrid it feels to be kept in the dark, but you must try to bear it, out of love for me. Will you? Can you?”

“But I don’t—”

“It is very important. And I wouldn’t ask it unless I thought it was necessary, but it’s simply too complicated to explain all at once.”

“I’m not a baby,” Draco snapped. “I can understand complicated things. What, is it some sort of Dark Arts book?” He looked at Dumbledore and Snape, who were staring gravely on, watching the altercation between mother and son. “It is, isn’t it? That’s why you’re so skittish, and why you won’t tell me. You think I don’t know we own

Dark artifacts? I lived in that house for eleven years! I walk past three of them on the way to breakfast!"

"Draco," Snape said uneasily.

Draco pointed at him. "You're nervous," he accused. "Nervous enough to tell Dumbledore, so it's important. But not just important to us, either, because *he* thought it was worth seeing himself. And whatever it is, it scares you all to death, because I can't think of another reason my mother would willingly let Albus Dumbledore into our house."

"Darling, please be courteous," murmured Narcissa.

"It's Death Eater stuff, isn't it?" He laughed humorlessly. "Don't answer that, it obviously is. It's his diary, isn't it? My dad's? And you're worried because it has a bunch of information about the Dark Lord, and — and all the Dark magic they did."

Dumbledore gazed at him. "Draco," he said gently, "would you be so kind as to make a deal with me?"

Draco folded his arms. "What deal?" he said suspiciously.

"I would like you to return to your dormitory, right now, and remain there for the rest of the night."

"No w—"

"Please allow me to finish. In return for this considerable favor," said Dumbledore, "I will personally repair the wards around Malfoy Manor from this evening's breach, and I will give you my word — on my house, if you prefer it — that I will never again cross the Manor's threshold unless invited by a member of your family."

Draco breathed out. He looked at his mother.

"Do you want me to go?" he demanded of her.

She looked up at him sadly. “Darling,” she began.

“No. Stop it. Never mind. I’ll go.” He extended his hand. “Dobby, come.”

“Dobby should return to the Manor, I think,” Dumbledore interrupted, gentle as ever. “He has had an eventful night, and he has earned a rest.”

“Can’t he take me back to the dorm first?” Draco heard the whinge in his voice, and loathed it.

Dumbledore folded his hands behind his back and spoke calmly. “In fact, I would prefer that Dobby make as few appearances as possible to the other students,” he said. “I respect the right of each family to conduct its affairs as it may please, but the keeping of house-elves in bondage is not a tradition I would like modeled to your young peers, especially those in Gryffindor Tower who look up to you, of whom there are several. There is a reason we do not permit students to bring their servants to Hogwarts.”

“He’s *my* elf!”

“But it is not your school,” said Dumbledore, ever soft, and ever unyielding.

Draco rounded on his mother, but she had turned her head away, her brow knotted in guilt and worry.

“Fine,” he spat, balling his fists. “Goodnight, then. To all of you.”

“Draco—”

He stalked out of Snape’s office, letting the door bang against the wall.

The stairs to Gryffindor Tower had never felt longer than they did that night. By the time he reached the top, his thighs burned in the familiar way they did at the end of the week, and he had worked

himself into a proper fury. He couldn't stand the insult of the dismissal, the lack of one word spoken in his defense. How his mother and godfather failed to lift a finger while Dumbledore sent him off to bed.

What rights did they have to dismiss him? He was the head of household; he was the Malfoy heir. If anyone should have been in the room, it was him. To dismiss him like a child — not to mention stripping him of his house-elf — was condescending, patronizing, paternalistic in the extreme…

His fortunes didn't improve when he reached the Tower. Curfew had come and gone, and so had the Pink Lady; the portrait had become a pastoral landscape.

He tried the password anyway — his plaintive exhortation of "Pustule nuggets" achieved nothing — and then, in a swell of rage, pulled out his wand to try and blast open the door. But the moment passed, and he lowered his wand, sighing.

He hammered on the wall instead.

"It's me! Let me in, I'm locked out!"

The portrait hole swung open. Hermione stood in the door, her expression cold. His heart sank.

"Well, come in," she said. "You don't want Filch seeing you."

He clambered through. The common room was empty: at this hour, and everyone had gone up to bed. The fire guttered low. Neville's toad was croaking peaceably from somewhere in the rafters.

Hermione shut the door. "I waited for you."

He dragged a hand down his face. "Merlin," he said. "Can't this wait?"

“You were the one who asked *me* to wait. I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Yes, you were.” He fought the urge to snap. “You took one look at Dobby and you were ready to give me a sermon, Granger. Don’t deny it.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“Yeah, well, you wanted to.”

“I *wanted* to?”

“Of course you wanted to,” he said, spiteful. He was aware of a defensive edge in his voice, and he resented it, which only made him more irritated. “You’re Hermione Granger. You always want to.”

“I can’t believe you!” Her jaw dropped in outrage. “You have a *slave —”*

“Right. Here we go.”

“An actual, living, breathing slave, in the year 1993, and you brought him into Hogwarts, where we could all see him, and *I’m* the bad guy? Because I *thought* about saying something about it?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. He’s not a slave.”

“Really!” she shrilled. “Is that so! So he can refuse an order, can he?”

His shoulders crept up. He scowled.

“He can leave at any time?” she continued, advancing on him. He spun around and walked away, but she followed him, her voice rising. “He can choose not to work? And you pay him, of course, don’t you?”

“You know, I have had one hell of a night, and I’m really not in the mood—”

“Well, that’s tough, because you decided to bring it up!” He turned to go up the stairs, and she pulled him back. “I’m in shock,” she cried, “in *shock,* Draco, that you ever could be so cruel! After everything Podmore said about Dark Magic—”

“Podmore doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“Podmore fought in the Order of the Phoenix!”

“Fantastic!” he roared, whirling on her. “Good for him! What a saint! Why don’t you go nag him about what *monsters* my family are, then? I’m sure he’ll agree with you!”

“Nag? *Nag?”*

“Yeah, and while you’re at it, ask him what my dad did during the war! If house-elves are where you draw the line, then I’m sure he’ll *really* open your eyes for you—”

“I don’t care what your father did,” she shouted. “He didn’t make you keep that house-elf! You could have freed him whenever you wanted!”

“It’s not that *simple!”*

“It’s exactly that simple! You own another sentient being! Good people don’t *do* that, Draco!”

“I’m getting really sick,” he snarled, “of you calling me a bad person just because my family has certain traditions that you can’t understand.”

She gave a high, inarticulate cry of outrage. “Can’t understand,” she shrieked. *“Can’t* understand? Can’t? I understand everything about it!”

“Yes, can’t. And frankly, it’s quite rich of you to try and judge us, since it’s not your culture.”

She stepped into his face. He could count the pieces of hair that floated free of her braid, and individual crosshairs of her braces when she bared her teeth. “Not *my* culture?” she repeated dangerously. “And what does that mean?”

“It means— oh, come off it, you know perfectly well what it means.”

“No, I don’t. Why don’t you tell me, Draco? Why don’t you tell me exactly what you mean by ‘your culture’? What is that culture, exactly?”

“You’d feel differently if you were…” He gestured, vaguely and angrily.

“If what? If I was *what?* ”

“A pureblood!” He threw up his hands. “It’s different! I can’t explain how, it just is!”

“Right,” she seethed. “Right. It ‘just is’ different. And purebloods ‘just are’ better than muggle-borns. That’s what you’re thinking, aren’t you?”

“Oh, piss off,” he said coldly. “That wasn’t what I was thinking, and you know it.”

“I don’t know anything about you,” she snapped. “I don’t know why you expect me to trust your intentions. I thought I could, but apparently I was *very* wrong—”

“Merlin’s *beard,* don’t be such a — a bloody—”

“What? Don’t be a what? A nag? A harpy? A shrew?” Her voice rose on every word. Her eyes were shiny. “Why are you *so* angry at me? What did I do? How is it that in your mind, Draco Malfoy is once again the victim?”

“I AM the victim!” His voice went so high it cracked, and upstairs, one of the doors creaked. “Someone broke into my house tonight, if you

didn’t recall!”

“Poor you!” she shouted. “That’s really awful! That doesn’t mean you get to stomp in here and yell at me about it!”

“I didn’t start yelling at you!”

“You picked a fight, and you know it!” Hermione was on the verge of tears. “You were sour at me from the minute you walked in! Before I said a word!”

“Because I didn’t fancy getting lectured by a mudblood!”

The word was there before he knew what it was. He listened in horror as it surged up from somewhere deep and bitter and secret, a place he hadn’t known existed, and slipped between his teeth like spittle, tasteless and invisible.

It hadn’t even fully left his mouth before he wanted to take it back. But it was too late: it was there, hanging in the air between them, hard and sharp and clear as a piece of broken glass. He got to watch as it struck Hermione like a punch to the throat.

She stumbled backward, her mouth slightly parted, and the expression on her face did something to his insides that made him feel like he was dying.

Then she slapped him.

His head whipped around on his neck. Slowly, he lifted his hand to the fiery plane of his cheek. His signet ring burned cold against the skin.

“Muggle-born,” he said, quietly. Then, in a firmer voice, he repeated, “Muggle-born, I meant.”

But it might as well have come twenty years too late. Hermione’s mouth trembled, and she buried her face in her hands.

“Granger,” he said, numbly. He reached out. “Granger, I didn’t—”

She shoved past him, knocking him aside, and sprinted up the girls’ staircase.

He followed her, growing conscious that he had made the sort of mistake from which something precious, being lost, would not return.

“Granger! Come back here!” At his touch, the girls’ staircase flattened into a slide, and he went stumbling back to the bottom. “Granger!” he shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth. Panic tinged the cry.

“Malfoy.”

It wasn’t Hermione’s voice.

He turned, and saw Harry and Ron standing at the top of the boys’ staircase. Harry wore oversized flannel pajamas with the sleeves rolled up, and his glasses were askew on his nose; Ron wore a giant Cannons t-shirt and drawstring pants. Both were holding their wands, and looked disheveled, as if they had received a rude awakening.

Their expressions left no possibility that they had not heard him.

NEXT CHAPTER: 10/14/2022

Any Living Thing

Chapter 15: Any Living Thing

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

In the end, it wasn't the silence that broke him.

No, it wasn't the silence: not the silence that greeted him every morning while the other boys dressed, wordless, and went down to breakfast without him; not the silence that swept through the common room when he stepped through the portrait hole, dousing laughter, killing smiles; not the silence that whisked over his housemates when he passed them in the halls, and descended anywhere at the Gryffindor table he chose to sit. No, not the silence of Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, who ignored him as well as any two people sleeping in the same room could, and on whose account, he suspected, he found a cache of stink bombs buried in his sock drawer. It was not the vengeful scorn of Fred and George Weasley, who (none too subtly) jinxed his shoelaces together while he was coming down the stairs; nor was it the quieter scorn of their prefect older brother, who became mysteriously deaf and blind to their hijinks whenever Draco happened to be involved.

It was not even the unendurable silence of Hermione Granger, whose boisterous, warm, know-it-all chatter had narrated his life at Hogwarts for almost two years, and who now showed no sign of remembering he existed.

What broke him was, of all things, Ginny Weasley, whom he made the mistake of sitting next to at lunch.

He had just set his bag on the table when she turned, made a face, and said coldly: "You know, Parvati, I'm not really hungry today."

Parvati paused, bewildered, mid-sandwich. “Oh?” she said. “Oh. *Oh.”*

“In fact,” said Ginny, standing up, “I’ve rather lost my appetite.”

Parvati glanced at him, then to the sandwich, and seemed to make up her mind. “Me, too,” she said. Then, bravely, as she stood up: “In f-fact, I wouldn’t want to — *bother* anybody by sitting near them. Being a half-blood and all.”

Draco closed his eyes. He was very tired; Seamus had ‘accidentally’ mistaken Draco’s Potions essay for kindling while building the common room fire last night, and he’d been up past midnight rewriting it.

“Good point, P. And I’m sure anywhere half-bloods aren’t welcome, blood traitors aren’t, either.” Ginny shouldered her book bag. “Let’s go find some of our own filth to sit with.”

They moved down the table to sit with Dean and Neville. A burst of laughter flowered from the group, and Ginny slung her arm around Neville’s shoulders, ruffling his hair. Hermione, who was sitting between them, looked up and smiled at Ginny.

And finally, after a week of silence, Draco broke. Grabbing his bag, he shoved out his seat and stalked away from the table, ignoring the chorus of whispers that ignited in his wake.

Theo jumped when Draco slammed his bag down in front of him.

“Goodness, that’s an entrance,” he said. His eyes did a comical sweep up Draco’s person. “Have you been Confounded? This isn’t your table.”

“I’d like to sit here,” Draco muttered. His jaw was so taut his mouth barely moved.

Slytherins were staring, but he didn’t care. It couldn’t possibly be worse than the Gryffindor table.

Pansy, who was sitting across from Theo, squinted at him in bemusement. “Why?” she asked. “What happened?”

“Does it matter?” Draco said tightly. “There’s not a rule against it.”

Theo shrugged.

Draco sat down. He grabbed a turkey sandwich and forced himself to take a bite. It tasted like ash.

He chewed. He swallowed. He took another bite.

Pansy watched him with an expression of alarm. “Teddy, they broke him,” she said.

“Oh, rats. This is why I never share my good toys.” Theo poked Draco’s arm, tentatively. “My good man, *did* you get Confounded? I was joking, but now I’m concerned.”

“I’m fine.” He took another bite.

“You are most certainly not. You’re a taciturn fellow, I grant, but you don’t usually act like a goblin clubbed you in the head.”

“I’m fine enough to hand you your arse, if you don’t bugger off.”

Theo and Pansy both sucked their breath through their teeth in the same mildly impressed way.

“Perhaps living in that Tower finally drove him to violence,” suggested Theo. “No shame in it. It took two full years, he’s still a man of more patience than I.”

“Don’t joke, it might be serious.”

“I’m deathly serious. Stuck in that loony bin till graduation? He’s got good reason to be depressed.”

“Or it’s about his M-O-T-H-E-R, you muppet,” she hissed.

“Ah,” said Theo, somewhat sheepish. “You know, I didn’t think of that. She *is* well, isn’t she, Draco? Please say she is, or I may have to faint in humiliation.”

Reassuring, they were not, and polite they were not, but carrying on a real conversation with people his own age went a long way to making him feel like a human being again.

“Narcissa is fine.”

“Thank Merlin.”

“It’s a problem with Granger.”

“Hermione Granger?” said Theo in surprise. “The swot? Didn’t think she had it in her.”

“She and I had a verbal altercation.”

“Mm,” he said. “Tragic. Well, can’t be helped. Say, can I glance at your Potions homework—”

“What could *she* have said that would upset you?” said Pansy. She fixed him with an intent shock-blue stare. “You’re *Draco Malfoy.* Your ancestors were the greatest wizards in the world. What is she? A gap-toothed baseborn freak?”

“Shut up,” Draco snapped. They both stared at him.

“This is our table,” Theo said slowly. “You can do whatever you like, in Gryffindor, and they’ll tolerate it — or they won’t, apparently. But if you’re going to lean on our hospitality, it’s custom to keep our manners.”

It was more than a little sinister, Draco thought, how quickly Theo could flip from merry indifference to the cool, commanding tone of a superior officer. He was the only son of a pureblood family; he'd likely never been told he couldn't have his way. Draco knew the type. He was one of them.

Except — it *grated* at him, for some reason. He didn't used to care, but he felt something intrinsically objectionable about Theo's slippery smile, as if there was something disrespectful in it. He found himself thinking of Ron, who could be heedlessly rude on scant prompting, but who never pretended to feel anything he didn't.

Draco never had to worry about where he stood, with Ron. Or Harry, or Hermione. When they were angry, they just came stomping over and yelled at you until you made it right again. It was sort of marvelous.

Pansy leaned back and flipped her hair. "Fine. Be miserable about it, I don't care," she sneered. "But mind you don't drag us into your mess, whatever it is."

He gave a bitter bark of a laugh. "You have absolutely nothing to worry about."

"No?"

"Unless you happen to have friends in Gryffindor Tower, I assure you, you're in no danger."

She snorted. "Only one, regrettably," she said. Then she caught him staring. "What? Don't look at me like that."

Theo beamed. "Parkinson, you dog," he said. "That was just about the sweetest thing you've ever—"

"Finish that sentence and I'll replace one of your colognes with Itching Potion," she said furiously. "And I won't tell you which one."

“And that’s the second sweetest.”

Draco snorted. It crossed his mind, absently, that Pansy and Percy might enjoy each other, if they could ever tolerate each other for long enough to have a conversation. Then he realized that Harry would probably laugh at all of Theo’s jokes — except the snobbiest ones — because Harry thought practically everything was funny, and that nothing would delight Theo more; and then he was thinking about the sorts of explosive arguments Pansy would have with Seamus, and how Daphne would adore Lavender’s muggle nail polish, and probably flirt with Dean; and most of all, he thought about Hermione, who would sit in the corner with him, and narrate the whole exchange under her breath, and laugh when he said something witty.

This thought occurred to him with a pang, like a physical needle through the left side of his chest. He rubbed the spot.

The afternoon post swept in, bringing with it a lighter haul than the morning. Ulysses made an automatic sweep over the Gryffindor table, doubled back twice in confusion, and finally cut across to land at the Slytherin table. He carried a scrap of tawny parchment.

Theo caught his *Prophet* before it hit the table. “Double edition,” he said, surprised. “There was already one this morning.”

“Why? Is there a crisis?” Pansy was ever hopeful. “Did somebody die?”

“Seems not,” said Theo. Then he exclaimed, “No! Really?”

“What? Don’t be mean! Tell me tell me tell me.”

“Asquith’s declared for Minister,” he gasped, paging through the paper. “Against Runcorn and Fudge. That makes four candidates, with Lockhart… the vote’s in a *week!* Of all times…”

Draco unrolled his scroll of parchment. It was written a scrawl so thick and stubby he struggled to parse it.

Dear Mr. Drako Malfoy,

Ye don't know me very well and that's because I reckon we haven't met proper yet. I reckon it's about time to fix that too, since any friend of Harrys is a friend of mine, and I heard enough about ye from Hermione that it seems like I know ye already. I know things aren't right with you two at the moment, but as I see it, that's all the more reason a bloke might be needin a friendly ear.

(Don't worry. I ain't mad at ye.)

Come down to the hut around 4 if ye can make it for tea + a chat.

Rubeus Hagrid

"...don't know what would possibly possess him to do it," Theo was saying, scanning the article with barely concealed glee. "It's mad. He must not think Fudge can beat Runcorn, even with the coalition behind him… it's that or he knows something we don't. My father must be jumping for joy…"

Draco balled the note in his pocket. "Who's Asquith, again?" he said dully.

"Speaker of the Wizengamot. Left wing bloke, Pop party. Just how disorganized are things up there?"

"Dumbledore wrote an editorial criticizing Fudge," Pansy said, wrinkling her nose. "Maybe Asquith took it as a declaration of war?"

"You'd think they'd communicate about these things. This is funny, though. I admit, I thought Lockhart would have dropped out."

Draco couldn't muster the enthusiasm to feign interest in politics. At that moment it couldn't have been less important to him who took the

Minister’s seat, whether it was Fudge or Runcorn or Hagrid. He pushed away the rest of his sandwich, muttering, “I’ve got to get ready for Transfiguration.”

The bell rang. Pansy sprang up like a shot. “Me, too,” she announced. “Draco, walk me.”

Theo frowned at her. “You don’t have Transfiguration.”

“No, Defense, but the classrooms are close. Draco?”

She rocked on her heels, fingering the strap of her bookbag. A disorganized and unusual energy animated her body, as if she had been struck by a current and was still riding out its unpleasant aftershocks.

In the archway, Professor Podmore was chatting to Professor Snape, and making no effort to keep his opinions discreet.

“...particularly,” he was saying, “at a time like this. I mean, don’t get me wrong. Asquith’s my man. But the best thing would be to wait. Don’t you think? Better for the coalition, better for Fudge, better for the party. Our party, that is. Isn’t that right, Severus?”

Snape turned his head so slowly he seemed like an automaton.

“In front of students,” he said, choosing each word like he was plucking petals from a rose, “it is custom to address one’s fellow faculty by their title.”

The force of each consonant could have leveled a building. Draco’s mouth twitched.

“Right, of course. Sorry, Professor Snape. Rookie mistake. Still learning, you know! Ha, ha. But seriously, what do you think? Asquith or Fudge? For your ballot.” Podmore clapped Snape on the shoulder. Snape closed his eyes; he appeared to be praying.

“I am a humble Potions Master,” he said. “I am unprepared to speak on the matter without inquiry.”

“Dodgy fellow,” laughed Podmore. “No such thing as a ‘humble’ voter, in a democracy. As long as it’s not Runcorn, eh? Oh, Miss Parkinson! There you are. We were worried about you, the other day!”

“Walk faster,” muttered Pansy, seizing Draco’s elbow.

“Miss Parkinson! Hold on a moment! A word?”

Draco stopped, seeing no other option, and Pansy gave a high-pitched groan, stamping her foot.

“Make an excuse,” she begged Draco in a whisper. “Say — say you’re about to throw up.”

“What? No.”

“I don’t know! Think of something!”

Podmore hurried forward, eager. “Miss Parkinson, you’re on your way to my class, I suppose? Very good, I’ll walk you. Mister Malfoy, you go on ahead, I shouldn’t like to keep you.”

Pansy stared woodenly at her feet. All the nervous energy had gone out of her, leaving her limp and listless.

Draco tried to think of an excuse, but he couldn’t find a reason to deny the professor; Hermione was, ironically, much better at lying. So he watched as Podmore placed a hand between Pansy’s shoulder-blades, and with a gesture like someone guiding livestock, he swept her up the stairs.

At four fifteen precisely, Draco put away his watch, climbed the stairs to Hagrid’s hut, and rapped the knocker.

“Jes’ a mo!” Great thumps echoed behind the door, and with a riotous squeak of hinges, the half-giant peered out. At the sight of Draco, his craggy face broke into a grin. “Mis’r Malfoy!” he said grandly, flinging the door wide. “Good to see ye. Thought ye might not be able to come.”

“Hello, Mister Hagrid,” said Draco, in strained tones. He eyed the giant’s hands, and tried not to think about how one errant backhand could punt Draco into a wall. He held out a wicker basket. “Thank you for the kind invitation. This is for you.”

It was a basket of fresh tomatoes under a piece of cheesecloth. They came from the kitchens, so they weren’t exactly his own, but Narcissa had raised him better than to appear empty-handed.

“Thank ye, lad,” said Hagrid, quite touched. “These are beau’iful. Well, come in! Come in! I got a kettle on. Don’t mind Fang, he jus’ wants to lick ye.”

The door swung shut, enclosing Draco in the hut’s only room. Fat hunks of ham and pheasant hung from the ceiling, and a copper kettle burbled merrily on the open fire. It was ample space, but it all seemed small in relation to Hagrid, who made even the largest piece of furniture — an overstuffed armchair the size of Draco’s four-poster — look like a child’s playset.

A black boarhound larger than a Shetland pony came bounding up to Draco in the entrance, barking madly. Draco, whose recent past included less than favorable experiences with dogs, gave a shout and flung himself against the door.

The dog butted him hard in the stomach — he ducked, groaning — and then began licking him furiously. Draco began to reconsider whether he was in desperate enough need of companionship yet to stoop this low: perhaps he could try talking to Peeves, or the Giant Squid.

“Jus’ push him away, if ye don’ like it,” Hagrid called, lifting the cauldron of a kettle off the fire and decanting into a red clay teapot.

Setting his jaw, Draco carefully pushed the dog’s head away. Fang gave a disappointed sigh and relented, trotting over to sit at Hagrid’s feet.

“See? There ye go. Gentle hand, that’ll do it.” Hagrid scratched behind Fang’s ears, and Fang gave a world-weary *woof.* “Go on n’ have a seat. Cream an’ sugar?”

“Dash of cream and a squeeze of lemon,” he said automatically. “If it’s no trouble, thank you, Mister Hagrid.”

“Hagrid will do fine,” said Hagrid cheerfully. “No ‘mister’ for me. And you’re Draco, is tha’ right? Harry an’ Ron an’ Hermione’s friend.”

“Did they call me that, sir?” he said hopefully.

Hagrid snorted. “No,” he said. “Ron called ye a weaselly git in need of a spanking, and Harry said ye were an embarrassment to Gryffindor.”

Draco swallowed, dropping his chin.

“And I suppose Granger agreed with them,” he said.

“Nah. She *did* say ye were a ponce and hadn’t any more manners n’ Fang here, but she didn’ call you a disgrace.” Hagrid pushed Draco’s mug at him. “They’re jus’ mad at yeh. They’ll come aroun’ once you apologize.”

Draco looped the teabag string idly around his finger. “Right,” he said dully.

“Ye don’t believe me. Listen, I’ve been here for near fifty years, an’ there’ve been folks in here whingin’ about everythin’ under the sun. I mean name-callin’ an’ bullyin’ and catfights, even real fights, too, sometimes. They all come in here spittin’ mad, an’ you know, every

one of ’em swears that that’s it, they’ll never speak to each other again, this is the end times. Some kids I have in here every week, with that story.”

“Let me guess,” he drawled. “They all made up in the end.”

“Eh, not all of ’em,” said Hagrid frankly. “Some of ’em meant it. But those folks weren’ the ones who were angry, you understan’? Usually, the folks what meant it jus’ didn’ care enough to go back and make up. They’d come in and tell me, Hagrid, it’s over, an’ they wouldn’ even be sad about it. Because they’d been angry so long it didn’ matter to them no more. They’d wore themselves out, an’ jus’ wanted to stop cryin’ over it.”

Draco gripped the handle of his mug. “Thanks,” he said tightly. “That’s comforting. Thank you.”

“Don’ look so low, lad. I’m tellin’ ye, there’s a long way to go before tha’ happens, with Hermione and yeh.” Hagrid nudged a tray of rock cakes at him, and out of politeness, Draco took one. “She’s still spittin’ mad at yeh, don’ get me wrong, but she’s not done with yeh. When she was in here jus’ yesterday, cryin’ about it? Sayin’ how awful it hurt her feelings, what yeh did? Not done by a long shot.”

The thought of Hermione weeping at Hagrid’s table made him want to sink through the floor. He took a scalding hot sip of tea, and the burn was almost pleasant in comparison.

“So here’s what ye do,” Hagrid said cheerfully, tapping the table. “Yeh go back up there, an’ yeh do somethin’ real nice for her, to make it up. An’ yeh show her yer not done with her, either, an’ that you mean to be friends. An’ yeh try not to do nothin’ stupid again.” He eyed Draco sternly. “Because it was real stupid, what you said to her. An’ yeh know that, don’t yeh?”

“I know,” he said defensively. “I didn’t *mean* to.”

“A horrid thing to say at all. If we were back in my day, I’d have yer mouth scrubbed out wi’ lye for tha’.”

“We were already having a row at the time,” he muttered. “Did she tell you that? We were both yelling. It was tense.”

“And yer the only wizard on the planet what ever got mad, were yeh?” said Hagrid calmly, without judgment or ire. “Think yer the only one who ever wanted ter say something mean? Think Hermione weren’t mad, too? What’s the worst thing she said to yeh?”

Nothing cruel: the truth, mostly. He scowled. He took a bite of rock cake to avoid the question, and almost cracked his jaw.

Hagrid shook his head, setting his great shag of hair aquiver. “She tol’ me everythin’. An’ now I’m telling yeh: she’ll forgive ye, she wants to, but she can’ do that unless ye show her ye want tha’, too.”

“I don’t… I don’t know what to do.”

“Ye’ll think of something,” said Hagrid confidently. “Yer a creative lad. Hermione’s always goin’ on about how good yeh are in Potions. An’ a rich boy like yew can always get some flowers, if yeh run out of ideas. Yer father was orderin’ these massive deliveries o’ lilies an’ jasmines up the castle grounds, an’ I had to sign for ’em and haul ’em up for him ter collect…”

Draco sat up straighter. “You knew my father?”

“Lucius Malfoy? ’Course,” he crowed, leaning back in his chair. “He kept to himself, but he had a reputation aroun’ the castle. Tha’ whole year with yer parents in it, they all had reputations. Pompous git, if you ask me. No offense, o’course, he’s still yer dad. Jus’ reminded me too much of some other slimy folks I knew when I was in school.”

“You went to Hogwarts?”

He realized belatedly that his surprise was somewhat rude, and tried to appear innocent.

Hagrid grunted idly. “Long time ago,” he said.

“...You’re a *wizard?”*

“Aye. It’s a long story, an’ with due respect, Draco, we aren’ that close friends yet, you an’ me—”

“Yes, sir. I understand, sir. I didn’t mean to pry—”

“—but les’ jus’ say tha’ I tried to do somethin’ kind for another livin’ thing, and a lotta people at Hogwarts don’ take well to tha’ happenin’, ’specially when it’s somethin’ tha’ scares ’em.” He set his mug down hard, a faint scowl creasing his weathered face.

Draco’s brows furrowed. “...All right.”

Hagrid shook his head, lost in thought. “I still can’t barely wrap my head aroun’ it,” he muttered. “How much hate some people have in their hearts for jus’ about any livin’ thing.”

Draco, thinking of Fang’s massive bulk, wondered what size of ‘any living thing’ Hagrid had been trying to help.

A crawling sensation prickled his arm. He hissed, and smacked at the tiny spider that had been scaling his wrist.

“Don’ do that!” Hagrid barked, and Draco jumped, slamming his knee on the table. Hagrid hurried around and scooped the spider up, cradling it in his massive hands. “Don’ hurt the spiders,” he scolded, opening the window and tossing it out. “Yeh don’ have to like ’em, but yeh don’ have to hurt ’em, neither.” He sent Draco a severe look. “Especially this close to the Forest.”

“The Forest?” He wrinkled his nose. “What’s the Forest got to do with it?”

“Don’ ask,” Hagrid said darkly. “Jus’ do me a favor, and don’ go killing no more spiders. And if ye have ter, don’ do it near the Forest.”

“But it wasn’t a dangerous spider, it was just a little…”

“All the more reason yeh shouldn’!” Hagrid cried. “Never done you no harm, did it? An’ they’re not all of them that little, are they?”

“...I suppose not?”

The half-giant lumbered back to his seat. “Don’ mean to yell at ye,” he said apologetically. “But you jus’ remember what I said, alrigh’? About Hermione, and about the spiders.”

Draco blinked. “Yes, sir.”

“No *sir,”* Hagrid laughed, thumping him on the back. Draco heard one of his shoulder joints crack. “I ain’ yer professor. Jus’ a friend.”

This was the last of a series of surprising revelations in a thoroughly surprising conversation. He wasn’t sure it was accurate to call him Hagrid’s friend, especially since he’d spent most of the visit fearing that the man might accidentally sit on him.

Deaf to these doubts, Hagrid shrugged. “Hermione vouches for ye, when she’s not mad at yeh, and tha’s reason enough,” he said gruffly. “Yer a quiet one, an’ odd, to be sure, but she likes ye, and she’s not been wrong about anythin’ important yet. If ye ever need anythin’, ye jus’ come on down here and let me know.”

“Thank you,” said Draco, and surprised himself again by meaning it.

Then, forgetting his earlier lesson, he took another bite of rock cake and promptly lost a tooth.

He sat with Theo in Potions. This was his only option, as Neville — who usually worked by himself in the back — had started sitting next

to Hermione. But as soon as Snape put the recipe on the blackboard, Draco was out of his seat.

He had thought about what Hagrid had said. Thought for a while, all alone in Gryffindor Tower, while he stared at the page that was supposed to be his Transfiguration essay, and then, instead of writing the essay, he'd written down a list of things he could do.

The essay still didn't exist. That was fine. He'd ask Hermione for help, once she was talking to him again.

He stood by her desk with a tray full of lionfish spines and said, "Ahem."

Hermione didn't turn her head. Neville did, though, and said, "Oh. Um, hi, Draco. I don't think you're supposed to be over here."

"Hello, Long– Neville." When he practiced it in his head, Neville hadn't been there. That was fine, too. He'd adapt. "I don't want my seat back, don't worry. I just brought these over." He added, "To share."

"Oh!" Neville peered at them doubtfully. "Thank you? I suppose?"

Hermione finally looked up. She had tied back her hair for safety but some pieces always drifted free, and the cauldron's heat drew a flush to her face. She looked like a tired shopkeep dealing with an unpleasant customer. She looked at him like she'd rather be looking at any other face in the world.

He swallowed around something hard in his throat. "Here," he said, thrusting out the tray. He'd had words prepared, but they abandoned him under the cool pressure of her stare.

She said nothing.

"Lionfish spines," he explained. When she gave no sign of recognition, he added helpfully, "The recipe calls for them."

“I know the recipe calls for them.”

It was the first thing she’d said to him in over a week. It was a very sad, very small kind of relief that warmed him; perhaps some part of him had worried that she truly couldn’t see him anymore.

“Well, you can have these,” he said. He set them down, somewhat lamely, on the edge of her desk.

“For what.”

“For… for what? For the potion.”

“What do you want,” she said flatly, “in exchange for them.”

“Nothing,” he said quickly. “They’re for you. You don’t like butchery, so I did them.”

Hermione lifted her chin. “Neville?” she said.

“Yes?”

“Can you get me a fish knife? It should be the small one.”

Neville did so, despite his confusion, for the not insufficient reason that Hermione Granger told him to.

“Just use these,” Draco said, with an edge. “I already did them all for you. They’re perfect.”

“That’s great. I’m sure they are. And the lionfish, please, Neville? I’m going to need three of them.”

“Look, there’s no strings here. It’s a present. Take them.”

“How generous.”

“I didn’t mean — see here! Would you *look* at me? Please? I’m trying to say—”

“Professor Snape,” said Hermione, lifting her hand.

Draco flinched. He leaned in and hissed, “What are you doing?”

She met his eyes and didn’t blink. “Professor? Malfoy is out of his seat. He’s bothering me.”

Snape sighed, closing the book on his lectern. “Mister Malfoy, please find your table.”

“In a moment, professor,” he said. He searched her eyes, but there was nothing there except frostburn-worthy scorn.

“You mistake me, Mister Malfoy, that was not a suggestion. Relocate, or I will have no choice but to take points.”

“Sit down,” said Hermione coolly. “Or you’ll lose points for Gryffindor.”

“I couldn’t give a rat’s arse about *Gryffindor—”*

“Yes, you’ve made that very clear!”

“Five points, Mister Malfoy,” called Snape, amid a rustle of groans from the Gryffindor side of the room. “Tarry further, and I will double the sum.”

He went back to his seat.

Still stirring their own cauldron, Theo gave a low whistle. “What crawled up her— ow!”

Draco had pulled out his chair, and in an entirely unavoidable accident, had clipped Theo’s ankle with the leg. “Sorry,” he said blandly, and sat down.

When class was over, Hermione left nearly at a run. Harry, who had not been sitting close enough to overhear anything about lionfish spines, shot a dark look at Malfoy, and ran after her.

“Draco,” called Snape. “A word.”

Theo slapped his shoulder sympathetically and shuffled out the door with the last of the Slytherins, leaving Draco alone with Snape.

The classroom was empty save for the burble of dying cauldrons and the creak of floorboards overhead. Snape presided over a bubbling cauldron at the teacher’s desk, the steam from which was effervescent green. He emptied the contents of a small vial into the cauldron, which turned the steam purple.

Draco shoved his hands deep in his pockets and waited.

Snape did not look at him; he continued to prepare the potion, corking and uncorking vials with such speed it seemed random to the untrained eye. “You have changed your seat partner.”

“I guess so.”

“The year is soon over. You have chosen an unusual time.”

“Wasn’t my choice. Sir.”

Snape nodded, as if this did not surprise him. “You have fallen out with Miss Granger.”

Draco set his jaw.

“Am I incorrect?”

“No,” he gritted. “Sir.”

“On her account, and not yours.”

“There were extenuating circumstances,” said Draco, inspecting the floor between his shoes.

“Are the differences irreconcilable?” Snape cracked a bundle of twigs in half. “Understand that I do not ask out of any degree of interest in

your personal affairs. I ask because it has twice now interfered with my class, and if you are not capable of conducting yourself civilly with Miss Granger, I will have her moved to the back of the room, and out of your line of sight."

"Don't do that. She didn't — that's not fair."

"Not fair? Why, to whom? Is Miss Granger's eyesight so terrible she must sit in front, or call it punishment?"

Snape understood perfectly well, of course, how Hermione would react to being moved to the back of the classroom, and the humiliation it would bring her. For what it was worth, Draco doubted very much that the threat was genuine; this was Snape's roundabout and somewhat slimy way of commanding him to set his house in order.

Draco rubbed his eyes until colors spun in front of his eyelids, and dragged his hand down his face.

"I called her a mudblood," he said. He was aware of how miserable he sounded, but his pride had taken such a beating already that he didn't care.

When Snape said nothing, he lifted his hands from his face. The Potions Master had stopped brewing. His hands rested in fists on the desk.

"Professor…?"

"That is a foul word," he said coldly. "Its use is not tolerated on Hogwarts grounds."

He blinked. "I know. I've been through—"

"Did you mean to use it?"

"No," he spluttered. "I didn't… I mean, I said it, but it wasn't… I didn't think. My mum uses it. I hear it at home all the time."

“You didn’t think?” Snape’s tone hovered near absolute zero. “You called your friend the foulest word that lies within your arsenal to describe her, and you did it thoughtlessly.”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I knew—”

“What it meant?”

“I meant muggle-born!” he shouted. “I *wanted* to say muggle-born. I don’t know why I said — the other thing. And I don’t need *you* to stand there and tell me it was a mistake, because I’ve spent the past two weeks getting treated like dirt by everyone, including Granger, and I can’t even *be* angry because I don’t have the right! And I know what she’d say, which is stop whinging, you’re not the victim, but actually I think I am, for once, because at least Granger’s got all her friends to be nice to her! Nobody gave *me* two chances!”

He kicked a table leg. Its cauldron rattled spitefully right back.

“It astounds me that it has not occurred to you,” said Snape quietly, “piddling as your faculties of comprehension may be, that this is your second chance.”

“What?”

He killed the burner. The cauldron gurgled to a still.

He spoke haltingly: “I had a friend, once.”

“Merlin,” Draco said, alarmed.

Snape glared.

“Right, sir. Sorry. Go on.”

“I had a friend,” he repeated. “And that… person… was lost to me, not entirely, but in no small part… because of a grave and singular mistake. And that, like yours, involved… a word that could not be taken back.”

“You mean m—?”

“There is no need for you to say it,” snarled Snape. “Now or ever.”

He paused, trying to show that he was taking the advice to heart. And he was: he didn’t want to say it, didn’t like the way it felt on his tongue. He couldn’t even think it anymore without Hermione’s face popping up in his mind’s eye, bright-eyed and agonied. “Y-Yes, sir. Sorry. But what happened to them? Your… friend?”

Snape shook his head.

“That’s it?” Draco said, chilled. “You just… they didn’t forgive you?” Incredulously, he added, “Ever?”

Snape drew his wand. Draco instinctively stepped back, although he realized belatedly how silly this was.

The Potions Master swept it over the scrapped cauldron, and the potion inside it disappeared.

“It does not matter.”

“What do you mean? Balderdash, of course it does.”

“I mean the point is moot,” said Snape icily. “Desist in asking; I have told you this for the purposes of instruction, not to subject myself to juvenile interrogation.”

“Instruction! What instruction? You haven’t told me what to do!”

“I have told you precisely what to do. If you are too thick to see it, that is your trial to face.” He flicked his wand at the door, and it swung open. “You may leave.”

“Oh, great. Thanks, Uncle Severus,” muttered Draco. “I’ll just go, then.” He stomped up the aisle, making a point of knocking over every cauldron he could reach.

“Draco.”

“What?”

Snape had not moved from the spot, and was turning his wand over in his hand. He closed his eyes, and spoke as if each letter were being carved into his flesh.

“It is not… the word itself… which requires apology,” he said. “That was… the mistake.”

Draco frowned. “Okay,” he said.

He wasn’t being facetious. He was trying to understand, he really was. But whatever Snape meant to convey, it had slid right over Draco’s head, because as he left the dungeon, he felt worse, not better, than he had before Snape said anything.

“Neville.”

“Mm-hm? Oh. Uh, I don’t think I’m supposed to t-t-talk to you.”

“You’re still passing Potions because of me.”

“...Fair. What d-do you need?”

“Is there a secret way into the greenhouses?”

“Yeah, ’course. You come through the d-dungeons and behind the portrait of B-B-Bambi the Tenebrous. Pops you up under the l-l-loose flagstone by the Venomous Ten— wait! Where are you g-going?”

The loose flagstone was somewhat heavier than Neville had implied, but a well-placed *Wingardium Leviosa* put paid to that. Draco hoisted himself into the plant nursery and rose, brushing loose dirt and cobwebs from his robes with a displeased twitch of his lip.

The sun was still an inquisitive firefly on the far side of the forest. Crickets purred in the warm silence of the greenhouse, and a spiky plant with thorny tendrils waved one coil curiously at him. He gave it a wide berth. A long tray of mandrakes were making a rather lot of noise, for plants, and their planter was shuddering with the force of movement happening within it. He gave this, too, a wide berth.

Professor Sprout grew flowers in the corner of the nursery. Most of them were used for brewing, and some for the kitchens. The pale flutes of a few dozen lilies sprouted from a small bush, and Draco severed these with a muttered *“Diffindo.”* He wrapped them in a bit of red ribbon he’d filched from Parvati’s sewing kit and examined them. The bulbs were perfect, shock-white bells, so pale the morning light turned them translucent. They were lovely, but just didn’t feel like quite the thing, somehow.

He pointed his wand. *“Flositerum tagetes.”*

The white bells withered away, and in their place erupted a dozen thick knots of gold petals, suffused with red at the heart. Draco was pleased: the marigolds barely retained any of the lilies’ shape. McGonagall would have been proud.

He cast a clumsy Notice-Me-Not Charm and headed back up to the castle. The library opened at six o’clock on Saturdays, which meant one could reliably find Hermione Granger at the door by six fifteen. The chances of anyone else appearing there so early — especially on the morning of the last quidditch match, when some students were camping in the stands to save seats — were slim enough that he could count on a measure of privacy.

There was a piece of paper in his pocket. He’d written down what he wanted to say. He’d been careful. He hadn’t had much luck coming up with things to say in person, so preparation seemed appropriate. It was like a cheat sheet for an exam. Hermione would appreciate the comparison, he thought. She didn’t find people easy, either. He’d rarely seen her apologize to someone for hurting their feelings; surely she’d appreciate how hard it was to do.

Then again, maybe she wouldn't. But he didn't dwell on that. He didn't really know what he'd do if this didn't work.

He found her favorite table. It was a wooden round in the back of the Transfiguration section, settled under a great east-facing window that filled the room with clear blue light as the sun rose, and sandwiched between thick stacks of old leather books that other students rarely, if ever, attempted to explore. It was quiet, and smelled of old pages, dust, vellum, the velvety scent of libraries. He sat in Hermione's usual seat, put the marigolds on the table, and waited.

Six fifteen came and went. So did six thirty, and seven, and at seven fifteen, he stood up, needled by worry. It was impossible that she'd slept in. Perhaps something had happened? Had she seen him coming in, and left to avoid him? That seemed uncharacteristically dramatic. Hermione wouldn't let a quarrel interfere with her study habits.

He left the library. In the hallway off the library antechamber, he ran into Theodore Nott, who was stepping out of a dark classroom.

"Morning, Draco," he called, tossing off a wave. "Early to be up, isn't it?"

Draco eyed him warily. "I could say the same of you. Shouldn't you be down at the pitch?"

"Who are you, Flint?" said Theo humorously. "No, I'll go down in a moment, I'm just looking for Pansy." He tapped the doorknob behind him with his wand and said, *"Colloportus."*

The lock clicked into place.

"Why?"

"She promised to watch the game. Can't find her, though. Are you going?" He leaned against the wall, twirling his wand through his

fingers. “You’ll regret missing it. I’m thinking of punting a bludger through your seeker’s kneecap.”

“I’ve an errand,” Draco said stiffly. “I’ll come if I can.”

“Sure. You can sit in the Slytherin stands if you want, Daphne will appreciate the company. Just don’t wear your scarf, you might get punched.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Theo straightened and chopped a jaunty salute. “ *Au revoir,* mon petit *transfuge.* See you later, then.”

“Fais gaffe à ta gueule, crétin,” he said, and enjoyed the way Theo’s eyebrows hopped all the way up to his hairline. As if it was bloody hard to learn French. “And I’m less worried about Potter’s kneecaps than Higgs’s eyes. Let me know how it feels to lose to a seeker in glasses, will you?”

He gave Theo a hard clap on the shoulder and strode out of the corridor.

The Gryffindor common room was empty, as was much of Gryffindor Tower; by eight o’clock, most people had flocked down to breakfast, or ventured out to procure seats. Even those uninterested quidditch had turned out at the prospect of winning the Cup. The only one left in the Tower was Lavender.

She emerged, red-nosed and swaddled in blankets, after he hollered himself hoarse for her at the foot of the stairs.

“Quit that yelling,” she sniffled, peering balefully down the staircase. “What do you want?” When she saw the flowers, she brightened slightly. “Are those for me?”

“Don’t be daft. Is Granger up there?”

Lavender scowled and blew her nose. “No,” she said thickly. “She left early, like always. It’s rather hateful, if you ask me. She always wakes me up…”

“Did she say where she was going?”

“How should *I* know?” shrilled Lavender. *“I* was trying to sleep.” She dabbed at her nose, and then added, “You might try the library.”

“I did. She’s not there.” His foot bounced.

“Well, golly, Malfoy, let me pull out my crystal ball and check,” she said irritably. “It’s none of *my* concern where she goes… Maybe she’s at the game, I know she’s friends with Harry. Besides, everybody’s there.” She groaned. “I *so* wanted to watch… it’ll be the last chance to see Wood play, and he’s so fit…”

“That’s enough. If she comes back, will you tell her I’m looking for her?”

Lavender blinked, rubbing a bit of sleep from her eye. “I suppose,” she sulked. “Not sure I should, though. Everyone says you were really awful to her.”

He snapped, “And I can’t very well make up for it if I can’t find the damn witch, can I?”

“Oooh, fine! I’ll help. But only because I’ve been trapped up here for days, and I’m bored to death.” She blew her nose again, pointedly.

He felt an unanticipated twinge of pity. “Doesn’t Pomfrey have anything for you?” he demanded. “You sound heinous.”

“I went and asked, but she gave out all her Pepper-Up, and she’s been so busy with Leanne and Colin she hasn’t made any more.”

“Why don’t you just brew it yourself?”

“Because it’s hard! And I hate potions! And I’m sick!” She gave a honking cough, for emphasis. Miserable as she was, he narrowly managed not to laugh at her.

“Good lord, this House is hopeless. Fine. You can have some of mine, but only if you promise to stop whinging.”

“Really? I can?”

“And if you tell Granger I’m looking for her.”

“Okay!” chirped Lavender, beaming. Her attitude improved instantaneously. “Is there anything you’d like me to say?”

“Tell her to meet me by the quidditch pitch,” he called, crossing to the portrait door. “And to hurry.”

The sun had risen cold and clear in a watery sky, and spring winds carried the scent of pollen on the breeze. The stands shuddered in tumultuous applause, and as he descended the lawn, his heel crunched on a paper-mache finger in red and gold, with ‘GO GRYFFINDOR’ printed on the bottom. He had just crossed the shadow of the stands when Professor McGonagall came striding out of the pitch, her robes billowing in haste. He had never seen her move so quickly.

“Professor—?”

“The match is canceled.”

“What?”

On cue, a cacophony of boos and shouts arose from the stands. He could hear Madam Hooch squawking through her megaphone as she tried to quell the school’s dismay.

He started after Professor McGonagall, who was scaling the hill at a breakneck speed for someone in ankle-length skirts.

“Professor, why—”

“All students are to make their way back to the House common rooms, where their Heads of House will give them further information. As quickly as you can, please.”

“You’re my Head of House,” he reminded her, bewildered.

She slowed, and the fact of who he was seemed to finally register. “Malfoy,” she said. “There you are. You… hm.” She pursed her lips, and after a moment of thought, she jerked her head. “No. You may as well come along.”

“What? Where?”

“I sent Potter and Weasley ahead. You’ll see.”

He followed her back into the school. His heart started a terrible drumroll against his ribs.

The halls near the infirmary were preternaturally empty, because of the match, and he could hear his own pulse in his ears.

McGonagall swept her wand at the doors, and they burst into the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey was bending over a fifth year girl in hijab, and Draco drowned in guilty relief, until he saw the bed next to her.

Harry and Ron were already there, clustered at the bedside of a second-year girl whose face was buried in her nest of brown curls. She was frozen stiff, with one hand braced aloft, as if shielding herself.

Ron looked up when Draco and McGonagall came in. Harry didn’t lift his gaze from the body, his expression glassy with fear and grief.

“Malfoy,” he began hoarsely. “Where’ve you been? It’s—”

Draco shoved him aside and lurched over the bedside, reeling with nausea. The flowers scattered to the floor, forgotten.

For Hermione stared sightlessly at the infirmary ceiling, her mouth parted in a perfect ‘O’ of surprise.

NEXT CHAPTER: 10/17/2022

The Election

Chapter 16: The Election

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“They were found near the library,” said McGonagall. “I don’t suppose either of you know what they were doing there? Or if they were meeting someone?”

“Near the library?” Draco repeated faintly.

“Filch discovered them in an empty classroom. Whoever paralyzed them had hidden them behind a locked door.”

A wave of dizziness struck, so strong Draco swayed back from the bed.

A locked door.

Wish whoever did it would come out and say, even just to other Slytherins… I think we’d all like to buy him a drink…

“Hermione always goes to the library on Saturdays,” said Harry quietly. “I don’t think she was meeting anyone.”

Theo, hoisting his goblet skyward with an insufferable smirk, as if he had a secret worth toasting… *To our faceless friend…*

“She must’ve been there for hours,” Ron mumbled. “Poor Mione…”

You notice how nothing here stinks of muggle?

“I will escort you back to Gryffindor Tower,” said McGonagall heavily. “I need to address the students, in any case.”

Draco spun on his heel and took off at a sprint for the infirmary doors.

“Mister Malfoy!” cried McGonagall in alarm. “What are you doing?”

“Malfoy!”

“Hey, wait!”

He slammed into the doors, and they burst open. Footsteps scuffled on the stone behind him: Harry and Ron were following.

“Draco!” shouted Harry. Draco ignored him and thundered down the stairs, three at a time, his feet almost flying over the steps. “Where are you going?”

“I know who it is.”

“What?” demanded Ron. They stumbled after him, feet scrabbling on the stone. Harry was still wearing his quidditch robes, and Ron had red war paint smeared all over his cheeks. “Who?”

“Theodore Nott.”

“That maggot!” snarled Ron. Then: “Who is Theodore Nott?”

“Yeah, who?”

“Slytherin,” Draco spat, rounding the banister and plunging into the dungeons. “Pureblood as they come. Sacred Twenty-Eight, which means, for reference, Potter, his blood’s nearly blue as mine. Blood purist, naturally.”

“Naturally,” echoed Harry. “But he’s — he’s a student? Like us?”

“Temporarily, seeing he’s about to be *dead,”* snarled Draco. Ron grunted in approval.

“Yes, but,” panted Harry, as they dashed down some stairs, “how’d he do it? Madam Pomfrey said it was a — a complex spell—”

“He’d find a way. He could ask his father for help, he’s a former Death Eater.”

“You say that like yours wasn’t,” Harry said, not unfairly.

“Yes, but mine’s six feet underground, so he’s not exactly a reservoir of paternal advice!”

“He’s talking sense,” agreed Ron. “I mean, check the boxes, Harry. Slytherin? Pureblood? Son of a Death Eater?”

“That’s not a *reason,* though,” Harry said incredulously, “that’s just, like — I’m as angry about Hermione as you are, mate, but you’re describing half of Slytherin House.”

“I saw him this morning,” said Draco. “Early. He said he was looking for Pansy — in the *library,* on a *Saturday morning,* of all places — God, someone should have me put down for idiocy, I’m as bad any other Gryffindor—”

“Oi! That’s Hermione you’re talking about!”

“Almost any other Gryffindor.”

The Slytherins were still trickling in from the match, a dispirited troupe of green and silver. Draco spotted Theo’s quidditch robes at the tail of the line, chatting idly with Daphne and Pansy.

He found his wand already in his hand.

“NOTT!”

Theo turned around. “Draco!” he said, breaking into a smile. “Did you hear about it? The election? Tell me you didn’t come running down here just to celebrate, you know we would’ve invited you to the party —”

“FLIPENDO!”

He went sailing into the wall, and his head cracked against the stone.

“THEO!” Pansy screamed. She dashed to his side and fell to her knees, cradling his head.

“Blimey,” mumbled Ron.

The Slytherins broke into shrieks and surged away, clearing a path for Draco’s approach. His pulse thundered in his ears.

“Get away from him,” he ordered Pansy.

“You *shit!* ” She glowered up at him, her face knotted in loathing. Theo stirred in her arms, groaning. “You could have *killed* him!”

“Move,” he said, pointing his wand at Theo.

“What the hell, Draco?” Daphne demanded. She seized his arm, and he shrugged her off forcefully. “What was that for?”

“Nothing he didn’t earn.”

“What are you talking about?” Theo shouted blearily, struggling to sit up. Pansy made a noise of distress and forced him back down. “I haven’t done anything!”

“This is for Hermione, you tosser,” said Ron grimly, adding his wand beside Draco’s.

“Granger?” Theo repeated, dumbfounded. “What’s her problem with me?”

“Don’t play dumb!” roared Ron. He shoved his wand so close that it almost poked Theo between the eyes.

Theo threw up his hands. “I swear I’m not playing,” he said smoothly, darting a nervous glance at Draco. “Really. Just dumb.”

“Hermione’s in the Hospital Wing,” said Harry quietly. He’d taken out his wand, but hadn’t pointed it at anyone yet. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

Theo’s mouth fell open. “No,” he breathed. “Granger? I had no idea. Is that why they canceled the match?”

“Oh, ‘is that why’? Don’t be cute,” sneered Draco.

“He’s not,” said Daphne calmly. “They didn’t tell us anything. Hooch said to go to the common room, and the Head of House would explain after that.”

“There was another attack,” Harry told her. “Two. Hermione, and a fifth year Ravenclaw.”

“They were found near the library,” said Draco, and watched in satisfaction as Theo’s face went rigid with shock.

“That’s a shame,” said Daphne, still calm. “We guessed it was an attack, but we didn’t know who it was. I swear.” She pointed. “Theo’s been at the quidditch pitch all day, Draco. It couldn’t have been him.”

“He wasn’t, though,” said Draco. “I saw you at the library this morning.”

“And I told you, I was looking for Pansy,” Theo said patiently.

“Yeah? Looks like you found her pretty easily.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say. Yes, I did find her. She was in the loo. No, I didn’t paralyze Granger.”

“Why should I believe that?”

He spluttered, “Why? Why should you — because it’s none of my business. And it’d be bad form.”

“Bad form?” repeated Ron furiously. “That’s your problem with it? It’d be impolite?”

“I know it’s not of much importance to you, Weasley,” sneered Theo, “but some of us take pride in our manners—”

“She’s a *human being,* and you’re worried about hurting her because it’d make another PUREBLOOD SAD?”

Ron was roaring. On each of the last three syllables, he poked his wand sharply into the soft part of Theo’s neck. Theo gave a yelp — more of surprise than pain, Draco thought — and Pansy let out a scream like a ferret, and threw herself at Ron.

“Expelliarmus!” shouted Harry, and a jet of red light knocked Pansy to the ground. Her wand sprang out of her hand and clattered to the floor, inert.

“Pans!” Theo surged to his feet, wobbling slightly, and slid his wand from his pocket. It twirled through his fingers while he stared down Harry, expression dark. “You’ll regret that, Potter.”

“Not before you do,” snarled Ron. *“Petrificus tot–”*

“Petrificus totalus!”

Theo’s jinx barely missed Ron’s chest, as he jerked out of the way. He rounded on Harry. *“Reducto,”* he snarled, slashing his wand and Harry hit the floor, just in time for a red curse to sail over his head and shatter a huge crater in the dungeon wall behind him.

Daphne jumped in front of Pansy, wand outstretched. “Stop it!” she cried. “Stop it, stop it, stop it! Draco! Make them stop!”

“Expelliarmus!” shouted Harry again, and Theo threw up a sloppy Shield Charm that did not absorb the spell so much as refract it — it

bounced off the shimmering curtain and struck Ron, whose wand sailed to join Pansy's on the floor. But now Theo's back was turned on Draco.

"Petrificus," Draco spat, and the spell caught Theo's wand-arm, which locked stiff as a board.

Theo swore foully, and tried to pry his wand from the newly-formed vise of his fingers.

"Expelliarmus," Draco added, and Theo's wand flew free, only for Harry to snatch it neatly out of the air. Draco advanced, twitching up the sleeve of his wand-hand, and with a coil of anger burning his gut, he put his wand to Theo's temple.

"Draco," said Theo, with a trembling veneer of calm. "Let's be reasonable about this."

"Give me one good reason my next word shouldn't be the Reductor Curse."

"Draco," said Harry sharply. "No. Hang on. What?"

"Butt out, Potter."

"We're not going to *kill people!"*

"Give me a moment, I'll get back to you." He ground his wand-tip into Theo's temple.

"Hermione wouldn't want you to," Harry said. "She'd stop you."

"Hermione is in the Hospital Wing because of this bit of venomous slime," Draco snarled, "and for that reason, she's not here to stop me, so it'll be his own fault, won't it?"

"Venomous slime?" said Theo weakly. "And to think I invited you to my Christmas party."

“When I make it to ‘one,’” said Draco, “the next word will be *Reducto.* Five. Four—”

Pansy screamed. Daphne had to throw herself in the way to prevent the smaller girl from leaping at Draco. *“NO!”* she screamed. “TEDDY! Malfoy, stop it, you — you vile, loathsome — muggle-loving blood traitor!”

It was remarkably easy to ignore being called a blood traitor; Draco marveled at how something that would have devastated him just a year ago now seemed to have no effect at all. “Three,” he reminded Theo coldly. “Two.”

Theo laced his fingers over his head, cracking his knuckles anxiously. “Because it’s a nightmare to get brains out of silk,” he suggested. “Especially when one’s threatening to spill quite so much.”

“Nott.”

“Merlin, I thought you had a sense of humor. All right, one good reason. See, I’ve only got the one, but you don’t want to hear it,” he said, with false levity. “I didn’t do it. The thing you’re angry about. It wasn’t me.”

“My next word, Nott, if you think I won’t then you don’t know me—”

“STOP!” Pansy screamed, writhing Daphne’s arms. “Stop it! It wasn’t him, I swear, *please* — don’t kill him!” She added, in a wail: “Granger’s not even dead! None of them are!”

“What, that’s your winning argument?” said Ron acidly. “No harm done, she’s only comatose?”

“No! Paralyzed, only paralyzed! He promised!”

Draco lowered his wand.

“He promised?” he repeated slowly.

“Yes!” Pansy slumped in Daphne’s arms, sobbing. “He — he — I didn’t, I couldn’t, so — but he said, he promised, and they *didn’t* die, they’ll be fine, so— so—”

“Pans?” Theo’s voice was thin with disbelief. “What are you talking about?”

She shook her head violently. “I didn’t,” she sobbed. “I wouldn’t. He wanted me to — but I wouldn’t! He took me and said, he said, it would — it would be funny, and — to get D-D-Dumbledore in trouble, you s-s-see, and — but he wanted me to use the Killing Curse but I couldn’t, I tried to do it first but I couldn’t, so I used *Rictosempra major* instead—”

“It was you?” Ron said hoarsely.

She ignored him. “A-a-and then I wanted to s-s-stop,” she wailed. “Because I got s-scared when I s-saw her in the Hospital Wi-i-ing, and everybody said the person who d-d-d-did it would go to Azkaban, and I *can’t* go to Azkaban, I just can’t, I’m only eleven! But I told him, and he s-s-said now I’d done it once I had to d-d-do it again, I c-couldn’t back out or he’d tell Dumbledo-o-o-re—” She broke into a howl, and Daphne hauled her into an embrace, cradling Pansy’s head against her chest.

“Shush,” cooed Daphne. Her cheeks shone with tears. “Shush-a-shush, Pansy, it’s okay. You’re alright. It wasn’t your fault.”

Theo looked murderous. He said, “Someone forced you?”

“Mm-hm,” moaned Pansy. “He said if I told anyone he’d fail me, and I can’t fail, or my parents will be s-so angry.”

“Which professor?”

“N-n-n.” She shook her head, her pigtails flying.

“Which professor, Pansy.”

“It was Podmore,” Draco said suddenly. Pansy flinched. “I’m right, aren’t I? It’s Podmore. That’s why you wanted me to walk you to Defense.”

“You *mustn’t* tell anyone,” she whispered.

Theo looked at Draco. Then he looked at Harry, then Ron.

“Truce?” he said.

Harry nodded. “Truce,” he agreed. He tossed Theo his wand, and he caught it. “But what are we going to d—”

Wordlessly, Theo strode from the corridor. His green robes snapped sharply in his wake.

“Teddy?” called Pansy in alarm. “Where are you going? Come back!”

“Podmore,” Harry groaned. He raked a hand through his hair. “We’ve got to — yeah, no, we’ve got to help.” He broke into a jog after him.

“Merlin,” muttered Ron, retrieving his wand from the floor. “Here we go again. Can we maybe take a minute to think about it, this time, before we go charging off—?”

“He’s going to need us,” shouted Harry. “He can’t duel a professor alone.”

“Technically he can,” Draco muttered. “What he can’t do is win. Now, I, for one, can see myself coming to terms with—”

“It took four of us to beat Quirrell!” Harry climbed the stairs two at a time, disappearing. “Come on!”

“Quirrell?” repeated Daphne. *“Beat* him? Is that — is that why he left?” She gaped at Ron. “Did you kill our Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor?”

“Don’t worry, he was actually You-Know-Who in a trenchcoat,” Ron assured her. “But we didn’t kill him. I just hit him with a sword, and then Harry turned him to dust.” He paused. “Actually, now you mention it, we might have done.”

“What the hell? Draco, he’s joking, right?”

But Draco was running after Harry, because he was right: it had taken four of them, and he didn’t particularly want Theo dead, either, now he knew he hadn’t hurt Hermione after all. Ron, swearing in exasperation, soon followed him.

“Idiots!” Daphne shouted, still cradling Pansy. “Where are you going?”

The answer was Podmore’s office. They rocketed into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, and found it empty save for a sixth year Ravenclaw boy with cornrows, who Draco recognized as Podmore’s TA, grading papers in the corner.

“Where’s Podmore?”

The Ravenclaw blinked at Theo. “I don’t usually answer questions put to me in that tone.”

“It’s about the recent attacks,” said Draco smoothly, stepping in front of Theo, in the hopes of hiding the other boy’s homicidal grip on his wand. “We have urgent news.”

“Well, if it’s urgent,” said the Ravenclaw doubtfully. “He went down to the greenhouses to harvest mandrakes. The Restorative Draught should be ready soon… good Lord, what’s all the hurry about?”

Theo was out at the word ‘greenhouses,’ and Harry only a heartbeat after him.

Ron sighed. “Thanks, mate,” he said to the Ravenclaw, and then he and Draco followed.

Running down from the D.A.D.A. classroom to the greenhouses took less time than usual, because Theo only touched every third or fourth stair. On the last flight, he hopped onto the banister and rode it sidesaddle down to the Great Hall, then thrust open the oak front doors with a blast from his wand, and surged out onto the sun-bleached lawns.

“You know,” said Ron to Draco, as they brought up the rear, “if we could get Nott to wait, we might be able to go get McGonagall, or Dumbledore.”

“Great idea,” said Draco under his breath, winded from running. “You go fetch him and say so.”

The chances of this were slim: both he and Harry, well-conditioned from quidditch, easily outpaced Draco and Ron on the race down the lawns.

They reached the greenhouses, the door to which hung open. Inside, flames flickered bright and shimmery through the frosted glass.

“The mandrakes,” Ron said, horrified. He skidded to a halt at the bottom of the hill, as did Draco and Theo. Only Harry, upon seeing the fire, continued to charge: without pausing, he shucked the top piece of his quidditch robe, tossed it aside, and charged into the burning greenhouse.

“HARRY!” Ron bellowed. “ARE YOU MAD?”

For a moment, there was nothing, no sound, just the crackle of flames ravaging the flora.

Then Harry staggered back out the doors, carrying a heavy terracotta planter in each hand. The leafy follicles of the mandrake plant protruded, singed but whole, from the top of each planter. His face was stony from effort: he was a small boy, and each planter was about half his size.

Ignoring Ron’s cry of relief, Harry dropped these, wiped some ash from his forehead with the back of his hand, and plunged back into the greenhouse.

“Merlin,” Draco snapped. “Perfect *fool* of a Gryffindor. Get out of my way.”

He shoved Ron aside and strode after Harry.

It was boiling hot inside the greenhouse, and flames danced everywhere, walls of fire, singing the glass. The air tasted of ash and soot and dead leaves, and he could barely see through the billows of smoke that foamed from every planter. Draco threw his sleeve over his nose, breathed shallow, and shouted: *“Aguamenti!”*

Water poured from his wand, in a wide jet, like a hose. He swept it over the flames, and where the twin jets met, great plumes of smoke erupted like the breath of a volcanic eruption. He put out a ring of fire around the mandrakes, and then moved the jet over to a crop of pygmy trees whose branches had turned black from soot. But it wasn’t enough: no matter how much water he poured, the fire was still greater, burned higher, and billowed more smoke that made it hard to breathe.

Harry seized his shoulder. “It’s no use,” he shouted. “It’s not enough. We’ve got to carry them out.”

“But the smoke—” He broke off, coughing.

“I know! We’ve just got to be fast!”

“I can’t carry—”

“You can! You have to!”

He began to explain that it didn’t matter, and that the mandrakes would burn to death before they managed to evacuate them all. But at that moment, a muffled voice cried, *“Reducto!”*

The front wall of the greenhouse exploded, and a million glass shards fell like raindrops to the floor.

Smoke unfurled from the greenhouse and poured into the afternoon sky, staining the clouds black. Immediately it became easier to breathe. Draco dropped to his knees, gasping, as he raked fresh air into his lungs for the first time in what felt like days.

Theo stood with wand outstretched, a triumphant expression on his face. “God,” he said, “I *love* that spell.”

“It’s aces,” Ron agreed. “Here’s my favorite. *Wingardium Leviosa.”*

And with a swish-and-flick that would have brought tears to Hermione’s eyes, he levitated the largest mandrake planter from the burning wreckage of the greenhouse, lifting it high over their heads, and depositing it safely in the lee of Hagrid’s cabin.

Harry laughed, part relief, part delight. “Thanks,” he called to Theo.

“Don’t mention it, Potter.” Theo, breathing heavily, lowered his wand. “Your friends are barmy,” he said to Draco. “Properly mad.”

“Takes one to know one, Nott,” he said, dabbing sweat from his forehead discreetly.

“That is the weakest of all possible comebacks, and the only reason I can’t do better is I’m still flustered from saving your skin.”

“HARRY? WHAT THE HELL DID YEH DO TO THE GREENHOUSE?”

Hagrid had heard the commotion, and came hurrying out of his hut. He held the largest, frilliest, most hideous pink umbrella Draco had ever seen, and was wielding it like a poker.

“There was a fire,” said Harry, unnecessarily. “We fixed it. Hagrid, it’s urgent. Did you see Professor Podmore come by here?”

“Podmore?” Hagrid was distracted, and stricken, by the site of the charred greenhouse. Draco sympathized immensely. “He came by jus’ a minute ago ter harvest some o’ the mandrakes. Wha’ happened ter you lot?”

“Never mind that. Where did he go?”

“He wen’ into the forest,” Hagrid said, looked wildly between them. “Said he had ter get another ingredient fer Snape. I — oi, you there! Where d’you think yer goin’, lad?”

Theo had plunged down the path into the forest. Ron moaned in exasperation.

“Hagrid, Podmore’s behind the attacks,” Harry said urgently. “You have to get McGonagall. Get Dumbledore. Tell them Podmore set the greenhouses on fire and went into the forest.”

“Tell him to ask Pansy Parkinson,” Draco interrupted. “Ask her about it. She’ll tell you.”

“All righ’, but — Harry! Where are ye goin’?”

Harry had sprinted into the forest.

“Theodore Nott’s going after him alone,” said Ron, “and Harry’s got a complex about these kinds of things. Unfortunately, so do I. See you, Hagrid,” and with a sigh, he took off after Harry.

Draco had never been this deep into the forest before. He could vividly remember Dumbledore telling the first years not to cross the forest threshold at the Opening Feast, a warning he’d always taken gladly and without reinforcement. But now, with the castle far behind them, and nothing but the sourceless rustling of invisible creatures in the thick foliage around them, did he realize how *big* it was. They had been hurrying along the path for almost fifteen minutes, wordless in their haste, and he had no idea how far they’d gone from the greenhouses, or how much path was left ahead. The woods

stretched out for miles beyond the Hogwarts grounds, he knew; if they kept going, they might very well be there forever.

The path shrank, and they had to clamber over fallen logs and tree stumps, ringed in the teeth marks from some giant pair of jaws. Spiderwebs clustered thickly in the foliage, and Ron walked into one without paying attention, yelping and swatting it away.

“Careful,” hissed Draco. He cleared the cobwebs from Ron’s shoulders with a quick Scouring Charm and brushed him off. “Don’t go flailing about, you’ll bring the whole forest down on us.”

“I *hate* spiders.”

“I’m not in love with them, either, but keep your voice down.”

“Will you lot keep up?” Theo’s voice wafted out of the darkness, irritated.

Draco exchanged a foreboding glance with Ron and re-lit his wand.

A clearing appeared in the distance, lit not by sunlight but a watery blue gleam. The boys extinguished their wands as they came in sight of it, and dropped to a crouch, creeping through the brush. Theo and Harry went down on their hands and knees, clambering under the roots of an oak tree older than Draco’s fortune, and with a quiet whine of displeasure, Draco did the same.

In the clearing stood a man in a dark pinstriped suit. A skein of yellow hair clung like a cap to his skull, and his pale eyes glowered from deep within a square, leathery face. Professor Podmore knelt at his feet.

“...burned, and soon gone. The girl has grown difficult…”

“Irrelevant,” said the wizard coldly. “Why are they not yet dead? Why have you tarried?”

Hunched in the dirt, Theo stiffened at the sound of his voice. “Yaxley,” he whispered to Draco.

“It is impossible,” said Podmore dully. “The infirmary is warded. Poppy Pomfrey has refused visitors.”

“Why did you not execute the deed yourself, to begin with?”

“I do not… I cannot…” Podmore shuddered. He dropped onto all fours.

“Imperio. Answer me.”

Podmore gave a strangled cry.

“ *Imperio,”* cried Yaxley. *“Imperio!* Answer me!”

“...Dumbledore… asked to inspect… my wand…”

“And what do I care for that? I ordered them dead! *Crucio!”*

Screams filled the clearing. A flock of ravens lifted from the boughs above and fled, cawing.

The baying of Podmore’s agony made all of them squirm in discomfort, but for Harry, it was too much. He leapt up. Draco gasped, “Potter, *no,”* but it was too late. Harry vaulted the tree root and ran into the blue light, shouting, *“Petrificus totalus!”*

The spell flared and died against Yaxley’s wards. Yaxley turned, and Podmore collapsed, the curse broken.

“Mister Potter,” he said.

Harry brandished his wand. He had on his side not one single weapon besides a wand and heart far too big for its own health — that, and one very angry Theodore Nott, who had jumped into the clearing after him.

“Yaxley!” he barked. “Explain yourself!”

“Theodore?” Yaxley had been surprised; now he was shocked. “What are you doing here? Where is your father?”

“At home, celebrating his victory,” said Theo coldly. “And I’m sure he’d be very interested to learn what you’ve been doing with his best friend’s daughter.”

“What Sibelius doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” said Yaxley, “and what Prescott Parkinson doesn’t know could fill a book.”

“You’re telling me, but you can’t — this is a school, it’s not—”

“What is happening at Hogwarts is absolutely essential to what comes next,” he said calmly. “Dumbledore must be ousted.”

“So you’ve been terrorizing Pansy all year?” he snarled. “I don’t like Dumbledore, either, but this isn’t how we do things.”

Yaxley began to reply, and then gave a bark of laughter: Draco had stepped into the clearing.

“And the young Malfoy. Fitting, that you should join us so *belatedly.”* He pointed his wand at Draco, conversationally. “This was your father’s idea, you know. Years ago, at the height of our glory, he confessed to me an idea for how one could dismantle the Hogwarts administration and replace it with a more suitable infrastructure for our purposes.”

“You mean Voldemort’s purposes,” snarled Harry. Yaxley flicked his wand at him, and Harry’s jaw snapped shut. Sounds of panic emitted from his throat as his teeth refused to part.

“He was a brilliant man,” Yaxley told Draco. “I know he would have approved of the work we do today.”

Draco shivered. Trying very hard to keep his voice flat, he said, “I rather think he wouldn’t approve of you pointing your wand at his

son, Yaxley."

Yaxley reached into his robe and withdrew a small black book. The cover was unvarnished leather, split from age, and the pages were yellowed from use. It bore no title. "He told me it would begin with a diary," he said simply. "No mere book only, but an artifact of enormous power, which the Dark Lord had entrusted to him many years ago."

A rustle came in the bushes behind them, and Ron gave a yelp. Draco glanced backward, and watched a large black spider hurry out of the underbrush, about the size of a rat. At the sight of it, a rough craggy voice filled his ears.

Don' hurt the spiders.

He glanced at Yaxley, who was distracted by Ron. Shifting subtly, covering the movement with his robes, Draco lifted his foot and brought it down hard on the spider's head. It crunched under his heel.

At the sound of Ron's voice, Yaxley's head cocked, and he swept his wand in an arc at the trees. Foliage wilted in a curtain of death. Roots shrank, leaves blackened, and fat sheaths of bark rolling into ashy coils at the feet of withered trees. The rosebush hiding Ron sagged and wilted, revealing him.

"How many of you are there?"

"At least one more," said Ron brashly, lifting his wand. "Dumbledore's on his way. You should be scared."

"Of Dumbledore?" Yaxley smiled, fanning himself with the book. "How could I fear Dumbledore? He is an old man, and he allowed my poppet—" He flicked his wand at Podmore's body, and his limbs twitched — "to run amok in your castle for a year. Even now, the Ministry has sent a detail of uniformed goons to place him under

investigation, and now, without Fudge to protect him, he will find it much harder to interfere with the course of justice…"

Theo said, "But I don't understand—"

Yaxley's lips twisted in irritation. With a shadowy cousin of what might have been patience, he said, "Theodore, you are young, and you have much to learn. Leave us. Take Draco. Attend your father. Our victory is in hand, and celebrations will be in order. Meanwhile, it will be fitting… if Mister *Potter…* christens our Lord's second regime with his blood."

Ron roared and leapt in front of Harry, but Yaxley's wand was already moving. With a slash, he killed the blue lights in the clearing, and they plunged into pitch darkness.

Somewhere in the slate of black, a booming voice roared, *"AVADA KEDAVRA,"* and green light shot across the clearing. There was a cry and a scuffle of movement, and something knocked Draco back into a tree. He slammed his head against the bark, and felt it tear at the back of his robes.

"Expelliarmus!"

"Crucio!"

"Verdimillious!"

Bolts of red light flickered here and there across the clearing like a lightning storm. Yaxley seemed to flit from one place to another, his weathered face contorted in fury, wand chasing Harry's gleaming golden shape through the darkness — now Harry dived out of sight, and Yaxley was pointing at Theo — and Draco never knew quite how it happened, whether Yaxley had seen one dark-haired boy and mistaken him for the other, or whether in his rage he had decided it no longer mattered — but Yaxley cried, " *Serpensortia,"* and a long, black cobra leapt airborne from a seam in the air, hissing, its eyes fixed on Theo, who saw it and screamed — Harry hurled himself in

front of the other boy, and opened his mouth, and a sound like sand running over stone came slithering out—

But now the snake was pausing, lifting its head, swaying back and forth in the rhythm of Harry's voice. Draco gaped.

He was a parseltongue. The Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One, Gryffindor's favorite son, and he was a parseltongue.

Where the hell had he learned *that?*

The snake bowed its head and slithered into the trees, harmless. Harry slumped against Theo, gasping for breath.

" *LUMOS MAXIMUS!"*

Yaxley's wand blazed like the rising sun, and the clearing filled with blinding light. Draco clapped his hand over his eyes to shield them and threw a Body-Bind Jinx vaguely in Yaxley's direction, hoping against hope that it hit something. Someone gave a cry of fear.

When he opened his eyes, he saw that Yaxley had gone stiff, not from the Body-Bind, but in terror of something large and black and furry that was crawling out of the trees behind Harry and Theo. It dangled from the trees on six immensely long, hairy legs, and from its bulbous head, studded with eight ruby eyes, hung a pair of shining curved pincers, sharp as the edge of a scythe. It clacked them together, and it made a sound like swords being crossed.

Ron made a sound like a dying goat. Draco, frozen in fear, watched as the thing hauled itself over Harry's head, its gigantic bulk passing so close that it ruffled the hair on his head. Harry had closed his eyes, and his shoulders heaved with each breath.

Yaxley shrieked, *"Avada kedavra!"*

The curse struck the spider square beneath the eyes, and it sagged from the trees, keeling over onto the clearing with a terrible crunch.

Its corpse landed on Yaxley's cobra, crushing it. Venom welled from its inert fangs.

Theo groaned, out of disappointment or disgust or terror, or perhaps all three. Ron whimpered.

Yaxley's breath came in gasps. "Acromantula," he said. "The Forbidden Forest teems with them. Dark Creatures — lamentably large — but no mere Beast, regardless of size, is a match for a true wizard—"

The second spider sank its pincers into his shoulder.

Yaxley's howl was lost in the rumble of the trees. Spiders poured out of the darkness, waves of them, hordes, a swarm of hairy wiggling legs. Spiders the size of carthorses, spiders the size of dogs, spiders the size of carriages, and at least two or three as large as Hagrid's hut, whose massive bulk knocked the trees together as they waddled into the light. Pincers clacking, the spiders converged with horrible hisses and screams.

The net of them drew tight around the clearing, forcing the boys into the middle, near Yaxley, who was writhing and screaming as the spider above him drove its pincers again and again into his neck, leaving a mess of carnage that Draco was grateful he could not see.

Ron, with a wailing sob, leapt onto Harry's back to try and escape the flood. But there was no escaping, for they were everywhere, above them and below them and walling in the forest on all sides, and the large ones were beginning to cast thick nets of cobwebs between the trees, erecting silver walls of glistening sticky rope as thick as steel girders…

Moving fast, Draco seized Harry and Theo with an arm each, and hauled them in back-to-back in the center of the clearing. They needed to leave, but how? They couldn't apparate; none of them had a Portkey; and they couldn't get out without fighting their way clear…

He had an idea.

“Dobby,” he mumbled.

He screwed his eyes shut and thought about the Manor on Christmas morning, the smell of roast chestnuts on the great fireplace, snow thick on the gables and wafting past the windows… he thought of swimming in the lake in summertime, and the smoky smell of the kitchen after breakfast had been prepared, coffee grounds and bacon grease, and the smell of rotting oranges in a secret cabinet under the silverware…

“Dobby!”

A crack split the air.

“Master Draco?”

The elf stood in the center of their little ring, holding a bread knife and a pat of butter. At the sight of the clearing, he gave a shriek and dropped them. Then he said a word Draco hadn’t ever heard from him before, and loudly.

“DOBBY!” Draco could have kissed him. “Apparate us!”

He didn’t hesitate. Dobby seized Draco by one hand, and Harry by the other, and twisted hard on his heel. Draco snatched Theo’s wrist as they went, and with a winnowing tug in his gut, the clearing vanished.

They snapped into existence in a high-ceilinged circular room. A number of strange silver instruments whirred and trailed smoke. The walls were covered with portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses, and at the back of the room sat an enormous, claw-footed desk; behind it, high on a shelf, a shabby, tattered wizard’s hat. A large bird with feathers the color of flames perched on a mount suspended from the ceiling, and at the sight of them, it gave a curious chirrup.

“Good *Lord!”*

Professor Dumbledore stood by the mantelpiece, next to Professor McGonagall, who was taking great, steadying gasps, clutching her chest. Between them sat Cornelius Fudge, who sat hunched in an armchair by the fire, cradling a glass of something amber. He and McGonagall modeled Dumbledore’s mystified stare in triplicate.

Draco risked a glance in the mirror behind Dumbledore’s desk. The four boys looked awful: wild-haired and muddy-kneed, their uniforms ripped and studded with twigs, scrapes darted here and there like smudges of clay. They would’ve been chased out of most reputable establishments with a broom.

He took a deep breath. “Headmaster,” he said. “Professor. Minister.”

“Former minister,” Theo corrected, under his breath.

Harry stepped forward, silencing both of them. “We figured out who’s behind the attacks,” he said. Then he withdrew a small black book from his robes. Theo gave a small hiss, as if in pain. “And we have this.”

Dumbledore’s mouth parted. Swiftly, he crossed the room and took the book from Harry. He paged through it with an energy that Draco had never seen in the old man before, touching each blank page almost reverently, as if it contained the deepest secret of his heart.

At length, he snapped it shut, and slipped it into some secret pocket of his voluminous periwinkle robe.

“Cornelius,” he said, “I believe I must take leave of you.”

Fudge pushed himself to his feet, leaning heavily on the chair. “Of course,” he said blearily. “Of course. Serious business. I think… I must go, as well… there is much to be done, at Ten Downing… I must prepare the transition.”

“Transition?” said Ron. It was the first thing he had said since they escaped the spiders, and it was weak from strain. “What d’you mean, transition?”

Dumbledore was still gazing at Harry with an anguished admixture of worry and pride. “I suppose your adventures have sequestered you from worldly news,” he murmured.

Ron pointed at Fudge. “Didn’t you win?” he said, in accusatory tones.

Fudge balked. “Young man,” he sneered, drawing himself up, “your friends and yourself have achieved a great victory. We should not sully your triumph by allowing politics to intrude…”

“He lost,” said Theo quietly. Fudge turned a baleful eye on him, but Theo did not so much as quiver. “It was cocked. Fudge won Northern Ireland, Runcorn and Fudge split the South, Runcorn and Asquith split the North. Fudge had a plurality, but without a majority candidate, the second ballot goes to the Wizengamot. The top two candidates go head-to-head for a bare majority. That was Runcorn and Fudge.”

“So what?” Ron rounded on Fudge. “You’ve the majority, haven’t you?”

“But Runcorn is Leader of the Opposition,” said Theo, speaking over Ron. “So he recused himself, obviously, but his party cut a deal. One vote for the Magical Security Act, in exchange for each vote for Runcorn.” He added, “My father wrote me as soon as he heard.”

“They’d never,” said Draco instantly. “That’s tosh. The Coalition wouldn’t—”

“Five seats flipped,” said Theo, shrugging. “They passed the bill this morning. Runcorn’s getting sworn in tomorrow afternoon.”

Fudge listened to Theo with a greedy sort of dread. Ron gaped.

Harry, who had a lump on his head where a Death Eater's curse had thrown him into a tree, plucked some brambles off his robes and glanced around like he was anxious for the conversation to be over.

"You're a precocious young man," Fudge croaked to Theo. "Your memory for detail, if nothing else… I am sure you will go far. Our children are the most important…" But where he seemed on the verge of launching into another stump speech, he suddenly faded, and the gusto leached out of him. Tiredly, he said, "Albus, I must go. The next twenty-four hours will, perhaps, define my administration's legacy more than the previous two years… I am very, very busy…"

"With what?" said Ron angrily. "Got any other elections to lose?"

"Mister Weasley," snapped McGonagall. Chastened, he fell silent.

"Doesn't anyone want to know," Harry said loudly, "who was attacking the school? And how we stopped them?"

With immeasurable chagrin, Fudge cringed and retreated. Draco watched him in disgust. He'd rather lick someone's shoe than seem so small.

"Harry, I would like nothing more," said Dumbledore sincerely. "And I should be honored to reserve an hour of your time to do so, after these lovely people have taken their leave of us.

"In the meantime, I believe all your friends have earned some food and sleep." Theo twitched, hard, at being referred to as Harry's 'friend.' "I suggest that you all find your common rooms for a moment's respite, and then help themselves to some well-earned victuals in the kitchens. I will instruct our friends to prepare something suitably hearty… and to prepare a berth for our guest," he added, inclining his head to Dobby.

Dobby hid behind Draco's leg. "Dobby is greeting Master Dumbledore," he squeaked. "Dobby is sorry for intruding, but Dobby

was trying to save Master Draco, and he went to the safest place he knew."

"'Dumbledore' will do perfectly well," said Dumbledore gently. "You will forgive me for being unorthodox, but I have never much liked the title of 'master.'"

With a start, Draco noticed that a spider had bitten Dobby's arm, and a ring of pincer marks wept blood down to his elbow. Pointing his wand at it, he muttered *"Episkey."* Dobby made a sound of surprise, fingering the wound.

"Dobby is forgetting to heal himself," he said. "A thousand pardons, for embarrassing the House of Malfoy—"

"Don't — that's not — don't say that," Draco mumbled. Dobby fell silent as if compelled, which of course, Draco realized, he was. "I mean. You can talk if you want to."

Dumbledore watched the exchange with an unreadable expression. "Draco," he said politely, "could you spare your servant for a moment? I should like a word with him."

"Yes, sir." Draco patted Dobby's head. "It's alright," he advised him.

He trailed out of the office behind Theo and Ron.

In the hallway, Ron yelped and smacked something on his shoulder.

"Spiders," he said. " *Giant* spiders. I hate magic, actually. If I ever see one of those things again, I'm going to snap my wand and go live as a muggle."

"I'm telling Pucey to move the bonfire next year," Theo muttered. "Acromantula. *Merlin.* Why don't they tell anybody about them? They ought to have an exterminator in."

"Good thinking, calling your house-elf," Ron said fervently. "Think he saved our skin."

“Yes, it was a neat bit of household magic,” sniffed Theo. “I wish I could’ve done it. My father doesn’t let me call Mimsy, he says I’m to wait until I’m old enough.”

Bewildered, Ron said, “You’ve got one, too?”

“Oh, yes. Ten of them.”

“Ten!”

Draco buried a cough in his arm that sounded like “excessive.” Theo narrowed his eyes.

“ *Some* of us run a full household, and like to host parties from time to time. It’s not like living alone with your mother in the middle of the country, where you’re practically self-sufficient…”

The next cough was “frippery.”

“Bully for you, you’ve a house-elf *and* a thesaurus.”

They reached the stairwell, and Theo hopped down the first step before realizing neither of them followed “Ah,” he sighed. “I forgot I was among barbarians.”

“Piss off,” Ron said warmly. “You nearly got us all killed tonight, running after him like that.”

“Mm, yes. That was quite uncharacteristic of me.” Draco noticed that Theo didn’t apologize. “I suppose you expect me to be grateful.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Why can’t you lot just say ‘thank you’?” he asked philosophically, though it was pointed in Draco’s direction. “It’s right in there with all that rot about ‘manners’ and ‘form.’”

“Can’t,” yawned Draco, leaning against the banister. “Implies you owe them something.”

“He *does* owe us.”

“Ah, but it’s not polite to say so. You’re supposed to wait around for a few decades, stumble into a miscellaneous bit of trouble in a totally unrelated situation, and then write him a veiled missive explaining your predicament, so he can respond by secretly intervening on your behalf and call in one of his other favors to exculpate you without ever breathing a word of it to another living soul.” Draco polished his fingernails on his robe. “Or let him die for you, or something.”

Theo was nodding vigorously. “That was my preference,” he admitted.

Ron shook his head despairingly. “You’re so weird,” he told Draco.

“Your face is so weird.”

“Oi! Fair enough.”

He lifted his hand and engaged Draco in the celebratory majyyks of the Muggle High Five. Draco’s palm smarted.

Theo watched with fascination and horror.

“You’ve gone native,” he said to Draco. “Astonishing. Your father would weep, you know.”

Draco considered this. Then he shrugged.

“I’ve still got twice the class in my pinky finger that you’ve got in your whole family tree.”

The corner of Theo’s mouth twitched.

“Snot-nosed weaselly bastard.”

“Ratty, mop-headed tosser.”

“Blood traitor.”

“Chauvinist.”

Theo turned to Ron. “Tea is at four on Sundays,” he said formally. “You will wear a tie. You will button your shirt. You will not be late. You will compliment Daphne’s accessories.”

“Wot?” said Ron. Draco snickered.

“See you both in hell,” called Theo, trotting down the stairs. “Or Potions, I guess.”

Once he was gone, Ron turned to Draco.

“Pretty sure there’s a match on,” he remarked. “Lee Jordan’s got a Spell-O-Vision projector in the fourth year boys’. Fred said something about popcorn.”

“Who’s playing?”

“You really care?”

This was fair.

“I want to change into good clothes, first,” he said. “Wandering around like this, people are going to start thinking I’m a Weasley.”

“Not to worry, mate, you haven’t got the looks,” said Ron. And jostling each other roughly, they started up the many stairs to the Gryffindor Tower.

Hermione Granger snored when she slept.

He hadn’t known that. Of course, he’d never spent the night in the same room as her before.

It made it nearly impossible to sleep, but he didn’t mind. The chairs in the infirmary were damn near impossible to sleep in, anyway, and he much preferred her snoring to silent.

Madam Pomfrey said it would take several days for the potion to work. Paralysis had given way to unconsciousness, and Colin had even begun to murmur in his sleep, but everyone still “had to be patient, Mister Malfoy, we can’t wave a wand and have them all back, now” — though precisely why that was *so* beyond the realm of comprehension, in a magical castle, was rather beyond Draco.

Still, he could be patient. He was an extremely patient person.

No, you’re not, Hermione would have said.

He didn’t know why he wanted her back, honestly. She was such a heinous bother.

Draco yawned and rearranged himself in the chair, slinging his legs over one of the armrests. His head rested against the side of her bed, cushioned by a stolen pillow. Madam Pomfrey clucked disapprovingly at him for robbing the bedding of the infirm, but in his defense, it served the very important medical purpose of preventing a crick in his neck. Besides, Hermione would hardly miss it.

It was early enough in the morning that none of the Gryffindors had come in for their daily visits, yet. If he remembered the schedule — and he’d memorized the schedule, at this point — it was Dean’s turn, which meant he and Seamus would be there about twenty minutes late, probably holding some leftovers from breakfast for Draco and whatever homework Hermione needed from the day before. Then, once they left, Draco would quietly copy his own answers onto her paper, slip it into a folder, and sneak it beneath the flowers on her bedside table.

She’d be spitting mad at him when she woke up and found them. She’d give him a howling earful about earning her own grades, and breaking academic rules, all of Hogwarts’ downright medieval punishments for plagiarism. He couldn’t wait.

The sun sent a querulous finger of light down from the clerestory windows, and as it poked her face, she gave a riotous snort. Her

eyes slid open, wide and summery brown.

“Hermione,” he said slowly. It felt odd on his tongue.

She blinked rapidly, in the fashion of someone still clearing the last figments of dreams from their eyes. “Draco?” she mumbled. Her voice was almost gone from lack of use. He sat up and snatched the empty glass by her bedside.

“Aguamenti. Water?”

“Mm-hm.”

She drank in deep, greedy swallows. He watched her with greedier eyes: the simple movement of her throat, the way her eyes flit instinctively around the room, noting the surroundings, lingering on doors and windows. There was something surreal about watching her move after having lain still for weeks — like watching the Winged Victory of Samothrace beat her wings.

After a moment, she turned her head. “Draco,” she repeated.

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“Right. So, you remember how I never liked Professor Podmore? Well, listen to this—”

“To my bed?”

“Oh. That.”

Hermione’s bedside bloomed with marigolds. They fountained from a dozen vases on her table, tumbled from a flotilla of mason jars and copper pots around the bed skirts, and heaped high at the foot of the quilt in unpotted mounds, spilling a waterfall of cherry gold petals onto the floor. Red and gold and ribbons of green lifted and danced with each cool breath of the vents, drifted into her hair, littered the

snowy tangles of her bedsheets. She twitched her hand, and found one slipped neatly between her thumb and forefinger.

“What,” she repeated, staring at him. “What am I supposed to do with these, Draco.”

“Well.” He shrugged, drawing his knees up to his chest. “If you’d been quicker about getting well, we wouldn’t be in this situation. The first day, I only came with a dozen.”

“...And the second day?”

“Another dozen,” he said. “Obviously. You can’t bring day-old flowers, that’s rude.”

“And then…”

“You’ve got to think about this from my perspective,” he drawled, gazing at the ceiling. “I mean, you could have woken up any day. And what was I going to do? Be caught *without* fresh flowers? What am I, a Weasley?”

“So you… Draco, you can’t possibly think…”

“That’s a joke, by the way, he didn’t neglect you. Dear Ronald brought some daisies and a pack of Chocolate Frogs. They’re in one of these pots. Now, *I* would have gone for Cauldron Cakes, because I know you prefer them, but *I* didn’t want to get anything that would go stale.”

“I don’t… this is absurd,” she said faintly. “And — and—” She sat up, her jaw forming a hard corner of determination. “And I’m still not speaking to you.”

“Fine, we can skip to that part. Hold on,” he said, rifling through his pockets. He withdrew a battered scrap of parchment and unrolled it, clearing his throat. “I, Draco Malfoy, being of sound mind and body —”

“Is that your *will?”*

“This will go faster if you let me finish. Being of sound mind and body, hereby apologize to Hermione Granger, to whom I have done a very wrongful thing; and for whose forgiveness, if forthcoming, I would be very grateful.”

“That’s not a proper apology,” she said tiredly. “That’s a template for an apology. You can’t show up with a shop full of flowers and a prewritten script and possibly expect everything to be alright again.”

“Wasn’t it a good script, though?”

“Draco!”

“All right. How about this: I was a ponce,” he said, “and I shouldn’t have called you — *that* word. I’m used to saying it—”

“Oh, are you, now—”

“—and if you’d *listen* I’d tell you that’s not an excuse, but it’s the reason I used it, not because I wanted to be cruel to you. Which I didn’t. Want to. Though I was. Obviously.” He folded the parchment in half, then folded it again. “Speaking personally was a terrible experience,” he said, “and I don’t intend to do it ever again.”

She frowned, twirling the flower between her fingers. “Okay,” she said. “But it’s not just me. You have to… I don’t want to think you’re not saying it because you want to make me happy. Even though you believe all of it, otherwise.”

“I don’t believe—” He hesitated. *“All* of it.”

Her brows knit together.

“Okay. I don’t believe the rot about muggle-borns. You and Creevey, you’re just witches and wizards. *Annoying* witches and wizards, but you’re Gryffindors, so there’s a selection effect.” He added, “Also, it’s making it doubly embarrassing that you’re beating me in

Transfiguration, so this rah-rah equality business is incidentally in my interest."

"And muggles?"

He threw his arms around his knees, scowling. "I don't — can't you see when a man is trying? Muggle-borns are one thing, because I know you, but if you're going to start talking about muggles and wizards being the same or any of that radical stuff, I just don't know —"

"That's all right," she said, surprising him. "We don't have to… not right now. But you really do mean it? You're *actually* sorry? Not just for the name-calling."

"Yes," he said, nervously.

She slumped back on the bed. "Oh, thank goodness," she sighed. "I was so sick of being mad at you."

He grinned. Dropping his knees, he hopped onto the mattress, bouncing some of her pillows into the air. She squawked and shuffled over so he could lean against the wall. "Makes bloody two of us," he said. "Let's never do that again, it was awful."

"Although… I don't know. You are much nicer when you're sorry for something."

"If you want flowers, Granger, all you have to do is ask."

"Speaking of," she said, laughing, "what on earth am I going to do with all these? Actually." She lifted a handful of blossoms and tossed them haplessly on the bedspread. "I can't take all these back to the Tower."

"Why not? I'll help you."

"Because I'll get stares! And Lavender might try to shank me."

“Brown owes me one,” he said, shrugging. “And I can get some for her, too, if she wants.”

“Don’t do that, she’ll fall in love with you,” Hermione said distastefully.

“And what’s so wrong with that?”

“Nothing, but you don’t want Lavender in love with you. When she had a crush on Harrison Ford, she wrote him a bunch of sonnets and tried to send them by owl.”

“I still don’t see what’s wrong with that. ‘If music be the food of love,’ you know...”

“Harrison Ford is a muggle,” she said patiently, “and they were bad sonnets. Did you say there was candy? I’m starving.”

“Good woman for trying, though, Brown,” he said absently. His fingers drummed on the side of the bed. “Say — Granger.”

“Yes?”

“Can I have that?” He pointed at her wrist, where she wore a crumpled silk hair tie with an elastic band. Parvati had once called it a “crunchy” or something like that.

“You want a hair tie?” Her glance at his hair was deeply skeptical. She took it off, anyway.

“Yes. I want you to watch this.” He cleared his throat. “Dobby, come here.”

A crack echoed in the infirmary, and Dobby appeared at the foot of her bed. Hermione yelped.

“Master Draco,” he said cheerfully. “Miss Grain Jar! You is awake.” He looked around. “You is very much liking marigolds,” he observed frankly.

“Yes, she is, it’s marvelous. Dobby, can you tell Granger what you talked to Dumbledore about?”

Hermione eyed Draco warily, but she spoke to Dobby in a kind voice. “Yes,” she said. “If you’d like to, Dobby, you can tell me. Only if you want to.”

“Oh,” said Dobby anxiously. “Dobby certainly can! Dumbledore told Dobby that if his masters ever found they no longer required his services — or if he found himself without employ — he would be free to come and work for the kitchens at Hogwarts, as a free elf.” He straightened his pillowcase. “He said also,” he said proudly, “that Dobby was the finest and bravest house-elf he had ever known, and that he would be proud to pay Dobby — real money, a wizard’s wage!”

“That’s wonderful, Dobby,” said Hermione sadly. She handed him a marigold, which he took, cooing in delight. “I hope it happens, one day.”

“Yeah,” said Draco casually. “Me, too. Catch.”

And he tossed the crunchy at Dobby, who caught it.

“Master has given clothes,” said Dobby wondrously. “Master has given Dobby a—” He looked up at Draco, spellbound. “What is it?”

“A crunchy,” Draco informed him.

“Um,” said Hermione.

“Master has given Dobby a crunchy,” said Dobby in disbelief. He broke into a beam. “Dobby has a crunchy, and Dobby is free!”

“Scrunchy,” said Hermione insistently, “it’s a scrunchy, Dobby, it’s for your hair—”

“See, here’s the thing,” said Draco. “Dumbledore won’t let me bring you to school. Something about slavery being a bad example for

other students, I don’t know. So I thought, if you came to work in the kitchens during the year, then you could come back to the Manor during the summers, and we’d — well, I don’t know what he’s paying you, but I’ll bet we can pay you more.”

Dobby had slid it up his arm like a gold bracer, and was hopping around Hermione’s bed like a child on Christmas morning. He spun, and leapt into Draco’s arms, who gave a quiet *oof.*

He could feel the heat of her smile like a physical emittance, a ray of sunlight, a tongue of fire.

“Don’t look at me like that.” He stroked the back of Dobby’s trembling head with as much dignity as he was capable. “I hope you don’t think this means anything vis-a-vis our ideological debate.”

“Which one?” she said, beaming. “I’m winning all of them.”

“You’re winning *one* of them, and that’s because I happened to put my foot in it so badly I had to reevaluate my whole life philosophy to get back in your good books. You won’t catch me making that mistake again, Granger, I warn you.”

“No,” she said, waving a marigold delicately under her nose. Her eyes sparkled. “I don’t think you will.”

The fool witch insisted on going to the Closing Feast, against his better judgment and Madam Pomfrey’s. They hammered out a compromise wherein she came, but in one of Pomfrey’s wheely-chairs, and Draco got to push her around. He took great joy in this important duty, particularly the bits wherein he got to shout at people to get out of his way, he was moving an invalid, please and thank you. Harry and Ron loved the chair, too, but mostly because once Hermione abandoned it, they got to use it to go scootering up and down the aisles of the Great Hall, cackling madly, until Percy accidentally stepped into their path without looking, which put paid to it in spectacular fashion. McGonagall howled herself hoarse at all

three of them. Hermione ate Draco's serving of cake. It was an unusually excellent night.

The next day, the sun blazed on a caravan of students trundling down the path to the Hogwarts train station. Draco ended up wedged into a compartment with Hermione, Harry, Ron, Ginny, and the twins, who roped them into a game of Exploding Snap — Draco tied with Fred for the win, because they both cheated — and set off the last of the Weasleys' Filibuster fireworks from the window, watching the explosions pop and crackle over the emerald hills. Hermione huffed in disapproval, but she didn't run to get Percy, and Draco was proud of her.

"...six one zero four," Harry was saying to Ron, "and it's called a telephone, you put in some muggle money and they let you talk to whoever you want…"

"Felly-tone, got it. Remind me why can't I just Floo?"

"We've been over this, you can't stick your head through my aunt's fireplace, she'll have a heart attack." Harry paused. "Never mind. Strike everything I've said, here's what you need to do—"

"...that Ravenclaw prefect, Penelope Clearwater," said Ginny. "That's who he was writing to all last summer. He's been meeting her all over the school in secret. I walked in on them kissing in an empty classroom one day…"

"You're lying," said Fred breathlessly.

"Ginny," said George, overwhelmed with emotion, "you're my favorite. You are."

"I thought I was your favorite."

"Only for your face, Freddie."

"Right back at you, Georgie."

And in the corner, wedged between Draco and the wall, Hermione was showing him how a cassette worked. She had his New Order album open on her lap, and with her finger, she traced how the rolls of tape spun around each little wheel. “It’s coated with a magnetic film,” she said, “which reacts when it comes close to a magnetic field.”

“Magnetic field? That’s magic, then.”

“No, it’s muggle science. So then the electromagnetic head on the cassette reacts to the coating, and it moves, which makes the sound waves…”

“‘Electromagnetic.’ That’s magic, surely.”

“No. That’s still muggle science. And you hear the sound waves because the headphones have a little speaker…”

“With an Amplification Charm.”

“No.”

She showed him how the reel could move forward and backward, and change the direction of the song, and at that point he declared it *had* to be magic, whether or not she would admit it. Then he insisted she take it apart and explain it again.

Meanwhile, the window glowed with the first heatstroke of summer. The compartment smelled of stale candy and Fred’s noxious cheap cologne. He was going home, where his mother waited for him, likely expecting an explanation as to just what her son had done with their house-elf. At his side, Hermione was babbling about something irrelevant and complicated with such verve one would think she intended to earn a degree in the subject.

Draco felt certain that thirteen was going to be his year.

Welcome to the end of Year Two! Thanks for sticking with it!

Same deal as the first time, I'll be taking a hiatus to finish Year Three. Year Three is a bit longer than the others, and it'll be the end of Volume One. It's longer than Years One and Two, so it's taking a minute to finish. Once it's done, it'll go up in much the same fashion that these first two have – regular update schedule, you know the drill.

I've been motivated throughout by the generosity of your comments, which are a treat to read. Thank you, thank you!

Happy October, and I hope you have a wonderful Halloween (or Samhain.)

Love,

GT

The Leaky Cauldron

Chapter 17: The Leaky Cauldron

And I wonder when I sing along with you

If everything could ever be this real forever

If anything could ever be this good again

—Foo Fighters, “Everlong”

In a secret fold of the French Riviera, nestled between Marseilles and the Italian border, a rose-colored building rose from a skirt of dancing palms. At its foot sat a white slipper of beach, and though it was a beautiful spot, the neighbors often found themselves looking over it, or around it, and were incapable of holding the place in their minds for long. A few white cupolas of abandoned villas dotted the verdant hills, but aside from these, the enclave had remained untouched by human hand ever since the last brick had been laid at the nearby Cannes.

Untouched, that is, except for the two shadows that darted over the buttery smile of the sands, freewheeling like birds. High above the surf, their twins zipped through the air in gyroscopic formations, their silhouettes cut in shadow against the purple spine of the distant Alps. Their cries, more jeering than birds, echoed over the empty bowl of the sea.

“Faster! Duck! Get a move on, Malfoy, I almost took your ear off!”

“You wish! A skrewt could have dodged that. Put your back into it!”

A hard black ball soared out in a U-curve, its reflection fleeing over the glassy sea. Then it doubled back, speeding for the distant crags

of the Maures, only to be diverted in its escape by a hard CRACK of a beater's bat. It zagged out at an angle, speeding for the second boy, who cut a sharp turn to avoid losing a rib.

The sun sat high in the sky like a jewel in its cushion, and placed shallow, pitch-black shadows under each palm. Sweat glazed the bare back of each boy on broomstick. Half-buried in sand lay an enchanted speaker, which, after several hours of joint work by two third year wizards, had spitefully relented to connect to a muggle music player. A singer whose name only one of the wizards knew exhorted them to hang the deejay.

The bludger wheeled back for another run. The slighter boy drew up on his broomstick, and slicked some sweat-damp hair from his face. It had grown long that summer, and hung in flaxen coils around his neck.

"One more go?"

"If you can take it," called Theo, flipping his bat casually in his hand.

Draco grinned. "Wouldn't want to strain your shoulder," he called back.

"Only thing you're straining is my patience. Watch your six."

Draco free-fell a few feet and caught himself, as the bludger soared over his head, rustling his hair.

"Try this one," shouted Theo, and he gave the ball a shuddering backhand that sounded like gunfire over the open sea. The bludger veered out in a j-shaped curve, twisted by a wicked topspin, and Draco dove into a smooth arc that plunged him close to the face of the sea. The surf raced up at him like a falling brick.

With feet left in his descent, he wrenched himself out of the dive, leveling with the sand, and the bludger plunged into the surf with an explosion of sand and foam.

“Showoff!”

Draco skimmed to a halt, and then hopped off, landing with a splash in the shallows. The water encased his ankles in a welcome chill. “It’s called a Wronski Feint, Nott, and I’ve offered to show you how to do it,” he called smugly.

Theo landed with his own minor detonation of sand. “And I’ve told you, I refuse such skylarking on principle,” he called back haughtily. “It’s a seeker’s move, anyway. All show, no strategy.”

“No strategy? Isn’t your job to sit there and whack the ball at people?”

“Yours is to flit around like a priss for half the game and make one tricky catch,” said Theo, slinging a towel over his shoulder. “You’re an upjumped spectator. Don’t lecture me about tactics, some of us have to play the whole time.”

Draco went to cuff him with the end of his Nimbus, and Theo blocked him with his Starbomber, and they had a brief but passionate swordfight up the beaches, into the drawing-room of the house.

The French doors sat open, and let in a lazy tongue of hot wind. The tongue slid through the white curtains, through a menagerie of linen furniture, and snuck up the white seersucker skirts of the two women balanced delicately on the sofa, whose dark heads and twin glances of undiluted snobbery could have marked them, at a distance, for twins. But one was far older than the other, and when the boys came in, she stood up, and her smile broke through her sneer (while the other’s sneer could have served as the firmament for skyscrapers).

“Don’t you two look wonderful! Would you like some lemonade, darling? It’s so dreadfully hot, and you should drink something, after all that work. No? How about you, Theodore?”

His smile could charm a raging boarhound. “I’d love some, Mrs. Malfoy.”

Draco rolled his eyes. He hopped onto the kitchen counter and snagged a slice of peach from the charcuterie platter the cook had left; Dobby was on vacation in Fiji with some of the other Hogwarts house-elves, so they'd had to borrow Pansy's cook.

"At least make them put on shirts," sighed Pansy, leaning over the sofa. "It's too hot. I can't stand to sit here and broil while they flounce around naked."

"Don't complain, you know I'm fit," said Theo, stealing another slice. "Anyway, no one's stopping you."

Pansy arched an eyebrow of supreme un-impressment. "Yes, and I'm sure you'd say nothing at all."

He grinned at her. "Well, I didn't say *that."*

"Draco, Theo, try not to spoil your dinner," Narcissa called. She carried a tray of highball glasses filled with pale gold, studded with crystals of ice. "We're having artichokes, and I've sent Briselda to get some fresh apricots."

"You needn't worry, Mrs. Malfoy," Pansy assured her. "I've seen Theo eat a whole roast chicken—"

"That was a moment of weakness, you absolute little rodent—"

"—and *still* take second helpings at dinner."

Theo's hand darted over the sofa and yanked one pigtail. "Some of us are growing boys," he leered. "When you hit your growth spurt, sometime in the twenty-first century, you'll understand."

"Hey!" She reared up and smacked him on the hip. "That's mean! I'm small-boned!"

"No squabbling," trilled Narcissa, squeezing Draco's shoulder as she sidled past. "Theo, Pansy is the perfect size for her age. Pansy, Theo can eat as much as he likes, and we shan't make fun of him for it. A

teenage boy needs all the food he can get his hands on.” She pinched Theo’s cheek, and he grinned widely. Draco blew a raspberry at him behind his mother’s back.

“Will you make them shower, at least?” begged Pansy. She made a production of holding her nose. “They reek of quidditch.”

“That’s the scent of boys becoming men, Pans,” announced Theo. He planted himself in front of her, arms wide. “We’re going to put Draco on the damn team if it kills us. I want everyone at Hogwarts to watch me thrash him.”

“Sod off, Nott!”

“Draco!” Narcissa pinched him, too. “Language! In front of guests!”

“Ow! Sorry, Mother.”

“Boys or men or whatever you are, it stinks,” said Pansy, poking Theo’s stomach.

“Oh, does it?” His grin grew dangerously wide.

“Yes, I — no! *Stop!”*

Theo collapsed on top of Pansy, who shrieked in horror and thrashed them both off the couch. They went to the floor in a tangle of arms and limbs as Theo attempted to shove Pansy’s face into his armpit while preventing her from biting him.

“Children, please!” tinkled Narcissa. “None of that! *Locomotor Theodore.”*

With a fluid stroke of her wand, she lifted Theo off of Pansy, and deposited him gently on the settee. “And I really must insist you do shower,” she said, mostly to Draco. “We’ll not stand on occasion at dinner, but there is a lady present, and I simply can’t conscience dining shirtless with a guest.”

“Whatever you like, Mother.” He kissed her cheek, and stealing a last slice of peach, he slung his broom over his shoulder to take upstairs.

“Do you hear that?” said Pansy loudly, sitting up. She pointed at Theo. “There’s a *lady* present.”

“Merlin, really?” He draped his knee over the armrest, yawning. “I thought it was just the three of us.”

Draco climbed the stairs to his bedroom. The villa had six rooms, so they each had their own, though Pansy and Theo spent so much time in his they could probably claim squatter’s rights. Pansy’s sand-encrusted bathing suit dangled, drying, from his doorknob, and Theo’s broom kit lay open near the dresser, beside Draco’s overflowing trunk and set of quidditch balls.

His mother had asked him if he hadn’t any friends he’d like to invite with them on vacation. He’d thought it was a rather more abstract idea at the time, and suggested them absently, as people of whom she might approve; if he’d known she was serious, he might have invited Harry, Ron, and Hermione, too, but he wasn’t sure how to go about pitching them to his mother. Theo and Pansy were easier to explain. Anyway, Harry was with the Dursleys, Ron was in Egypt, Hermione’s parents didn’t let her travel alone.

Nevertheless, it had been unexpectedly pleasant to have the others around. It had been a much more social summer than he was used to, and he didn’t think the old Black vacation house had seen this much company in years. And his mother clearly adored having multiple children in the house. He had begun to worry about her writing them into the will.

For some reason, she took particular delight in Pansy. There was something about having a girl around the house, he supposed, that created a feeling of instinctive allegiance and understanding between them, and she had delighted in taking Pansy shopping at the local markets. They gossiped and drank coffee (that Pansy wasn’t supposed to have) and chatted about whatever the hell

women did in pairs, and Narcissa spent unholy quantities of Draco's inheritance on fine silks and trinkets and bottles of wine for Pansy's parents, with whom she had exchanged almost a dozen letters before Pansy was allowed to come.

On the other hand, Sibelius Nott hadn't so much as replied to her owl. Theo had simply turned up on the doorstep of Malfoy Manor three days later, unannounced carrying two trunks and a broomstick and asking where to hang his hat.

On his desk, Ulysses had deposited a fresh batch of post. Draco fed him the last bit of peach, and unfolded the first letter. The address read:

Draco Malfoy

The Summer House (sic)

'Somewhere in France'

(???)

He smiled.

Dear Draco,

Okay, I think I got all the songs you requested on this one. It's a bit hard to get to the library to burn them, so this might be the last one before school starts. In return, could you check if you have "The Decline of Pagan Magic," by Bathilda Bagshot? It's obscure, but it's the last volume of her work and I can't find it.

What did you put down for classes this year? It was an absolute nightmare to choose. I wanted to take Arithmancy and Divination but they happen at the same time & McGonagall says they're basically the same subject anyway, one's just more technical than the other. I

chose the technical one, naturally, but perhaps they'll let us sit for O.W.L.s in both even if we didn't take the class? What do you think? Also I couldn't decide whether to take Muggle Studies or not, because even though I don't suppose I'd learn anything new, I'm fascinated to know what they teach. So many adult wizards are awfully ignorant about so much of the muggle world, I'm almost afraid that it's misinformation!

Anyway, I ended up with Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and Care of Magical Creatures. Harry and Ron are taking COMC, because Hagrid's teaching it this year, and Divination, because Percy says it's an easy O. I badgered them to take Runes (please say you're taking it!) but they won't do it. You know how they are.

I hope it's lovely down there in France. Don't forget the History of Magic essay! See you in a week!

Love,

Hermione

P.S. Percy made Head Boy. I'm not surprised. Ron doesn't seem too happy about it, though.

The letter came with a cassette, its tracklist scrawled in Hermione's looping hand. He pocketed it and went to shower, making a mental note to ask his mother if they still had that first-edition of the *Complete Works of Bathilda Bagshot.*

When he came downstairs, the sun hovered low on the sea, and the French doors pointed arrow-like to a rosy-colored porch, where the table held a minor fleet of bowls and glasses, and the flickering standards of four candles rose high over the rims. Theo and Pansy sat with Narcissa — Theo had conceded to put on a linen shirt — talking in unobtrusive murmurs that were lost under the rush of the waves.

He sat down and dropped his napkin into his lap. “You’ll have to pardon me. I fell asleep.”

Narcissa tucked a wet strand of hair above his ear, absently. “You need a haircut, turtledove,” she murmured. “Before you go back, perhaps? If we can coax Dobby to do it, that is.”

Her tone was rueful and slightly teasing; she had relinquished the family servant with grace, but he got the distinct feeling she could not really understand why he had done it, and still saw it as a gesture of youthful rebellion, rather than the right thing to do.

“Did you see the *Prophet?”* demanded Pansy, never one to mince words.

He reached for the decanter of pumpkin juice. “Not this morning. Ulysses was busy.”

“You really ought to see the *Prophet.”*

He lifted his eyebrow. She opened her mouth, but fell silent, blushing.

“Is there something you want to tell me, Parkinson?”

“No, I — well, not *personally,* no—”

“Sirius Black broke out of Azkaban,” said Theo casually, spearing a head of artichoke.

There was a clatter and an intake of breath. Narcissa had dropped her knife.

“Don’t mind me, darlings, I’m just clumsy,” she cooed, waving away their stares. “Keep talking. I’ll go get another.” Tossing her napkin on the table, she rose and set off for the kitchens in one fluid movement, her skirts swishing like a peacock’s tail.

Draco watched her go, worrying his lip.

He hadn’t heard his uncle’s name more than twice in his lifetime. There were some things that they didn’t say to each other. That included certain histories and certain names.

Nevertheless, there were stories. Supposedly he’d been a Gryffindor. Supposedly, he’d run away from home at fifteen, and in the course of his escape hexed Uncle Regulus so badly he couldn’t walk for a month. Supposedly, to hear Narcissa tell it, he’d broken Great-Aunt Walburga’s heart clean in two.

Draco didn’t understand someone like that. What a selfish sod he must have been, to reject a family so large and glorious. What an ungrateful wretch, to have the good luck to grow up with a father, and spit on the name he gave him. Draco quelled a sudden urge to hit something.

“Real classy, Teddy,” sneered Pansy.

“What was I supposed to say? You brought it up.” Theo ripped a leaf from his artichoke with a vehemence that suggested guilt. “He’s a mass murderer, and a family disgrace. I didn’t think there would be any warm feelings still involved.”

“He’s her cousin!”

“Yeah? Daph’s mine, but if *she* bagged a dozen muggles and denounced her family name, I’d — actually, never mind, I’d probably propose.”

Pansy held up her hand, as if she could not bear to look at him. “I only brought it up,” she said to Draco, “because I know Potter is an associate of yours, and I imagined he would be concerned.” She sniffed. “Naturally *I* don’t care, but everyone knows Black was involved in the Potter murders, so I’d be quite nervous, if I were him.”

“Surely you don’t think he’d go after Potter.”

“I don’t know what he’d do. But I wouldn’t rule anything out,” she said idly. She stole a sip of Narcissa’s wine glass. “If he could betray his family *and* his friends, I don’t see why he’d have any scruples about going after children. He’s clearly got no moral code whatsoever.”

“I’m sure Draco is grateful for your comfort, in this stressful time,” said Theo flatly.

“Well? It’s the truth!” She turned to Draco. “You should tell Potter to be on his guard. It’s no use to pretend that everything’s safe and hunky-dory. That’ll get him killed.”

“He’s Harry Potter, Pans. He’ll be fine.” He gestured at Draco with his glass. “Besides, doesn’t Dumbledore keep an eye on him?”

“Maybe. He lives with muggles,” said Draco, frowning. “I don’t know if he even gets the *Prophet.”*

Theo gave a discreet, delicate shudder. “I think I’d prefer Azkaban,” he said. “Truly. But at least Black won’t find him. Who would go looking for Harry Potter in some hovel of muggles?”

Draco narrowed his eyes. “They live in houses, Nott.”

“Oh, all right.” He wrinkled his nose. “Like you’d know.”

Narcissa returned with a new knife and a bowl of apricots. “I brought dessert,” she said brightly. “I thought we could take these down to the beach, and have an evening swim before we turn in. I’ve been longing to get in that water all evening.” Seeing their expressions, she looked around expectantly. “I’m sorry. Have I interrupted something?”

“No,” said Draco brusquely. He flashed a glance at Pansy, who got the message and nodded. “A swim sounds perfect, Mother.”

Narcissa hadn’t had an episode since they came to the summer house. Draco had been taking pains to keep her in a good temper,

and so far, he had reason to feel hopeful. He had tossed around the idea of floating a Healer again, once the summer was over — but she hadn't taken well to it before, and he worried about setting her off.

A few minutes later, dinner ended, and the dishware floated itself dutifully back into the house. They wandered down to the surf, and spent the last hour of daylight bathing in the warm tides, and Narcissa used her wand to create horses made of seawater that jumped and galloped around them, peppering them with splash. The moon bloomed full and fat over the villa, like the white bulb of a lily.

Though he didn't remember walking back to the house, when Draco woke up, he was tucked securely in his bed, and under his window, the dawn tide was rushing in to erase four tracks of footprints on the beach.

Dear Potter,

I hope this finds you well. Please find attached a copy of yesterday's Daily Prophet. Acquaint yourself with its contents, if you haven't already. I don't know if they deliver subscriptions to muggle households, but redundancy is a lesser sin than oversight. Watch out for yourself — I shall be most put out if you get yourself killed.

Granger has decided we are taking Ancient Runes. I wish I had some say in the matter but the fact is you and Weasley have abandoned her in this, knowing fully well that if she does not have a class partner we will never hear the end of it. I hope you appreciate the sacrifices I am making here for group cohesion. I am, contrary to certain past assertions, a selfless team player.

Write back soon. Nolite te mugglandes carborundorum.

Sincerely,

Draco Malfoy

Dear Malfoy,

Thanks for the Prophet, but I've already seen it. Were you worried about me? That's awfully sweet of you.

F.Y.I., I'm not with the Dursleys any more. I accidentally blew up my aunt using magic (long story). I took the Knight Bus out of Surrey and now I'm staying at the Leaky Cauldron. I didn't mean to use underage magic, but she was talking about my parents and… anyway, Hermione's already chewed me out for it, but the Minister of Magic wants to see me tomorrow, and I know it's not going to be good.

I hope I'm not expelled, but if I am, tell Hagrid I'm sorry.

Iyay on'tday eakspay atinlay.

Love,

Harry

Dear Potter,

What do you mean, you "blew up" your aunt? Is she dead? Why is the Minister of Magic coming to see you personally? Are you looking at a murder charge? Never mind, don't answer that in writing.

I'm coming, and I'm bringing a solicitor. Don't say a word to anyone from the Ministry until I get there.

Sincerely,

Draco Malfoy

Mummy,

Gone to Diagon Alley for the day to get school supplies &c. Will return by sundown if not earlier.

All my love,

Draco

Draco stepped out of the fireplace in the Leaky Cauldron armed with a nice suit, a wand he couldn't use, and the scariest-looking solicitor he could find in his father's rolodex.

(The solicitor wore a magenta suit under a lemon-yellow robe, and smiled like a man who had just made a killing selling subprime mortgages on his own soul. He had four gold teeth and as many hairs. His name was Gatz.)

"Potter, we've come to rescue you," Draco announced.

Harry, who was sitting on his bed in an outsize U2 t-shirt and muggle jeans, blinked and said, "Um. Hello."

They'd put him in a cheery single overlooking the Alley, with a plush twin bed and a set of shiny caramel oak furniture. Hedwig hooted in greeting from a cage atop the wardrobe. Harry's single trunk sat lonely and half-unpacked in the corner.

Draco said, "This is Gatz. Gatz, this is Harry Potter."

"Hello," said Gatz.

He smiled.

Harry shuddered.

“Hello,” he said politely, because Harry never met something ugly he couldn’t be nice to.

“We’re here to mount your defense,” Draco informed him. “What are the charges?”

“Underage use of magic,” said Harry, “and running away from home, I think? It’s not exactly clear. Also, hullo, Draco. Good summer?”

Draco nodded. “Quite. We went to Mummy’s house on the Riviera.”

“That’s nice. Ron’s just got back from Egypt. Did you hear about the money?”

“No. Did they find a galleon between the couch cushions?”

“Nah. Better than,” said Harry eagerly. “His dad won the lotto. Seven thousand galleons!”

“Oh,” said Draco.

He cleared his throat. Gatz inspected the room, whistling through his teeth.

“Which is a lot of money,” said Harry.

“Ah,” said Draco. “Yes, of course. How wonderful. May they use it in good health.”

He traded a discerning grimace with Gatz.

Harry snickered. “You’re ruddy posh,” he accused. “How much does your family even have, anyway? Could you just… I don’t know, buy the Ministry, and get me out of this stuff?”

“That’s one idea.” He ran a few sums in his head, squinting. “I suppose… no, it’d be a terrible investment. The thing bleeds money, it’d be a nightmare to privatize.”

“I was joking,” said Harry, staring. “Are you not… are you not joking? I can’t tell if you’re joking.”

A banging came at the door. Without waiting for an answer, it shot open, and Hermione flew in, her face tanned and freckled from the summer sun, clothes disheveled from haste.

“Harry, don’t you dare say a *word* without a lawyer present, it’s *highly* illegal to even question y— oh, hello, Draco!”

Draco suppressed a smile. “Granger.”

“Well, come here, then,” she ordered, and bustled over, hauling him into a bone-splitting hug.

He buried his smile in her hair. By the time she let go, he had mastered himself again.

“And you, too,” she added to Harry, hugging him. “But quickly, because we’ve got work to do. I bought a book on criminal law at Flourish and Blott’s, and I don’t know if they have public defenders in the wizarding world, but if not, you still have a clear right—”

Gatz cleared his throat. She rounded on him, and then startled, as if seeing him for the first time.

“Who are you?”

“Hieronymous Gatz,” he purred. “Attorney at law.”

He smiled.

Hermione’s eyes went very wide.

“Right,” she said belatedly. She turned to Draco. “He’s yours?”

“Technically, Potter’s.”

“Oh, lovely,” she said. She paused. “And he’s good?”

“Some have said so,” purred Gatz. She cleared her throat.

“Well, then,” she said, as the air went out of her like a punctured zeppelin. “I suppose you don’t really need me for anything, do you?”

“Yeah, you’re sort of useless,” said Harry good-naturedly. “I mean, you’re only my best friend. What would I want you around for?”

“Oh, stop it.” She pinked, but she was pleased, Draco could tell. “I mean you’re well taken care of, and everything.”

“Seems like it. I’m sort of nervous,” he added, picking at the blanket, “since I didn’t mean to do it, but the Ministry didn’t seem too understanding about it in the letter I got—”

Draco snorted. “That’s all posturing,” he assured him. “Pure rot. Don’t worry, Gatz will take care of that.”

“Do you have the letter?” Gatz inquired, with a lizard-like wetting of his lips.

Harry handed it over, and the solicitor scuttled into the corner, running over the text with his monocle.

Hermione leaned over to speak in Draco’s ear. “I don’t know where to find wizarding attorneys,” she whispered. “Where did you get him?”

Draco shrugged. “He came recommended,” he said, “from certain people who ought to know.”

“Eugh.”

“That’s the idea, yes.”

The fireplace gave an auspicious crackle, and the flames leapt up, fading from red to green. All four of them stood at attention as a figure emerged from the grate, brushing ashes from his cloak.

It was Sibelius Nott.

“You’re not the Minister of Magic,” said Draco.

Nott’s lip curled like a shorn sliver of wood.

“Well observed, young Malfoy,” he sneered. “And you are not Harry Potter.”

“Nope,” called Harry. He raised his hand. “That’s me.”

Nott glowered down his nose. He did not bear much resemblance to his son, in Draco’s opinion; his hair was thin and snowy where Theo’s was lush brown, his jowls loose where Theo’s were knife-sharp, his shoulders narrow beside Theo’s broad beater’s back. He walked with a hunch in his spine that age and poor posture had conspired to inflict, and it shrank his already not-indomitable height to well below that of most men in his station. He wore a gray pinstripe suit, and a badge on his cloak proclaimed him a member of the Wizengamot.

“Lord Runcorn sends his regrets,” he said silkily. “Business prevents him from joining you for this most important matter, though he hopes to demonstrate his respect for its severity by sending a treasured lieutenant in his place.”

“Was that your word, ‘treasured,’ or his?” said Harry cheerfully.

Nott made a sound like a hydraulic pump going out.

“Your levity is laudable, Mister Potter,” he said crisply. “It will serve you well. Needless to say, you have caused *quite* a deal of concern at the Ministry. Because of your… exceptional circumstances, we have postponed expulsion proceedings, as would normally take place—”

“Hang on,” cried Hermione. “You can’t expel him without a hearing, that’s rubbish—”

Draco gripped her elbow and pinned her to the spot, partly to stop her from leaping at Nott, and partly to beg for silence.

“Rubbish, indeed,” agreed Gatz. He emerged from the shadows of the room. Nott jumped.

“Lord,” he said, eyes roving over the yellow cloak. “I suppose you’re his solicitor?”

“Quite. Are we to take this as a formal recitation of charges,” inquired Gatz in gravelly tones, “or are you merely informing my client of the proceeding steps? I, for one, have yet to hear a formal claim against him.”

Nott sniffed, pursing his lips dourly. “Harry Potter has been charged with underage magic,” he said. “An announcement of charges was delivered—”

Gatz ripped the letter in half. Harry made a surprised noise, but not a disapproving one.

“This?” he said. “Codswallop. Bollocks. Dreck.”

“That — that is a formal charge of criminal activity! It carries the full force of Ministry—”

“Delivered without context to an underage wizard,” purred Gatz, “without his legal guardian present. Or did you also serve notice to the boy’s custodian?”

“His custodian is a *muggle.”*

“Oh, yes? So not only has Mister Potter not been served lawful notice,” murmured Gatz, ripping the letter into quarters, “but the Ministry stands in violation of the Custodial Rights Act of 1968, Section Four, subsection C—”

“Harry Potter is not a muggle-born!”

“Subsection C of which,” Gatz continued, blithely, “states that all muggle-born wizards, *or underage wizards in the custody of muggles,* may expect criminal charges levied against them to be delivered *by* hand by a Board-approved executor of justice, see footnote, who will explain said charges to the muggle custodian, and *answer any questions—”*

“He is a criminal,” said Nott coldly.

Draco decided he did not like Theo’s father.

“In point of fact,” drawled Gatz, “at this moment, the only criminal in the room is the Ministry, having attempted to initiate proceedings against my client without due process. Now, as an extremely litigious man, my client’s first instinct is naturally to file suit—”

Harry nodded somberly.

“But, with certain assurances, I might persuade him to turn the other cheek.”

Gatz smiled. Nott stepped back.

Draco elbowed Hermione, and nodded, as if to say: *You see?*

“As I was *going* to say,” Nott said, in the tones of someone wishing dearly to do the murder act on the nearest human being, “the Ministry has elected not to press charges against Mister Potter. I come on behalf of the Minister’s office, not the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. As suggested,” he added, nastily, “by the fact that you are talking to me, and not an Auror.”

“My client is very glad to hear it.”

“Yeah, he is,” Harry put in. “But, er — sorry — what, exactly, are you doing here? If not tell me I’m expelled?” He paused, and added, “I mean — if they just wanted to tell me I’m *not* kicked out — not to be rude or anything, but this could have been an owl.”

Nott drew out the chair, twitched up his trousers, and sat at Harry's desk. "Well put," he said crisply. "To wit: you have been recently aware, of course, of the escape of the scurrilous convict, Sirius Black."

Harry pressed his lips together. Draco knew and feared that expression. It usually meant Gryffindor was about to lose House points.

"I am. I am also," said Harry, "recently aware of the term *scurrilous."*

"Mister Potter, you must be aware that the Ministry will soon apprehend this criminal. And when it does, Lord Runcorn intends to bring him to justice using the fullest extent of the law."

Harry looked at Gatz. Gatz shrugged.

"Uh," said Harry. "Sure."

"Prior administrations," said Nott haughtily, "have languished on their laurels, while convicts, thieves, and scum run rampant in the wizarding world. Lord Runcorn will not tolerate this. It is a new day at the Ministry. Quite a new day, indeed. And to show that we are all prepared to put old political battles behind us, Lord Runcorn has personally seen fit to offer you a full Auror guard, until such a time as Black is returned to captivity," he hesitated, "or dispatched."

Draco startled. "A full Auror guard?" he repeated. "Do you even know that Black is coming for Potter?"

Nott ignored him. He watched Harry with a distant, almost pleasant expression on his face. "This is in addition to the new security imposed at Hogwarts, of course," he added. "Unlike Cornelius Fudge, Lord Runcorn will not stand by while children's lives are threatened. The crises of the past two years are long gone. He has sworn to lay waste to any man, woman, or beast that would lay a finger on Britain's most precious resource."

“What security?” said Hermione sharply.

“Dementors,” said Nott, without looking at her.

Draco’s breath caught. Harry and Hermione simply stared at Nott, uncomprehending.

“Wizarding security creatures, Mister Potter,” he elaborated. “Quite rigorous, I assure you. None have ever eluded them permanently. Nevertheless, Lord Runcorn would be more than glad to staff you with additional protection.”

“That… doesn’t seem necessary,” said Harry uneasily. He glanced at Draco, who shook his head.

Nott rose from his seat. “As you wish,” he said delicately. “Lord Runcorn’s offer stands, should you ever feel… less secure.”

Abruptly, he smiled. It was a small, oily expression. “But then again, we expect Black’s capture to be swift.” He extended his hand.

Harry frowned. He didn’t shake it. There was a long, awkward pause.

Draco blurted, “Did Professor Dumbledore consent to dementors on Hogwarts grounds?”

Nott smiled wider. “Professor Dumbledore has been informed of the Minister’s decision.”

“So, no,” said Hermione shrewdly.

“Professor Dumbledore understands the prerogative of the Minister to make important decisions regarding the wellbeing of children,” said Nott tonelessly. Hermione bristled again, and Draco tightened his grip on her elbow.

Nott made to leave, but paused. His hand flexed on the doorknob.

Without turning, he said: “How is my son?”

Draco realized, belatedly, that this was addressed to him.

“He is… well.” He tried to think of what Theo would want him to say. “He seems to be enjoying France.”

“Good.” A beat passed. “I expect that he will remain with you until the beginning of term.”

It wasn’t clear whether this was a statement, an order, or a question.

“I suppose so,” said Draco slowly, answering all three.

Nott nodded. “Give my regards to your mother,” he said softly. He left.

In the lull after the door closed, Harry flopped back onto the bed. He blew out a long, relieved breath.

“I don’t like that man at all,” announced Hermione. “I’m not sure I like the idea of him working for the Minister. ‘Treasured’ or otherwise.”

The solicitor folded his hands and planted himself, politely but obtrusively, in Draco’s line of sight.

“Thank you, Gatz,” Draco said crisply, handing him a folded check. “Give that to my accountant, he’ll see to everything.”

He bobbed a dramatic bow. “Many thanks, Lord Malfoy,” he croaked. “Always a pleasure to serve.”

“Yes, indeed. Do me a favor — the next time Potter calls for you, just do whatever needs to be done, and I’ll settle it with you after, all right?”

“Of course, Lord Malfoy. Mister Potter.” He gave another deep bow to Harry, and then one to Hermione — from pure politeness, it seemed — and scuttled out the door.

Harry pried his head up from the bed. “I’d say thanks,” he said, “but I’m going to check out what my nightmares look like tonight, first, and get back to you. Merlin.”

Hermione said, “Dementors,” and frowned. “I know that word. I’ve read it somewhere. They’re Dark creatures, aren’t they?”

Draco grimaced. “They’re horrible,” he said. “They guard Azkaban. They’re… I can’t describe them, but if you saw a picture, you’d get the idea. They… eat souls.”

Hermione and Harry stared at him.

“Not *really,* though,” she said, after a moment.

“Yes, really. I’m not using a metaphor, that’s what they do.”

“But there’s no such thing as a soul,” said Hermione, with all the confidence of someone who had conferenced with God and achieved mutual agreement on this fact. “That’s unproven. It’s spiritual dogma, not scientific fact.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. Maybe you’re right, but that’s what they do. They call it the Dementor’s Kiss. Leaves you all… empty. Like a lobotomy.” He swallowed, thinking of faceless shrouds creeping around the quidditch pitch, and shut his mind against the image.

Harry rolled upright, tousling his hair. “Have you seen it?” he said curiously.

“Merlin, no. Do I look like the type who’s in and out of Azkaban?”

He shrugged — which was fair, since Harry barely knew what Azkaban was. “I only asked because you seemed to know.”

Draco shifted his stance. “You learn about these things,” he said shortly, “when your father does time.”

“Your father…?”

“Until I was five. After he got out, he had… stories.” He sniffed amusedly. “Not ones I was *supposed* to overhear, I imagine, but there you are.”

“So you didn’t have hardly any time with him at all,” Hermione said softly. “I mean, you’d have been… five to eight, that’s what, three years?”

He looked at the ceiling.

“Three and a half,” he said stiffly. “Now, if you two inquisitors wouldn’t mind, I’d like to change the subject. Potter, you’re an orphan. Why don’t we talk about your dead mum?”

Hermione made a scandalized noise, but Harry cracked a grin. “Can’t, I don’t know anything about her,” he said. “Except that nobody’ll shut up about her sodding eyes. If you want to hear a million synonyms for ‘green,’ I’m your man, though.”

“Absolutely not. I’d much rather get out of this dismal room and go shopping,” said Draco. He actually thought the room was rather cozy, but to maintain appearances he made a habit of calling any room ‘dismal’ that didn’t have a footman in it. “That solicitor only cleared out about half my summer allowance, and while Diagon Alley’s no Savile Row, I’m sure you two cash-poor rabble can find a way to part me with my hard-earned galleons before the day is out.”

“Hard-earned?” said Hermione indignantly.

“Cash-poor?” Harry laughed. “My parents left me a fortune, mate. I’m rich, probably.”

Draco smirked.

“Granger,” he said, “Look out that window and choose a shop.”

“Why?” she said suspiciously.

“Do it, would you?”

She went to the window. “Quality Quidditch Supplies,” she read doubtfully. “That’s the first one I saw.”

“Right. Good. Potter, get your shoes. We’re getting you a birthday present. Granger, thank you for your cooperation, you’re a dream to work with, as always.”

“What, new quidditch supplies?” said Harry excitedly. He scrambled out of bed. “That’s corking — thanks, Malfoy!”

“I have concerns about this,” fretted Hermione. “Tell me you’re not about to do something dramatic, like buy out the store.”

“That’s ridiculous,” he said. “I’d have to buy all the cheap things, too and that would be a horrendous waste.”

“Are you trying to make some sort of point?” she asked, exasperated.

“Naturally. The point, Granger,” he drawled, examining his fingernails, “is that someone needs to teach you both the difference between ‘rich, probably’ and ‘rich, definitely.’”

Dark Creatures

Chapter 18: Dark Creatures

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Platform 9 ¾ roared with noise when Draco and his mother stepped out of the Floo booth. The old scarlet steam engine belched smoke over a bustling crowd. The scent of oil and metal hung so strongly in the air he could almost taste them. He waited for the pang of sorrow and anticipatory homesickness to register in his chest, and it did, but it was weaker than he expected, and it warred with an unanticipated swell of eagerness to be on the train and riding away to Hogwarts.

Theo and Pansy emerged from the booth next. Theo waddled out somewhat awkwardly, being saddled with both their trunks. Pansy floated out like prima donna emerging from her dressing rooms, brushed ash from her blouse, and yawned.

They had spent their last night on the Riviera around a bonfire on the beach, making cheese toasties and chatting about all the things they were going to do when they came back to school. After Draco's mother went up, they had stayed awake long past midnight and gone to sleep only when Pansy passed out on Theo's shoulder. Draco's hair still smelled faintly like bonfire smoke.

As they stood blinking in the light of the platform, Pansy's parents hurried forward from the crowd. Their loving daughter greeted them with a heartfelt: "Oh, balls."

"Language," said Narcissa sweetly, and with a sweep of her wand, she smoothed a stray hair into one of Pansy's pigtails. With two taps, she planted an orchid on each hair tie, and kissed Pansy on the head. "Run along to them, darling. They look anxious."

"But I don't want to see them."

“Hurry up and face the music,” Theo muttered to her. “Sooner you do, sooner we’ll be gone.”

Theo’s own father had not made an appearance on the platform. Theo had no discernible reaction to this fact. Instead, he turned and said, in a careless sort of way, “Oh look, there’s Daph. Suppose I’ll go say hello.”

Daphne was pinned between Orpheus and Dido Greengrass and clearly hating every second of it. She had got her looks from her parents: Orpheus was a tall, svelte, steel-eyed man of Scandinavian features, while his wife Dido could have played an emaciated Marilyn Monroe. She leaned heavily on a foxhead ivory cane, and deep bags clung to her eyes. Daphne’s younger sister, Astoria, was with them, but she was sitting in a wheely-chair, and carried a corpulent black longhair cat on her lap.

As they watched, Daphne extracted herself, with difficulty, from her father’s embrace, and limped across the platform to Draco’s group. Her right leg trembled perilously whenever it took her weight, and her irritation with this was clear in how she refused to favor it.

“Hello, you brutes,” she said brightly. “How was your glorious vacation without me?”

“Would’ve been better if you accepted the goddam invitation,” Theo said genially, reaching for her, and she smacked a hard kiss ‘hello’ on his cheek. “Invalids don’t get to pout. Narcissa would’ve rented the Royal Ambulance to get you out there.”

“I told them that. And I almost had them convinced, too, but then *Tori,”* she spat the word sourly, “had to go and take a spill down the staircase, and that was curtains for both of us. It’s been nothing but the baby treatment all summer. They wanted me to come to Hogwarts on crutches — fat chance!”

“So what if Astoria fell?” said Draco, frowning. “What’s that to do with you?”

But Daphne's parents had descended on them, and she was steered away without another word. Meanwhile, the other Slytherin girl was fighting for her life to buck her mother's grip.

"Pansy!" Her mother was a diminutive, dark-haired woman whose sneer erased whatever beauty her features might have offered. "What *are* you wearing? Is that to code? Where's your badge?"

"It's Hogwarts, Mummy, they let us wear pants," sighed Pansy, shrugging off her mother's arm. "Also, hello. It's ever so good to see you, et cetera."

"Merlin's sake, let her be," snapped her father, a man shorter than Draco, whose daughter had inherited his nose. "We get all of ten minutes with her this summer, and you're picking fights? Come aside, Poppet, I've a gift for you…"

Narcissa watched them go with a fretful expression. "I hope they don't make her change," she murmured to Draco. "I took her to get them tailored. They're quite presentable, I thought, and we checked the handbook to make sure…"

"Nah, not to worry. She'll just put them on again once we're on the train," said Theo cheerfully. He shrugged Pansy's trunk over his shoulder. "Couldn't stop that girl with an army. Daph, need help with your trunk?"

"No," Daphne said dourly. "My dad insisted on taking it up. On the bright side, I've got a compartment now, so."

Deciding it was time to make goodbyes, Draco embraced his mother. It was startlingly easy, now; he didn't have to stand on tiptoe at all, and he only had to lift his chin a little to kiss her cheek. She gave him a quick frenzy of kisses over the forehead before turning, unexpectedly, to Theo.

"Now, young man," she said sternly, "you mustn't let my son get you into any sort of trouble."

Draco had a sudden fit of coughing which may or may not have contained one or two unpleasant words.

Narcissa patted his shoulder without looking. “You must try your very best to behave,” she continued, “and make good grades in everything, and earn lots of House points. And you must write to me often to tell me what you’ve been doing. Every week, you understand? I won’t accept anything less, or I should be most disappointed in you.”

Theo puffed his chest out a bit. “I’ll do my best,” he said seriously.

“Good.” She kissed Theo on top of the head, and he appeared to glow. “Now, run along, and help Pansy with her trunks.”

Theo — to Draco’s abject shock — gave Narcissa a sincere and dutiful salute. Then he marched off to regroup with Pansy, head high, hardly swaggering at all.

“I don’t know what that’s about,” Draco muttered, eyeing him. “Highly suspect, if you ask me.”

“In fact it’s rather simple,” said Narcissa, opaquely enough. “Anyway, don’t be jealous, my dove. You’re still my darling boy.”

“Lies and slander. I’ve never been jealous in my life.”

“Oh, never mind, then, dear. Perish the thought.”

“Oi! Draco!”

Harry and Ron wrestled their way through the crowd, staggering with their trunks. Harry had a long, conspicuous wooden box strapped to his back, and staggered under the weight of it, but he was beaming. “I just showed Ron the Firebolt,” he said. “We took it for a run before we left the Burrow. You’ve got to try it. It’s incredible!”

“Careful, Potter, or I’ll hold you to it,” said Draco, enjoying himself. “Hello, Weasley.”

“Malfoy,” said Ron. He wasn’t smiling; in fact, he looked a little sour. “Good gift, mate.”

“Thank you. I did think so.”

Narcissa cleared her throat politely. “Draco,” she said, “these are your schoolfriends?”

Draco twitched. “Oh,” he said, and his eyes darted for the train, calculating how quickly he could cross the distance to it. It would be easier than explaining to his mother that his “schoolfriends” were the two most famous blood traitors she was ever likely to meet.

But there was no use; Harry and Ron had put them all in an inescapable situation, and there was nothing for it but truth or lies. *Gryffindors.* “Yes. This is… erm. Well, for starters, this is Ronald Weasley.”

Ron — who had probably never in his life been introduced *before* Harry Potter — gave Draco a glance that was surprised, and perhaps even slightly grateful.

“Weasley, this is Narcissa Malfoy. My mother.”

“A pleasure,” she said, shaking Ron’s hand. Draco watched her reactions closely: her smile was a touch brittle, perhaps, but nothing discourteous. “You’d be the Ronald who sent him that lovely pair of spectacles for Christmas?”

Ron pinked. “Yeah, that’s me,” he said. “Er. We meant to get him something nicer, but they don’t let second years go to Hogsmeade, so…”

“It was a perfectly wonderful gift. I’m so glad we’ve been introduced. Please give my regards to your mother — Molly, wasn’t it? Molly Prewett, and her husband…” Narcissa wet her lips, hesitating.

“Arthur,” muttered Draco.

“Arthur! Yes. Your father, Arthur Weasley.” She smiled, with teeth.

Ron, looking faintly floored, said, “Yeah. That’s him.”

She turned to Harry. “And you,” she said, tapping her forehead wryly, “are Harry Potter.”

Draco jumped.

Harry shrugged, and nodded, having presumably learned to accept these sorts of introductions without awkwardness. “Yup. That’s me. Hullo.”

“Did I tell you, Mother,” Draco said quickly, “that Weasley’s mum is the last living Prewett? After the war, I mean. Which technically makes Ronald here a scion of the House of Prewett, as well as Weasley. Seven children, too, and only one girl — I don’t suppose you remember Aunt Cedrella—”

Narcissa put her hand on Harry’s shoulder. “The Wizarding World owes you a priceless debt,” she said, and Draco’s mouth froze in the shape of his stifled next word.

Harry shifted uncomfortably. “Oh. Well, that’s awfully nice of you, but —”

“To say nothing,” she added, “of the debt I owe you for freeing my husband from the Dark Lord’s clutches.”

Draco and Harry exchanged wild-eyed looks.

“Yeah, don’t mention it,” said Harry stiffly. “I’m glad I could, er… help him.”

“Do not think I do not understand the sacrifices it required,” said Narcissa. “I see them. I hope that in another time, if you ever have a need, we shall have the opportunity to repay you for those sacrifices.”

“Thanks. I… sort of hope not, actually?” Harry shrugged his Firebolt higher on his back, and glanced at the train, which obligingly screeched and belched smoke. “Well, we’d better get going. Er, Draco? You ready?”

“Yes,” said Draco, and snatched up his things. “Let’s go — have to run — bye, Mother! Don't forget to write!”

Together, they scrambled onto the train.

Steam billowed from the engine, and it heaved away from the station just as Ron’s foot left the ground. Harry pulled him up, and they slammed the door shut as King’s Cross shrank into the horizon.

“No offense, but your mum’s weird,” Harry told him, as they bustled down the aisle, searching for compartments. “What did she mean, ‘free’ your dad?”

“Yeah, she makes it sound like he was some double agent or something,” said Ron humorously. “Was he a secret Order member all along?”

Draco had no idea. He understood less and less about his mother the older he got, and today had been a profound regression on almost every score. “I don’t know,” he said. “I’m as surprised as either of you are; I thought she’d hate both of you, to be perfectly frank.”

“Cheers,” said Ron, elbowing him. “I thought the feeling would be mutual. Turns out, you’re the sore thumb in the family. Should’ve expected.”

“Makes two of us, Weaselbee. My congratulations to Percival, by the way, on Head Boy. Least one member of your family’s not a perennial disappointment.”

Ron’s expression darkened. “Don’t bring that up around him,” he warned. “You’ll never hear the end of it. We’ve only just pawned him

off on Penelope, and the twins have been riling him up all day. They charmed his badge to say ‘Bighead Boy.’ Wonder when he’ll notice.”

They set off down the corridor, seeking an empty compartment.

Near the very end of the train, they ran into Hermione. She had yet to change from her muggle clothes, and wore some fitted muggle pants of a rough-hewn fabric, with a voluminous turtleneck jumper in gray and red stripes. It was a perfectly ridiculous outfit, but she looked enviably cozy and warm.

She also carried a cat. It was bright orange, the size of a tiger cub, and half as amicable.

“Oh, good, you made it,” she said brightly. “Boys, this is Crookshanks.”

The four of them ogled each other. It was hard to say whether the animal or the wizards were less happy about it.

“Hermione,” Ron said, in pained tones, “Scabbers is a rat.”

“Yes! So what?” The defensive edge in her tone suggested that Hermione did indeed know exactly ‘what.’ “He won’t be a problem! He’s perfectly well behaved.”

As if perturbed by the sound of lies, Crookshanks gave a beastly yowl and tried to claw his way out of his arms. She wrapped her arms around his chest and hoisted him firmly into place. “Anyway,” she said firmly, “the people at the emporium said no one else would take him. He deserved a second chance.”

“At what?” said Draco, veering out of reach of the claws. “Manslaughter?”

“You’ll all come around,” she said firmly. She hauled open the door to the last compartment, refusing to look at them. “He’ll grow on you.”

“Like gangrene,” muttered Ron. Draco coughed in discreet agreement.

The last compartment was already occupied, as it turned out — but not by a student. A man slumped against the window, clothed in a rumpled herringbone jacket with more patches than buttons, and a shabby, browned-out traveling cloak that he’d wrapped around himself like a blanket. His hair was too gray for his face, a silty brown like autumn earth.

His face was scarred indiscriminately, like someone had taken a fork to it. Draco balked a little at the sight of it.

“Didn’t think adults took the Express,” mused Ron.

“He’s a professor,” said Hermione. “R.J. Lupin.”

As Draco turned to her in amazement, ready to inquire whether she’d dabbled in Legilimency over the summer, Ron spared him the embarrassment by asking: “Blimey, how’d you know?”

She pointed. “It’s on his luggage.”

“Oh,” said Ron. Draco tittered, as if he, too, had made that deduction, although privately he was relieved Ron had beat him to the punch.

“Defense Against the Dark Arts, if I had to guess,” she added, “since there’s a vacancy again.”

Draco sat down opposite the professor, kicking his feet up on the seat. “Think we should just beat the piss out of him up-front, and save ourselves the trouble later on?” he asked, yawning. “Or at least check if he’s a Death Eater or You-Know-Who in disguise? Since Dumbledore’s obviously not heard of vetting.”

“Quirrell was arcanely possessed,” Hermione said primly, sweeping his feet out of the way with a swish of her wand, and settling on the

cushion. “It was Dark magic. And Podmore was under Imperius. Neither of those things reveal themselves with a background check.”

“No, but they might with a taste of Veritaserum.”

“Incredibly invasive,” she said severely, “and inappropriate, as far as school policy goes. You can’t go poking around in people’s heads just in case they might be Death Eaters — then you’ll *really* have trouble filling the job.”

“Anyway, he’s got to be desperate, Dumbledore,” said Ron. “The job’s jinxed. How many qualified wizards do you think are lining up to take a job where the last two blokes got knocked off inside of a year? You burn through enough good professors, and suddenly, the weirdos start looking pretty good.”

Harry sat down gingerly next to the sleeping Lupin. Ron squeezed in with Hermione. All three of the boys had shot up a few inches over the summer, and the same compartment that had seemed cavernous as first years now only tenuously admitted the five of them.

A faint, tinselly whine pierced the air. Harry winced, and dug from his satchel what appeared to be a quaffle-sized lump of socks. Peeling them away, he revealed a Pocket Sneakoscope, which glowed and spun even faster when it touched Harry’s palm.

“Is that a Sneakoscope, Potter?”

“Yeah. I think it’s broken,” he said apologetically. “It’s been going off ever since I left this morning.”

“It’s not broken, it’s merely junk,” Draco snorted. “Pocket Sneakoscopes are a scam. They’ll spin and squeal whenever you bring them near loud noises, or bright lights. Trash that thing first chance you get, and buy a proper Sneakoscope from a reputable vendor, if you want one.”

Harry glanced away guiltily. “It was Ron’s birthday present,” he said. “He brought it back from Egypt for me.”

Draco blinked. “Oh,” he said. Hermione was glaring at him. Wonderful. “Well. Then its… sentimental value is, naturally… inimitable.” He looked at her. She rolled her hand in a go-on motion. “Forget what I said. I… apologize… for any offense.”

Ron, who had been staring at his shoes ever since Draco started talking, shrugged. “Nah, mate,” he said crisply. “S’fine. Doesn’t work anyway, you might as well.” He wiped his nose on his sleeve. “I mean, it’s no Firebolt, so.”

“Ron, c’mon,” said Harry pleadingly, but the professor gave a snort, and they all fell still, like rabbits in the presence of a sleeping fox.

In the awkwardness that followed, Draco, Harry, and Hermione played a silent game of ‘who’s going to speak.’ Draco drew a finger across his own throat, shaking his head. Harry and Hermione turned to each other and did some sort of strange game of hand gestures that involved smacking their palms and making different shapes with their fingers. Finally, Hermione smacked her hand over Harry’s fist, and pointed at him. Harry sighed.

“Oh, Ron, you’ll think this is funny,” he said. “Your dad thinks I’m going to go looking for Sirius Black.”

All three of them looked at him seriously.

“Are you?” said Draco.

Harry blinked. “Of course not,” he said, irritated. “Last I checked, people were more worried about him coming after *me.”*

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione said, knitting her fingers together. “You don’t think… you have to be careful.”

“I am careful! I don’t want to get killed, do I?”

Ron chuckled, “Mione, he’s not about to go running after a murderer. He’s thick, but he’s not that thick.”

“Thank you,” said Harry, “and piss off, respectively.”

“You *must* admit that it sounds like something you’d do,” she said to Harry. “I mean, first Quirrell… then Yaxley…”

“I was eleven, that first time,” said Harry firmly. “And the second time, it was Nott who started it. Just because some loony’s got it in for me doesn’t mean I’m going to go all… Batman.”

“Well, that’s good to hear, but you must understand why I’d worry.”

“What’s a Batman?” said Ron, mystified.

“I don’t know,” said Draco honestly. “If someone who betrayed *my* parents broke out of Azkaban, I would consider it.”

There was silence in the compartment.

“What do you mean, he betrayed my parents?” said Harry tonelessly.

Draco turned from one face to another, seeking recognition. “Well,” he said helplessly, “I mean — didn’t anyone tell you? The story of the Potter murders? I wouldn’t have… Merlin, Potter, I wouldn’t have mentioned it, but I thought you knew.”

“What’s he got to do with them?” demanded Harry.

“...Black knew your father. Before he turned coat on the Order.” He paused. “He was the Potters’ Secret-Keeper, in Godric’s Hollow. The night after they died, he went after Peter Pettigrew.”

Harry stared. Draco said weakly, “Nobody’s ever told you?”

“Harry, I’m so sorry,” said Hermione tenderly. “It’s in *Modern Magical History.* I didn’t think.”

Harry blinked. He wet his lips, and Draco wished suddenly that they could all Disapparate from the room, to give him a modicum of privacy. It wasn't dignified to catch a man with his trousers down like this.

"It's okay," Harry said bleakly, after a moment. "I've sort of gotten used to everyone knowing more about my life than I do."

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione, and with a flurry of movement she had crossed the carriage to wrap him in a fierce hug. In her haste she displaced Crookshanks, who leapt into Draco's arms with a fearsome yowl, and Draco hissed as the claws dug into his legs.

The *things* he tolerated for these people.

The Hogwarts Express pressed north through darkening swells of wilderness. The sky knitted over with clouds and dimmed to the color of coal, while lightning flickered in the distance, small knives of light dancing on the horizon. People raced back and forth past the door of their compartment, their laughter echoing queerly in the long train.

At one o'clock, the trolley woman arrived, and Harry bought them all Cauldron Cakes, which put Ron in better spirits, since it freed him from the tyranny of Molly Weasley's premade sandwiches. Hermione took out her History of Magic essay and insisted on peer revision, which was fine by Draco, since he'd wanted to edit his essay anyway, but led to much groaning from Harry and Ron.

Mid-afternoon, rain rolled down in a battery across the hills, accompanied by a gun-salute of thunder, and lashed the windows. The train rattled and the wind roared, and still, Professor Lupin remained unmoving. Hermione took some of Draco's Cauldron Cakes, and they had a brief, highly litigious argument over whose property rights were at stake, until Harry threatened to just go buy more, which they both begged him not to do, as it would moot the point of contention. Then he gave the cakes to her anyway. He didn't like sweets that much.

“Blimey, it’s black as pitch out there,” said Ron, squinting at the black mirror of the window. “We must be nearly there.”

As if on cue, the train started to slow down.

“Speak of the boggart,” Ron said cheerfully. “Bang-on. I’m starving.”

“We can’t be there yet,” said Hermione, checking her muggle watch. It had a pink strap with roses on it. Hermione, Draco noticed, owned rather a lot of accessories in pink.

“So why’re we stopping?”

The robust pumping of the pistons faded to a faint *tsh-tsh-tsh,* and then vanished under the pounding of the rain. Harry poked his head into the corridor. “Everybody thinks we’re getting out,” he said. He lifted his voice: “Oi! Neville! D’you know why we’re stopping?”

Someone said something warbly and muffled, and Harry shook his head. Draco stood up, intending to join Harry’s investigation in the corridor, but as he did so, the train slammed to a halt. A jolt rocked the carriage, and he tumbled down on top of Hermione — and, by extent, Crookshanks, who gave a tortured yowl and sprang away. A small thunder and racket of cries from throughout the train told them that luggage had been knocked from its berth.

“Ow!”

“Sorry,” he muttered, prying himself apart. He’d fallen hard on her lap, and Hermione’s knees were none too hospitable on one’s rear, but he couldn’t rightly blame her for that. He pulled out his wand and gave her a once-over to ensure he hadn’t banged her up. “Not hurt, are you?”

“No,” she said, rubbing her head where it had knocked against his. “I’m alright. But what on earth happened to the train—?”

At the same moment, the lights went out.

“What’s going on?” said Ron’s voice from behind Harry.

“Ouch! Ron, my foot!”

“D’you think we’ve broken down?”

“We must have done,” said Hermione, though she didn’t sound certain. “The Express doesn’t make stops.”

Something squeaked, and a figure moved to the window, scrubbing away a patch of fog. A flicker of lightning filled the compartment, and Draco could see that it was Ron, peering out the window.

“There’s something moving out there,” Ron said. “I think people are coming aboard.”

“I’m going to go and ask the driver what’s going on,” said Hermione, businesslike. “I’m sure there’s an explanation.”

Draco grabbed her wrist as she rose to leave. “Don’t,” he said suddenly.

“What? Why not?”

He couldn’t explain it — maybe it was the dark — but a cold hand of foreboding trailed its nails down his spine. “It’s like you said. This train doesn’t make stops,” he said. “Ever. We have no idea what’s happening up there.”

“It’s the Hogwarts Express,” she said slowly. “We’re perfectly safe.”

“Yeah?” he said. He could feel her pulse against his thumb, and it was fast. “How sure are you?”

The compartment door slid open. Everyone startled, but a girl’s voice cut through the dark: “Who’s there?”

“Ginny?” said Ron, moving away from the window. “That you?”

“Ron? Harry?”

“Yes, Ginny, it’s us!”

“Oh, hullo, Hermione! I was looking for Ron.” Ginny fumbled into the compartment. The door squealed closed behind her. “Mad, isn’t it? I overheard someone saying we hit something.”

“That’s impossible. The train is warded with Repulsion Charms, so animals don’t come near the tracks. I read it in—”

“Oh, shut up, we all know where you read it,” Ginny said good-naturedly. “Can I invite Neville? He got scared and went looking for a prefect.”

“Quiet!” said a hoarse voice suddenly.

A small, shivering light bloomed in the compartment, perched on the tip of Professor Lupin’s wand. The cool glow drew deep lines in his face.

He stood up in a single, rigid movement, like that of a soldier. None of them spoke.

“Stay where you are,” he rasped. He crossed to the door and reached for the handle. With a rattle, it slid open before he touched it.

At first, Draco mistook it for wandless magic. Then he saw something locked around the door: a slender hand, black as ink, thin as a raven’s claw. His heart skipped.

Then, as it slid open, the rest of the creature came into view.

It spanned ceiling to floor, a floating shroud of black coils like smoke, under the dusty cowl of a long cloak. In the place where its face should have been sat a pit, shrouded in fathomless dark, and from the tattered hem of its sleeve protruded a gray, glistening, skeletal hand, its skin scored and peeling like dead flesh.

It drew in a deep, rattling breath, and it sounded like an echo of wind over a distant moor.

The temperature in the compartment plummeted. Frost iced over the windows, and a shiver wracked Draco's spine. His breath turned silver in the darkness. He could feel Hermione's skin turn cool under his fingers, gooseflesh pebbling her arm, but the sole throb of warmth from her pulse point distracted him from the chill. He squeezed, tighter, and felt warmth sprout around the place where his fingers banded her wrist — he clung to it like it was the last living flame on the planet, the last warm thing he could find, and as if from a distance, he heard her hiss of discomfort. He tore his eyes away from the Dementor to look at her, and she had drawn as far as she could into the seat, her knuckles white around her wand, her eyes enormous.

Harry dropped to his knees with a thud, and collapsed. Ron dove to catch him before he hit his head.

The Dementor made to enter the compartment, but it made it no further than the threshold. Lupin had stepped calmly over Harry's body and pointed his wand at the creature.

Draco, who was still clinging to Hermione's wrist in the effort of remaining upright, considered this an inconceivable display of recklessness and supremely impressive nerve.

"None of us is hiding Sirius Black under our cloaks," he said. "Go."

The Dementor gave a rattling howl. Ginny cried out and clapped her hands over his ears, and Draco winced.

Lupin narrowed his eyes. *"Expecto Patronum.* "

A silver beast erupted from the tip of his wand, four-legged, with a long snout and a short, wagging tail. Snarling, it leapt at the Dementor, leaving a glowing trail of white mist. The Dementor gave another shriek and soundlessly swept out of the compartment.

Lupin hauled the compartment door closed in its wake, locked it with a muttered and trembling, *“Colloportus.* ”

In a moment, the lights flickered back on, and the train shuddered into motion. Lupin dropped to his knees — Draco opened his mouth, an embarrassing flood of thanks on the tip of his tongue — and dealt Harry the meanest, fiercest slap Draco had ever seen.

Draco winced.

“Oi,” roared Ron, shoving him away. “What’s the big idea?”

“Wake him up,” panted Lupin, pointing at Harry. “Wake him up! Is he all right?”

But they needn’t have worried: Harry groaned, stirring. He hauled himself up on his elbows and fumbled for his glasses on the floor. “What happened?” he mumbled.

“Harry! Oh, thank goodness — here!”

Hermione snatched up his glasses and pressed them into his hand, shaking quite badly herself. Draco smoothed both hands over his hair and tried to settle his own nerves, which were badly frayed. He still felt cold, too; a coat of frost lingered on the windowpane.

“Who screamed?” said Harry, looking around. His eyes lingered on Ginny, and she scowled at him.

“No one,” she said. “Lupin cast a Patronus, and the Dementor left.” She had gone tremendously pale, and there was a suspicious redness to her eyes, which she scrubbed at angrily.

“Cast a what?” said Hermione.

“That’s a Dementor?” gasped Harry.

“Powerful anti-Dark magic charm,” Draco said to Hermione. He furtively drew his cloak tighter around his shoulders. The piercing

cold had abated, but a chill lingered in the compartment, and the hairs on the back of his neck had yet to lie flat. “Heinously difficult to do, as I hear it. I didn’t know they worked against Dementors.”

“Common misperception. They’re only as difficult as you think they are, young man,” said Lupin bracingly, and something snapped. He broke a large chocolate bar into several pieces, and passed them around. “Eat up. It’ll help.”

Draco eyed the piece in his palm. “Is this enchanted?”

“No, it’s Cadbury.” Lupin pocketed the empty wrapper and hauled open the compartment door. “Alright, Harry?” he said.

It was not a strange question, but it became strange by virtue of his tone: he asked it casually, almost familiarly, as if they’d known each other their whole lives. Harry, who obviously was just as unnerved by this as Draco, frowned and mumbled, “Fine, professor.”

“Good,” said Lupin. “Very good. We’ll be at Hogwarts in ten minutes, I think. If any of you don’t start to feel better, have some more chocolate… I’m going to have a word with the conductor.”

And with that cryptic announcement, he hurried out of the compartment.

Harry pushed himself up on the seat, looking discombobulated and rumpled, at least more so than usual. “What about the rest of you?” he asked, earnestly. “Are you alright? Ron? Draco?”

“M’fine, mate.”

“Quite well, thank you, Potter.”

“Ginny?” He held his hand to help her off the floor. A tinge of color topped her cheeks, but she accepted it, and sprang to her feet.

“I’m fine,” she said briskly. “That Lupin’s got to be something to write home about, if he can produce a full corporeal. I’ve only ever seen

one of those."

"Yeah, that's right, isn't it?" said Ron. "Dad conjured one that time he thought someone was breaking into the Burrow… turns out Bill just forgot his key, and the nutter thought it'd be fun to try and crack the house wards…"

"Bill's a riot," Ginny said wistfully. "Wish he were here. Anyway, I've got to change, we'll be there in a mo. Hermione, come with?"

"Yes, I'd better change, too," said Hermione, springing up to fetch her trunk. "I've never cut it this close, but I got distracted — oh, Crookshanks, no!"

Crookshanks, master of strategy, had taken advantage of the hullabaloo to make a mad lunge for Ron's pocket. There, Scabbers had sequestered himself, squeaking frightfully. Ron shouted and whisked his pet out of the animal's reach.

"Hermione! Get — that — thing — away — from — Scabbers!"

"Fine! Crookshanks, come here," she said and wrestled him into her arms. She turned to Draco, and her expression turned sly and coaxing. "Draco, would you do me a wonderful favor—"

"No."

"Just for a bit! He'll behave!"

"Your nose twitches when you're lying. That, or you need a hanky."

"Oh, fine," she huffed, and went out to change with Ginny.

"Given the choice between a Dementor and that animal," Ron said darkly, "I'd take the Dementor."

Draco shuddered. "Bite your tongue, Weasley. Fortune has big ears."

“Not joking, mate. At least Dementors respond to a patronus. I could cast a full corporeal, and that cat wouldn’t give a damn.”

At the opening feast, Draco listened intently to Dumbledore’s usual remarks about house unity and cooperation. The headmaster warned the first years away from the Forbidden Forest and introduced Professor Lupin, who, as Hermione had predicted, would fill the D.A.D.A. slot. Not a word was said about Runcorn, the Ministry, or why Dark creatures were now permitted to stalk the castle grounds.

“I suppose he doesn’t want to frighten people,” suggested Hermione the next morning. They were marching down to Care of Magical Creatures, their scarves wrapped tight against the nippy air. In the distance, faceless shrouds floated in a foreboding perimeter over the hillsides, staining the overcast sky like ink on gray velvet.

“Sure,” snorted Draco, “because there’s nothing frightening about *those* things, certainly.”

“Well, he’s addressing first years, too, remember. They don’t know it’s not normal. And he wouldn’t want to cause alarm.”

Draco sneered. “Ignorance is cause for alarm. Or at least, it should be.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, and what did you want him to say? ‘Sorry for the nightmares, children, but nothing to be done, nobody’s in control, and we think a murderer might come for you at any moment’? Honestly.”

“I’d give him points for honesty, at least,” he muttered, as they marched into the shelter of the trees.

Hagrid hosted Care of Magical Creatures in a paddock just a few meters into the Forbidden Forest, where the trees were still thin enough that you could clearly see the castle. The grass was springy

and wet beneath their feet, almost breathable, as if the rain had pounded life into the earth.

Their textbooks that year were horrible things, actually, literally monstrous, and it took Hermione's and Draco's combined efforts to pry one open: he gripped the spine and held it still while she pried it apart, and then she stuffed a stone in between its jaws, to keep the page open. Hagrid urged them to "Jus' stroke the spine, all ye need ter do," but though this worked for Harry, who rarely met a creature he couldn't charm, Hermione and Draco's touch failed to soothe the agitated volumes.

"See, this is interesting," said Hermione valiantly. "He's — he's incorporating the textbook into the teaching method. It's a fully integrated kind of learning."

"The thing tried to 'fully integrate' my hand into its gullet," Draco said darkly. "Remind me again why Kettleburn retired?"

He had spoken too loudly; Harry threw a sour look at him. "Thanks, Hagrid," he said clearly. "This is really cool."

"Thanks, Harry!" Hagrid piped up, beaming. If he was bothered by the whispers and sour looks of other students who, like Draco, had little love for their textbooks, he did not show it. "Now, if yeh all got yer books — looks like yeh do, well done, you lot — I'll go fetch the firs' of the creatures. Picked out a real treat fer yeh today, firs' day of classes, didn' wan' to disappoint ye…"

He strode out of the paddock. When he was gone, Draco turned to Hermione.

"I take back what I said about Muggle Studies," he muttered. "All of it. It's the nine o'clock slot, isn't it? If we go now, we can make the first half—"

"Just give him a chance," Hermione said, but she didn't sound altogether convinced. "It's his first time teaching. He's probably

nervous."

"He's nervous? Did that sound comforting in your head?"

Hagrid came back holding a weathered and suspiciously frail-looking leather leash. Lavender Brown gave a cry of delight, because she was a twit who didn't recognize when a creature had the capacity to stomp you to death.

The animal on Hagrid's lead looked like a horse, if horses were designed by someone with murder in their heart. It had the head and wings of an eagle, the talons of the same, and the back of an equine, which altogether doubled, if not tripled, its capacity for bloodshed. Its yellow, beady eyes swept with haughty bloodlust over the assembled children, clearly seeking a subject upon which to enact the terrible violences for which it was wrought. Draco saw it and despised it at once.

"This is Buckbeak!" said Hagrid, slapping the thing's back. It looked at him as though it was too surprised to maul him for it. "He's a hippogriff! Lovely creature, inne? Who wan's to pet 'im first?"

Nobody raised their hand. Draco leaned into Hermione's ear.

"You know, I've heard the *loveliest* things about Charity Burbage—"

"Stop it!" she whispered, but her eyes were darting back to the castle. "We're here now, aren't we?"

Harry squared his shoulders and stepped up. "I will, Hagrid," he said loyally, and Draco, with a sigh, set about drafting a quick eulogy. *Dear friends, we are gathered here today to celebrate the life of Harry James Potter, big of heart and none of brain, who nobly laid down his life for the cause of Sodding Zilch and No Reason At All…*

"To think I could be safe and sound in a classroom right now," he said gloomily, "learning what a fellytone is."

“Selly- phone,” said Ron wisely. Hermione huffed a short laugh.

Harry gave a deep bow to the hippogriff, which, to Draco’s surprise, permitted Harry to pet its flank. A few moments later, at Hagrid’s exhortation, Harry was scrambling atop its back, and it vaulted into the sky. Harry gave a long, gusty holler of exhilaration. Hermione gasped, and clapped her hands over her mouth.

“Oh, my God!”

“There yeh go, Harry!” Hagrid roared, pumping his fist. “Perfect! He likes yeh!”

“He’s so daring,” sighed Lavender. She had grown up a bit over the summer, and now wore a number of beaded charms in her hair, along with feathered earrings that brushed her shoulders. The quantity of silver jewelry on her hands and fingers, none too slim to begin with, had quintupled since June. She and Parvati had both doubled down on their eyeliner, and their nails shone a dark, inky purple.

When Harry landed again, he was met with a raucous cheer. He slipped off the hippogriff’s back, grinning widely, his hair standing electrically on end from the wind of his flight. “That was fantastic,” he said. “Draco, you’d love it. It’s like flying, only rougher.”

Draco said politely, “Thank you, I would rather die.”

“Don’t be a priss! Hermione, what about — okay, you wouldn’t like it. Ron, though, seriously…”

But nobody else could be coaxed onto the hippogriff’s back, and Hagrid spent the rest of the lesson lecturing. It was unclear what they were supposed to be gathering from his lecture, which mostly consisted of him saying: “Watch this! Isn’t he marvelous?” whenever Buckbeak did something of trifling note. At the end of the lesson, he added as an obvious afterthought: “Er — homework! Read the textbook introduction, and, er… choose yer favorite creature from the

book, an' come to class ready ter share it an' say why. Alrigh'! Off ter the castle, there yeh go!"

Word of the new Care of Magical Creatures' professor's pedagogical approach spread quickly through the castle. Later that week, Theo flagged Draco on the way into Potions to ask if it were true.

"Is what true?"

"That Hagrid's got a Class Four monster on a leash down there," said Theo incredulously. "And he's showing it to third years."

"Class Four?"

"It's a Ministry classification indicating a creature's danger to wizards," Hermione said, appearing from the crowd, as some radar in her brain detected all academic questions in a five-mile radius. "It's in the reading he assigned for Wednesday. I did it during lunch. Actually it's quite problematic, because it's biased in all sorts of ways! For one thing, a lot of the ratings are outdated, totally in conflict with the latest research. House-elves are Class One, but considering how strong their magic is, they really ought to be Class Three or Four! And of course, it's totally wizard-centric…"

"Wouldn't want that, would you, in a book meant for wizards," said Theo. "Hello, Granger. Good summer?"

"Quite," she said stiffly. Hermione loathed to be interrupted, and Draco almost would have found it funny, except he knew magical creatures could be a touchy subject.

"Good. I still mean to kill you, by the way."

Her lips twitched. "Still stuck at third rank in Transfiguration?"

"Veritably ensconced in it, my dear. I am comfortable and at home in this rank. I soon intend to purchase building permits, and erect a

great country house for my descendants, of whom there will be many."

"Mazel tov," said Hermione dryly.

Snape barely uttered a word as they filed in. He flicked his wand at the board, and the instructions scrawled themselves in chalk. Draco tried to catch his godfather's eye, but the man was scribbling furiously on a book of his own at his desk.

The first potion of the year typically constituted a pre-test, a sort of evaluation to see how far they had slipped over the summer. It wasn't hard, but from the sweat-beaded faces and frantic muttering that filled the dungeon, the slippage had indeed been vast. Ron was still making careful, deliberate cuts on his daisy roots, wielding his knife like an ax, and Harry had barely stripped the first layer of skin off his shrivelfig.

Draco made a quick job of both pieces of knife work and passed the cutting boards over to Hermione, who was murmuring an incantation over the pot, stirring while she carefully adding six, seven, eight drops of tigerbee honey. Their potion ripened from yellow to a healthy acid green. He grinned at it, and sat back in his chair.

A squeak came from the next desk over. "Orange, Longbottom," drawled Snape. "Orange. Tell me, based on your understanding of a Shrinking Solution, when in the process of brewing should it turn orange?"

Neville flushed and looked down at his cauldron. "N-never."

"Never. And what color is your potion now?"

"O-o-orange."

"And what has caused your potion to turn this color?"

Draco cringed. Neville was hunched over his cauldron, his cheek pillowed miserably on his fist. Snape folded his arms, glowering with unmerciful disappointment.

Slowly, Draco inched one of the shrivelfigs into his grasp, and tapped it thrice on the desk. Neville glanced at the noise, but just as quickly turned away. “I d-d-d-d—” He started, swallowed, and tried again. “Sir. I really d-d-don’t—”

Draco rapped the shrivelfig hard on the desk. Snape and Neville both turned.

“Sorry, sir,” he said brightly to Snape. “Thought I saw a spider.” As he spoke, he held the shrivelfig under his desk, out of Snape’s view, and shook it violently at Neville.

“Oh,” exclaimed Neville. “Oh! Sh-sh-shrivelfigs!”

Snape paused, mouth slightly open, and narrowed his eyes. “What about shrivelfigs?”

Neville scrambled for his book. “I didn’t add them,” he said hurriedly. “Or, no, I added them too late. So the cauldron was too hot, and they burned.”

“That,” said Snape, and paused for an interminable silence, “is correct.”

“It is?” said Neville wildly.

He and Snape stared at each other. Snape appeared to be attempting to cast laser beams out of his eyes and through Neville’s woefully thick skull.

“Start over. There will be no third chances,” snarled Snape, and he swept away.

Draco slumped into his chair, relieved. He daubed a bit of sweat from his temple and glowered at Neville. “What,” he said, once Snape was

well and truly out of earshot, “did we say about prep work, Longbottom?”

“Do it first, so you aren’t rushing later,” he said happily, “but who cares — Merlin, I’ve never got an answer right in Potions before!” And he wiggled gleefully in his seat.

“Right, *you* didn’t, I did, so let’s calm down,” muttered Draco. But he had to admit that it was an unprecedented coup for Neville, who last year would have called it an accomplishment to string three words together in front of Snape without throwing up.

Hermione was smiling at him in a small, sweet, profoundly unnerving way, quite different from her normal know-it-all smirk. It made his cheeks feel hot.

“What?” he demanded.

“That was nice of you,” she said quietly.

“What was?” He pretended not to hear her. He reached for their ladle. “Are those clumps? Did you forget to stir it? I turn my back for thirty seconds, and you let the brew turn to bilgewater. Pass me the funnel, I want a viscosity test.”

After the lesson ended, Neville joined Draco, Hermione, Harry, and Ron on their way to Defense Against the Dark Arts. “Granny says I don’t have to do more than O.W.L. in Potions,” he said cheerfully, trotting up the long staircase to the third floor. “After that, I can d-d-drop it for Advanced Phytomedicine, and Sprout says I can audit that once I’ve taken Herbology IV. But we’re already doing such cool stuff this year, I mean, she let me work with the new monkshood b-b-bulbs yesterday, *and* she’s letting me TA the first years…”

“Neville,” Ron said, patiently, after some time of this. “Not to be insulting or anything, mate. But could you — respectfully speaking — shut the hell up, a little?”

Neville, still riding on a cloud of his own borrowed glory, was unfazed. “Hey, Harry,” he added. “Have you heard about B-B-Black? The *Prophet* says there was a sighting this morning, in Scotland. A muggle spotted him not f-f-far from here.”

“What?” said Harry sharply.

“Yeah. On the m-m-move, it looks like.”

Harry paled. Draco felt bad for him; he thought Neville would do well to, in Ron’s words, ‘shut the hell up, a little.’ But Hermione said waspishly, “And this was a single sighting, was it? Uncorroborated, unverified?”

“Well, yeah,” said Neville awkwardly. “But I mean, it is scary, isn’t it? Seeing as everyone’s s-s-saying he’s going after Harry…”

“Yeah, everyone’s saying it,” said Harry, brusquely, shouldering open the door. “Everyone’s really excited about this scary bloke who wants to kill me. It’s excellent. Keep me posted if he turns up under your bed, would you?”

They filed into their seats. At five past the hour, Professor Lupin ambled out of his office, hauling a chest of drawers behind him. He looked better than he had on the train: though he wore the same shabby herringbone jacket, he had a fresh, unrumpled shirt, and was clean-shaven, which alone restored a decade of youth. He walked with stiff grace, as if each motion were a sentence unto itself, ending with a full-stop of stillness.

“Good afternoon,” he said pleasantly. His voice still went thin when he lifted it, and so he spoke at a conversational murmur that made all the students lean forward to hear. “I’d like to start the term with a bit of a project.”

The chest rattled and banged itself against the wall. Several students jumped and gave a shout.

“Never fear,” said Lupin. He looked down at the floor, smiled slightly, and then looked up again. “This is a boggart. It’s been rattling around a chest of drawers in the staffroom for some time, after a few, ah… young miscreants… trapped it in there, many years ago.” He cleared his throat. “So today, you’re all going to set their wrongs to rights, and deal with this little beastie for us.”

The chest’s topmost drawer rattled ominously. Seamus Finnigan, looking quite eager, said, “So we get to destroy a piece of furniture?”

Lupin covered his mouth with his hand, but his eyes were smiling. “Not quite, Seamus,” he said. “Can anyone tell our incendiary friend why that wouldn’t work?”

Hermione’s hand almost smacked Draco on the way up. (By now, he was well-used to dodging, and had leaned away as soon as he heard the question.)

“It’s a shapeshifter,” she said crisply. “It takes the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most. If you destroy its home, it’ll just move on to the nearest dark, enclosed space.”

“Quite right, too,” agreed Lupin, to Hermione’s delight. “These things are born of the darkness, and they thrive anywhere you have concentrated fear and misery. So we’re going to chase it away. Scare it so badly that it shan’t even think of coming to Hogwarts again. Wands out, please.”

The class rustled and drew their wands. Neville shook so badly he dropped his, and went scrambling after it on hand and knee.

“Accio, ” said Lupin calmly, and caught Neville’s wand in the air. He flipped it around and held it out, handle-first, to Neville, who slumped shamefacedly to the front of the classroom to collect it. “Why so blue, friend?” he said gently.

“I’m n-n-n-not very g-g-good with spells.”

Lupin frowned. “And who told you that?” he asked seriously, as if he desired to have a word with them.

“W-w-w-well, I, I thought that the b-b-b-boggart…” Neville swallowed. “If it’s the th-th-thing you f-f-f-fear m-m-m-m-mmm-mmm—” He choked himself off.

Lupin nibbled his lip. “Hmm,” he said. “Do you like music, Neville?”

“W-what?”

“Music? Muggle music, wizard’s music, any kind?”

“My g-g-g-gran likes Celestina W-Warbeck,” he ventured.

Lupin made a face. “And you?”

Neville swallowed again. “I like w-what Seamus plays.”

Seamus sat up proudly. “Good man, Longbottom.”

Lupin smiled slyly, a twitch on the corner of his lip. “Ah,” he said. “Let me have a guess, then, at what Seamus plays.”

He pointed his wand at the back of the room. From beneath a pile of trinkets on an old shelf, a dusty victrola stirred to life, and a thunder of drums roared from the old speaker.

Last night a little dancer, she came dancing to my door…

Last night, that little angel, she came pumping on my floor…

Lupin’s foot tapped a soft drumbeat on the ground. “Seamus,” he called, somewhat hoarsely, over the music. “Something like this?”

“Yes, *sir!”*

“Thank you, Seamus. Now, Neville, when that boggart comes out,” he continued, pointing at the chest with his wand, “I want you to

humiliate it."

"What, sir?" Neville said, terrified.

"I mean, make a mockery of it. Doesn't matter if it's the silliest, stupidest, low-brow joke you can think of. Nothing's too blue, or too raunchy. I'm giving you a free pass, you understand? Just whatever makes you laugh."

Neville, whom Draco doubted had ever had a raunchy thought in his life, gulped. The musician's guitar snarled and leapt into a chorus. Seamus shook his head back and forth to the music. Harry was beaming. "Okay, sir."

"And when you do that, I want you to yell *Riddikulus.* Big silly spell for a big silly beast. Can you do that for me?"

"I'll t-t-t-t-try, sir."

"Okay. Thank you, Neville. You're being very brave, going first," said Lupin seriously. "The rest of you: once Neville successfully dispatches his boggart, it's going to move around the room. All of you should be prepared to take the same advice I just gave him. Think of something that scares you, and embarrass the living daylights out of it. You understand?" He grinned, and it was a threadbare, ferocious expression. "Make a mockery of evil."

The singer howled, *WITH A REBEL YELL—*

Lupin flung open the drawer.

A dark shape exploded from the chest of drawers, swirling furiously in the air. It landed in front of Neville, thrashing, and resolved into a tall, pinched-faced woman with steel-gray hair, wielding a cherry red handbag.

"Disappointment!" she shrieked. She flew at Neville, wheeling her handbag like a flail. "Disappointment! Squib! Feckless, worthless,

unmagical lump!”

Neville staggered back, mouthing wordlessly.

“Embarrassment! Humiliation! Dishonor! Worthless child!”

“Riddikulus, Neville, come on,” shouted Lupin. “I think she needs new shoes, don’t you? Nice big red ones?”

“R-r-riddikulus!” squeaked Neville.

A crack filled the room. The woman stumbled, and her green blazer sprouted into a flowery clown suit, complete with lace frills. Her shoes sprouted into enormous red trainers, and a red bulb appeared on the end of her nose. Laughter exploded from the classroom, more from relief than anything else: she had stopped shouting at Neville, and everyone was glad.

The boggart paused, confused, and Lupin shouted, “Parvati! Up!”

Parvati sprang up, wand gripped tightly, and the boggart swirled into a bloodstained mummy, trailing bandages. But with the music playing so loudly, it was hard to be scared, and with a victorious jab of her wand, she collapsed it into a pile of toilet paper, laughing all the while. Then came Dean, who turned a giant squid into a plate of calamari, and Ron, who dealt with a giant spider — Draco shuddered — by planting a roller skate on each of its stubbly legs. The music changed, and an older song came on; this wasn’t Seamus’s music, but clearly Lupin’s, who smiled when the track clicked. *Ooh, a storm is threatening… My very life today…*

“Hermione, up!” shouted Lupin, and Hermione sprang up from her desk.

“Got this, Hermione!” hollered Ron. Electrified by his own success, he was in high spirits. “Go get him!”

“Yeah, get on!” shouted Harry. “Beat him up, Mione!”

Draco kicked her ankle, which was his own way of showing support.

She hurried forward. The boggart went swirled into a tall, white-haired wizard in a periwinkle robe, with horn-rimmed glasses and a kindly smile.

Draco startled. It was Professor Dumbledore. But Hermione couldn't be afraid of Dumbledore; she practically worshiped him.

"Miss Granger," he said softly, "I am afraid there has been a mistake."

Hermione gasped.

"The owl that delivered your Hogwarts letter was intended for someone else. It came to you in error."

"No. No, no. No, you can't. Please."

"In consequence, I must revoke your acceptance to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. You must pack your trunk and return your wand to Ollivander's, where it will be given to a true witch."

"No, no, no, please, *please,* you can't, don't send me away, please!"

Hermione broke into tears. She gripped her wand like the last torch on a dark planet.

"I apologize most dearly for this mistake," said Dumbledore, ever gentle. "To minimize emotional distress, your memory of the past two years will be modified—"

"NO!"

"Riddikulus!" shouted Lupin, frantic. "Hermione, riddikulus! Come on! Think of something funny!"

But it was clear this was the last thing Hermione could do. Instead, she lunged forward, slashed her wand, and snarled, *"Reducto!"*

The chest exploded, shattering splinters everywhere. Lupin dove behind his desk for cover. Shouts erupted from the other students, some of whom threw up weak Shield Charms.

Hermione lifted her wand for another go, her tearstained face contorted in fear and ferocity.

He was only half aware of his own actions: his head was full of heartbeat and worry. Draco shoved back his chair and shouldered in front of her.

"Riddikulus," he spat, and with a hard *crack,* Dumbledore appeared again, bare-chested, and mounted on the back of a unicorn. The class gasped, and then broke into a titter of nervous, irreverent laughter. He looked like he could have cantered off the cover of a harlequin novel.

Dumbledore looked down at himself in surprise. "Goodness," he sighed. He tossed his mane of luscious white curls. "Would it were so."

Then he disappeared, and the boggart broke into a dark swirl again, whirling on the hardwood.

Hermione clapped her hands over her mouth, mortified.

Lupin reemerged from his desk. "Very good, Draco," he panted. "It is — of course, when possible — always better to face a boggart in groups — helps confuse it, keeps it from making an impression…"

But now the boggart had started to take form again. It resolved into a tall, slender finger of stone, an obelisk of fresh marble, with a thin skirt of earth. At the bottom, three names appeared in succession.

HERE LIES: LUCIUS ABRAXAS MALFOY…

With the acid of dread pooling in his stomach, Draco watched the second appear under it: HIS LOVING WIFE, NARCISSA BLACK

MALFOY…

He quickly squeezed his eyes shut. But he knew the final line without having to read it, and it blazed on the back of his eyelids anyway: HIS SON, DRACO LUCIUS MALFOY.

“Once more,” encouraged Lupin. “Something funny, Draco… anything funny…”

But was funny about a gravestone? What could ever be funny about this?

“Riddikulus,” whispered Hermione. Her wand sparked feebly. *“R-riddikulus.”*

It trembled. Hermione made an irritated sound — and because no fear was stronger than Hermione Granger’s anger at failing to perform a spell perfectly, she brushed past Draco, advancing on the boggart like she meant to strangle it with her hands next. Stabbing her wand at it, she shouted, *“Riddikulus!”*

The writing vanished from the stone’s face, replaced by a new inscription.

HERE LIES DRACO LUCIUS MALFOY’S

HUMONGOUS EGO

1980-1993

From the fourth row, Ron laughed. It was a pity laugh, but it broke Draco out of his trance. Weakly, he managed: “Real classy, Granger, thanks.”

Her shoulders heaved. She gave a weak smile.

“Well done, Hermione!” Lupin stepped between them and the boggart, ushering them back to their desks. The boggart swirled into a large, round, luminous shape, hovering high in the classroom; Lupin glanced up, casually flicked his wand, and it popped like a balloon. The chorus of giggles that followed sent the boggart spinning, frantically, until it at last collapsed into smoke.

“Congratulations to all of you. You should be very proud of yourselves — grown wizards often struggle to defeat a boggart. Five points to everyone who dealt with the boggart, and an additional five for Draco, whose quick thinking may have spared us several pieces of furniture.”

Hermione blushed. Dean raised his hand and said, “Sir, but Harry hasn’t had a turn.”

“Did he not?” Lupin paused. His eyes flickered at Harry. “I’m sorry, Harry, that’s my mistake. If you would drop by before class on Thursday, I would be more than happy to give you a chance.”

Harry, who seemed disappointed but not upset, agreed.

“Right. Excellent. Homework! Kindly read the chapter on boggarts and summarize it for me… to be handed in next Monday. That will be all.”

On the way to the Great Hall, the Gryffindors fumed with exhilaration about their new professor. To have a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who was not only competent but enjoyable was an unprecedented windfall for everyone, and something to be celebrated indeed.

“Can you believe he listens to muggle music?”

“Did you see me with that eyeball? Did you see it, Seamus?”

“I saw it! I saw it!”

“With a rebel yell…”

“I wonder why Lupin’s fear is crystal balls,” said Lavender thoughtfully. “Maybe it means he’s afraid of the future…”

Hermione snorted. Lavender turned, and her eyebrow soared to a haughty altitude at the sight of Hermione. “Do you have something to say?” she said, politely.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt your conversation with Parvati.”

Lavender said, “Okay, but like, you did. You did do that? Actually? So. What is it?”

Hermione pressed her lips together, fighting a smirk. “Nothing, it’s just… It wasn’t a ball, Lavender.”

“How would you know?” she said stiffly. Lavender and Hermione had never lost much love between them, and Draco theorized it was because they both enjoyed picking on each other too much to relinquish that pleasure and be friends. “I suppose he told you, did he?”

“No,” said Hermione, on the verge of laughter. “I’ve just got eyes. It was round and white and in the sky! It was obviously the moon.”

“Right, because *that* makes so much more sense, Hermione,” snipped Lavender. “What kind of nutter is afraid of the moon?”

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common disadvantages of not being in slytherin include: a lot more inter-house politicking; explaining to your mom, the widow of a death eater, why your high school bestie is Harry Fucking Potter; multiple mutually antagonistic groups wanting to sit with you on the bus; Having To Come To Grips With Your Internalized Classism, Like, For Real Now; cats

common advantages of not being in slytherin include: not getting your ass beat by a hippogriff. all in all? fair trade

next chapter coming on tuesday! get ready for:

-the beloved shopping episode (hogsmeade trip!)

-fan favorite guest stars FRED and GEORGE

-rampant abuse of an invisibility cloak

-the [REDACTED] Politics of Theodore Nott

Hogsmeade, or: The Loyal Opposition

Chapter 19: Hogsmeade, or: The Loyal Opposition

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

It took less than a month for Gryffindor Tower to fall helplessly in love with Remus Lupin. Rarely had Defense Against the Dark Arts ever been this good: aside from the bountiful scores of brownie points he earned by playing music in the classroom, he continued to bring in live creatures for them to vanquish, which instilled everyone with the feeling of heroism and productivity that, they agreed, ought to have been part of D.A.D.A. curriculum all along. He also liked field trips, which endeared him terminally to those students who struggled to focus in classroom environments, like Seamus and Neville. By late September, when he took them out to study a dead kappa on the shore of the lake, he had acquired a gaggle of admirers who stuck close to his side, headed proudly by Lavender Brown and Romilda Vane.

Harry and Ron had developed a remarkable interest in schoolwork. Hermione barely had to remind them to do their homework for Lupin's class. Hermione, however, joined the lessons with less than her usual breathless thrill, and rarely raised her hand unless someone else had tried first.

She was still embarrassed about the boggart.

"You can't possibly still be sore over that, Granger."

The third years picked their way across the pebble beach, carrying baskets of sardines. Lupin had instructed them on the ways to bait grindylows from their hiding spots in the shallows. Every so often there would be a splash, and a student would yell, and Lupin would come hurrying over to verify if a grindylow had appeared.

It was a cold, cloudy morning in October. Dark arrows of geese passed overhead, baying forlornly. Hermione wore an enormous red scarf and a muggle knit cap that covered half her skull, making her hair poof out at the ears.

“It was horribly embarrassing,” she said tightly. “And you needn’t try to comfort me, I know I did terribly.”

“Terribly?” He wrinkled his whole face. “You successfully cast the spell. Full marks. What fresh hell of perfectionism is this?”

“The third time! After blowing up a piece of furniture!”

“Yeah, and it was awesome,” Ron said firmly, slinging his arm around her shoulder. “Are you kidding me? Seamus wants to marry you.”

“All right,” said Draco sharply.

“Truly, Hermione,” said Harry kindly. He flipped a sardine into the water, and it landed with a *plunk.* “Nobody cares if you didn’t get it right the first time. All that matters is you tried.”

Draco winced. Hermione, to whom there were as many kinds of failure as there were synonyms for ‘try,’ did not wince so much as dissolve what little stiff upper lip she had been weakly achieving. She flopped a piece of fish desolately into the water.

None of them brought up what her fear had been. Draco had been too horrified to possibly comment. The idea of a Hogwarts letter being revoked had never occurred to him in his wildest nightmares. It would be like someone showing up on your doorstep to announce you no longer got to use your legs.

He considered trying to reassure her, or at least comfort her with pictures of the gargantuan lawsuit they would bring down upon the castle if they tried, but it never seemed like the right time, and anyway, he didn’t want to start a conversation about their boggarts; it was too likely to lead to questions about his.

Meanwhile, in contrast, Care of Magical Creatures became exceedingly dull. Someone had complained to their parents about the hippogriff lesson, and their parents had complained to someone who complained to Dumbledore, and they now began each week's lessons with an hour of diligent study on flobberworm care. Draco still had no idea what they were supposed to be learning.

"I *do* think I'll drop it next year," Hermione admitted to him, in a low voice, as she ran over his Charms essay. He'd finished hers, and now lounged with one leg sprawled indolently over the arm of his armchair, reading a muggle novel he'd filched from her collection. So far it seemed to be mostly people sitting in chairs talking about murder, but it was slow going, because every few pages he had to stop and get her to explain a word. "I like Hagrid, and he'll be a good professor someday, but…"

"But you don't feel like waiting a few centuries for him to get there?" he drawled, flipping a page. "Or would you just rather do something more important, like watch paint dry?"

"But I don't feel love for the subject," she said defensively. "It's not his fault, I'm just not… the ideal student for his class."

"Of course you're not, you have more than two brain cells to breed together."

She sighed. "Perhaps Kettleburn might have been a better fit," she admitted. He sniffed, and nodded with such vehemence it jostled its head. They were alike in this way, he and Hermione, in that they both learned perfectly well from a book. Why people like Harry and Hagrid seemed to believe that you could only learn to deal with danger by swan-diving right into the bloody thick of it, naked, wandless, and screaming, was a question for people with more time than Draco, and definitely less sense.

Rain started against the windowpanes, soft and inquisitive. The fire crackled cheerfully, and as the clock struck four, a tea set shimmered into place on the coffee table, accompanied with a plate of scones

and roast beef sandwiches. Yawning, Draco swept his wand lazily at the tray and said, *“Locomotor sandwich.* ”

It drifted off the tray and settled into his hand. He bit off a corner, idly, while turning the next page. Hermione watched, one eyebrow cocked in amusement.

“What?”

“You use magic for the silliest things,” she said. “You could just get up and grab it.”

“Why?” he said, mystified. “I’m a wizard.”

“A legless wizard?”

“I’m sorry, are you new? This is a wand. It does magic when I point it at things. I bought it, fair and square, and use it in my own right. It is therefore my fundamental prerogative that I should never *have* to get up for a sandwich, if I don’t want to.”

“You’d *die* in the muggle world,” she laughed. He twisted his neck around so severely that something popped.

“I would not!”

“You’d take one look at a washing machine and faint away. I’d like to see you try to catch the Tube at rush hour.” Her eyes twinkled.

“What’s that, some kind of a disease?” he said warily.

A soft *mrow* introduced a third voice to their argument, and Hermione cooed, descending into the depths of soppy pet-motherhood without a second thought. She opened her arms as Crookshanks slunk up and crawled into her lap. “Hullo, precious,” she murmured. “Where have you been?”

“Does he often answer you, when you ask those questions?” He eyed Crookshanks with distaste, which only intensified when the cat

began sniffing his sandwich. “Or do you share some kind of familiar telepathic communique?”

“Ooh, Draco’s quite testy today. Isn’t he, Crooks? Is it because his Charms essay’s rather sloppy? Is it? I think so, too.”

Crookshanks made an ambitious leap for Draco’s sandwich, narrowly missing, but very nearly clawing him in the ear. Draco made an irritated noise and, deciding that it wasn’t worth a game of keep-away, dropped it on the carpet. The cat pounced on the fallen morsel with a triumphant mew.

It was a mark of Hermione’s mind-addling devotion that she did not even object to the obvious mess. “He’s precious,” she sighed.

“I weep,” he said, “for your children. He that spareth the rod, Granger.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes,” she said, “and how often did your mother *chasteneth* you, exactly?”

“I resent that implication.”

“HERMIONE!” Footsteps thundered down the stairs. Ron burst out of the stairwell, his face dangerously close to the color of his hair.

“Ron,” said Hermione in alarm, putting down her quill. “Is everything alright?”

“I can’t find Scabbers!” he shouted.

She blinked. “Oh,” she said. She looked at Draco, who shrugged, and went back to reading his book. “Would you like me to help look for him?” she asked politely. “I can try a Summoning Charm—”

Ron leveled a prosecutorial finger at Crookshanks. Draco half expected his next words to be *J’accuse. “He’s* been sneaking around the Tower all day!”

“Oh.” Hermione huffed a laugh under her breath, which won her no points for tact, but several for cheek, in Draco’s book. “You’re being silly. Crookshanks wouldn’t eat Scabbers, he would never do that. He’s never even caught a mouse before.”

“I don’t care!” Ron was flying through shades of red at a breakneck pace. He would soon hit the purples, and beyond that, they were in uncharted territory. “Scabbers never went missing before! For two years, he’s lived in that dorm and never left his cage, and then *that* thing comes along—”

“For goodness’ sake!” Hermione laughed shrilly, with a tinge of venom. “Listen to yourself! Scabbers lives in a *cage.* Does Crookshanks sprout opposable thumbs when my back is turned?”

Draco snickered. Ron registered the noise through his anger, and merged Draco into his target without a second thought.

“Yeah, bet it’s real funny for you, Malfoy!” he shouted, swiveling his finger between the three so-called guilty parties. “If that cat had gone after your owl, you could just swan off and buy a new one! Hell, you could buy the whole Emporium! Isn’t that what you told Harry?”

Draco slipped his leg off the armchair, rankled. “Peace, Weasley,” he said curtly. “I’ve done you no wrong, here. If you want a new rat, what’s more, you can just ask—”

“I don’t WANT a new rat! I want SCABBERS!”

This was more affection than Ron had ever shown for Scabbers before, and it bewildered Draco, who thought — based on comments that Ron himself had made — that Ron merely tolerated the animal because his family had foisted the responsibility for its keeping onto his shoulders. But he saw that both he and Hermione had badly misjudged the depths of water over which they tread, and he fell silent, surrendering. Hermione did not do the same.

“Fine,” she said shortly. She snapped her books shut and dumped them on the table. “Let’s check, shall we? Let’s go have a good, long look for Scabbers, and I’ll bet you anything that we’ll find him holed up in your laundry or something. He could nest there for weeks, and you wouldn’t notice.”

“Go on, then!” Ron folded his arms with a satisfied air. He had before never so closely resembled his mother. “Have a look!”

Hermione flashed Draco an apologetic look, and handed back his Charms essay. She and Ron stomped upstairs with the same deliberately heavy steps; it was almost amusing. But when they came down an hour later, Hermione wore a slightly abashed expression, and Ron was stone-faced, silent, and sullen in his triumph. They had not found him.

“I’m sure he just holed up somewhere in the walls,” she blustered. “I can’t Summon him from another room, not without smashing him through a wall, and it wouldn’t be safe to try. But that doesn’t mean he’s *gone,* honestly — this happens, Ron, pets *do* run away—”

“After thirteen years, do they?” demanded Ron. “And why would that be? Not like there’s anything for him to be scared of around here, according to you!”

Draco squinted. “Thirteen years?” he repeated, though nobody was paying attention to him. “Where did you find this Methuselah of rats?”

While Hermione and Ron continued their highly productive and imminently reasonable discussion of the facts, the portrait-door swung open, and the quidditch team stomped in from practice. Rain darkened their red robes to crimson, and they all wore varying degrees of mud in their hair. Draco sighed in profound relief at the diversion.

“Oh, cracking, we’ve got sammiches,” crowed Angelina Johnson, descending on the platter. She stuffed two in her mouth and washed them down with a glug of tea. “M’starfink,” she explained to Katie,

who pulled a face at her. Fred and George dramatically hauled their bodies through the portrait-hole as if returning from war, and flung themselves spread-eagle on the rug.

“When I die,” warbled Fred.

“Which will be soon, if Oliver gets his way,” groaned George.

“—tell the scientists they can have every organ in my body except my ass,” said Fred, “so that Oliver Wood can have the pleasure of beating it, one last time.”

Harry brought up the rear of the squad with Oliver. He still had to hop up over the portrait-door: though he’d grown since first year, he still lingered on the smaller side for his age, with a birdlike frame and inelegant, gangling limbs laced with ropey muscle.

“... think we ought to go over that last play again,” he was saying earnestly to Oliver, “because they could get it, really, with a few more goes. I know Angelina’s got the speed for it, and Katie could pitch the quaffle all the way to Ravenclaw Tower if she needed to, so it’s all down to timing…”

Draco closed his book and decided to read upstairs. He wasn’t jealous. He just didn’t much fancy watching the quidditch team loll around the commons, making such a ruckus that nobody else could hear themselves think, and generally fulfilling their reputation as the most annoying delegation of the most annoying House.

“Well done, squad,” barked Oliver. He carded his fingers through his hair, parting the wet strands. A table of girls in the corner gave a collective sigh. “Good performance. Eat a full dinner, and hit the bed early. We’re doing a double practice tomorrow. Malfoy, are you busy?”

Draco sniffed. “I might be. What’s it to you, Wood?”

“Need a word,” said the captain briskly. Draco sighed. He twitched his head in a way signifying assent, and they stepped into an alcove by the stairs.

“Right,” said Oliver briskly. “You wanted on the team last year, didn’t you?”

“Correct,” drawled Draco, polishing his fingernails.

“For both slots? Seeker and chaser?”

Draco’s lip curled. “If you want me to attend practices as the bloody Reserve Seeker, I’ll tell you something else—”

“No, no, that’s not it.” Oliver shook his head. “Although you should come to practice, really, you’ve left us in a terrible position if Harry ever — anyway. I know you ranked seeker first, but how’d you feel about playing chaser?”

His jaw dropped. He went scrambling for words like someone raking through drawers in search of a quill. “What? Yes,” he said immediately. “I mean, sure. Completely. I’m an excellent chaser. I fly like an eagle and throw like a cannon. Yes.” He took a breath, and said: “What happened to Alicia?”

“Nothing, but she’s on exchange at Beauxbatons,” said Oliver, in the somber tones of someone disclosing the death of a close personal friend. “Our Reserve Chaser graduated last year, and it’s policy to offer open slots to the reserves before we hold tryouts. Of course, this would mean that you’d have to come to practice — all of them. And you’d be Third Chaser, so you wouldn’t get to do any of that flashy pyrotechnic stuff you like, you understand? I run plays simple, and I run them clean. I don’t want to see my chasers acting like they’re trying out for the Globetrotters.”

“What’s a Globetrotter?” said Draco ecstatically. “Never mind, I don’t care. Yes, I can play Third Chaser. Obviously. No flash. Sure. I understand.”

“Good man.” Oliver slapped him on the shoulder, probably leaving a bruise. “Practice is four times a week, six to eight in the morning. That means you’re *in* the air at six, not out of bed at six, remember. I’ll have Harry loan you some robes until we get the next shipment, and if you need a broom—er—”

“I don’t.”

“Well, that’s one less thing to worry about. Oh, but no practice next Saturday, since that’s Hogsmeade,” he added dourly, expression darkening. “They don’t let us book the pitch on Hogsmeade trips. Says it’s bad for ‘student life.’”

“Fascists,” said Draco absently.

“Exactly!” Oliver slapped him on the other shoulder, which meant they would match, at least. “Tell you what, a team like ours could do with a little institutional support. Garrett Goyle is out there buying a platoon of Nimbus Two Thousands for the Slytherins, and I had to pitch a row with McGonagall for permission to practice on holidays… least Flint acts like they want to win, even if they don’t play like it…”

He wandered off, muttering mutinously about faculty rules. Draco remained where he was, shell-shocked.

Harry came over, eating a roast beef sandwich. “Ma’foy,” he said cheerfully, with a mouth full of meat and bread. “Talk to Woob?”

“Hmm?”

He swallowed. “Talk to Wood?” said the dark-haired heathen, grinning. “Did he pop the question?”

In his absentmindedness, he didn’t even think to chide Harry for talking with his mouth full, though it was a disgusting habit and he deserved friends who would tell him so. Draco worked his palm reflectively along his jaw.

“Potter,” he said thoughtfully, “how much could it cost to stock the Gryffindor team with Firebolts?”

It was one of those bright, silver-skied October mornings when everything was brown and golden. A trail of students in cloaks, hats, and scarves wound down the long wooded trail to Hogsmeade, and emerged onto a cheerful cobblestone street walled with Tudor-style buildings and market stalls full of pumpkins and squashes and apples bright as jewels, ruby and emerald. Most of Gryffindor had come, including all of the third years, for whom it was the first trip and therefore especially exciting. Dean and Seamus had brought a twelve-inch list and a shopping cart, which rattled industriously over dirt and cobble on their way through the village gate. Lavender, Parvati, and Romilda, who had formed a proper Pack in the time-honored tradition of teenage girls, dressed up in muggle clothes: tank tops, small pastel cardigans, and checked skirts that would never have passed muster with McGonagall. They seemed to be having fun. Notably absent from the merry crowd was Harry, who despite applications of hook and crook alike had failed to secure a permission form from his ghastly muggles.

McGonagall, the old gargoyle, had been intransigent in this. Draco and Ron had lobbied on their friend’s behalf with several well-argued pleas, but she received them all with equivalent indifference. “Parent or guardian,” she told Harry firmly. “Of whom I am neither. I am sorry, Potter.”

(“‘Sorry’ doesn’t polish my wand,” Draco muttered, on their way out of the office. “As my father would say. Potter, listen, give me two hours and a book on Forging Spells, this can all go away.”

“No use,” said Harry miserably. “She’ll know it isn’t real.”)

Ron had suggested the Invisibility Cloak, but Hermione shot that down with aim no less hateful for being faultless.

“Ron, no,” she said seriously. “Dementors can see through Invisibility Cloaks, and anyway, Harry, you ought to be careful of Sirius B—”

“Don’t say it,” groaned Harry, rubbing his forehead. “If one more person tells me to be careful of Sirius Bloody Black, I’m going to scream.”

Hermione sawed off a triangle of roast chicken, delicately but ruthlessly. “Careful of certain wanted persons, then,” she said primly, and popped the triangle in her mouth, ignoring how Ron was glaring at her.

Relations between the Weasley and Granger delegations of their friend group had not improved since Scabbers’ disappearance. With heroic effort, and herculean levels of diplomacy from Draco in particular, they had worked themselves up from ‘arctic’ to ‘amicable,’ but there was a hard ceiling imposed by the limited patience of everyone involved. The problem was (in Draco’s scholarly opinion) as follows: that Hermione, though brilliant and wry and witty and sweet, could not for love nor money admit to the mortifying state of being in error; and that Ronald, though funny and loyal and kindly and clever, could not for love nor money ever bear to forgive someone who had not first apologized to him.

Harry took it harder than Draco did. It was probably the Slytherin in him, but Draco had never found it difficult to pick favorites. Ron, as the sixth of seven children, seemed to intuitively understand this, and spared most of his wrath for the Cause, treating Draco instead with the gruff dignity of twin soldiers on opposite sides of a war.

So Ron, though he accompanied Draco and Hermione down to Hogsmeade, spent most of the walk in silence, kicking a stone in front of him, clearly wishing that Harry was there. Ron and Harry could keep each other entertained in a locked room until the heat-death of the universe, but Draco and Hermione, who liked to talk about things like novels and magical history and next week’s homework, could together hold his attention for an average of ten minutes before he wished to change the subject.

“Percy made a list of things worth doing,” said Hermione, searching her pockets, “and it’s extensive. The sweetshop, of course, I wouldn’t dream of missing it, but also the post office, and he mentioned somewhere called the Shrieking Shack…?”

“You asked Percy for recommendations?” said Ron tiredly.

“He *is* Head Boy. It's part of his job to answer questions.”

It was a testament to how war had abraded him that Ron had nothing sarcastic to say. He merely sighed and said, “We’ve got to remember to bring candy back for Harry. *Lots.* You hear me, Moneybags?”

“I am going to pretend that question was not addressed to me,” said Draco, “for tact. I would like it observed, for the record, that I am choosing to be tactful.”

“It is so observed,” said Hermione.

“Thank you.”

Ron rolled his eyes.

Honeydukes looked like someone had set paper in front of a very hungry child and asked them to draw their ideal sweet shop. Barrels of candy ran from floor to ceiling on every wall, while boxes of sweets stacked high and overflowed, erupting a pyroclastic flow of candy in all the colors of a rainbow, crossbred with a tornado. Giant creatures made of jelly sat on shelves behind the checkout counter, flanked by chocolate bunnies the size of first years, and at the far back of the room, a giant brick oven blazed the October chill clear out of the room. It smelled of baked cookies and pure, raw sugar, in the almost unpleasant way that good sweetshops do. Draco pocketed a handful of chocolate sea-salt caramels with enchanted molten centers, and picked out a few bits of saltwater taffy. Ron went around with a bag, sweeping great armfuls of everything he could reach, but especially the things Harry liked.

Hermione found a shelf of heart-shaped strawberry lollies the size of her head, and after watching her admire them covetously across the room for altogether too long, Draco rolled his eyes and said, “Oh, get one, why don’t you, your teeth are done for as it is.”

He never claimed to be a *good* influence on his friends’ lives, Draco thought, as they left Honeydukes. (Hermione was smiling broadly in between each lick of her platter-sized sucker, and Ron’s happy-go-lucky attitude had reappeared when Draco dropped his coin purse in front of the cashier and said, boredly, “Give him everything he wants and whatever the rest of this will buy, I can’t be bothered with change.”) But he did occasionally make them more enjoyable.

After that, Ron wanted to go to Zonko’s (“Fred and George swear by it, they say the owner buys them drinks!”) but Hermione wanted to see Scrivenshaft’s, so they arranged a rendezvous at the Three Broomsticks and parted amicably. Hermione ended up buying a new eagle-feather quill, and Draco good-naturedly allowed the clerk to upsell him a probably fraudulent bottle of spell-checking ink. They left as the sun was painting long shadows under the eaves, and autumn leaves rustled around their ankles in dancing anklets of scarlet and gold. Gryffindor colors, Draco thought fondly, before reeling aghast at his own sentimentality and stabbing the emotion stone dead.

On the way to the Three Broomsticks, they passed a side-street that tapered off into a narrow hike through the woods. “Fancy a trip to the Shrieking Shack?” he suggested, nodding to it.

“Hm.” She eyed the severe uphill climb, and he suppressed a grin: Hermione dodged all tasks requiring athleticism with a dexterity her physical body lacked. “What is it, exactly? Percy didn’t say.”

“Most haunted place in Britain,” he said offhandedly. “Creepy as they come. Dead people by the armful. Simply redolent of ghost.”

“More so than Hogwarts?”

“Hogwarts isn’t that haunted, it’s only got twenty or thirty ghosts.”

“Only thirty!”

“Yes, and that’s piddling, for a castle old as Hogwarts. Even the Manor would have more than that, if we didn’t have pest control in.”

“Hmm,” said Hermione thoughtfully. “How do you take care of a ghost? Is it an exorcism, a casting-out procedure? Or is the spirit truly destroyed in the process?”

“See, that’s an interesting question,” he mused. “Naturally the magical energy would have to go *some* where, that’s Merlin’s First Law—”

“Newton’s, but carry on.”

“Call him what you like. Ghosts are palimpsests, they retain an image of a magical body, but without the body itself as a source of power... that’s why they draw their energy from a magical location, they can’t generate it on their own…”

“Theoretically you could create a stasis chamber for a ghost anywhere, couldn’t you? Say, a portable one?”

“Certainly, but the trick would be finding the power — it takes volumes of energy to sustain a Being, even a palimpsest of one, which is why ghosts tether to historical locations, where the magic is old and deep and self-replenishing.”

“Logistically, sure, but I’m right on the theory? You *could* tether a spirit to a material object, then.”

“Possibly,” said Draco, doubtful. “I’m not a necromancer. You’d have to ask my grandfather. But tethering is separate from possession, let’s be clear. Possession is when the spirit occupies a physical form. The spirit gets its energy from somewhere else.”

“That’s so interesting! I wonder when we’ll start learning about it in class?”

He snorted. “Never.”

“Never?” She was crestfallen. “Why?”

“Because it’s Dark Arts,” he said, enjoying how her jaw slackened. “Hogwarts doesn’t teach necromancy. Or spirit magics of any kind. Only Durmstrang does.”

“But that’s… I mean, that’s just excluding a whole category of…” She frowned, folding her arms. “Well, *obviously* they shouldn’t teach Dark magic, but a theoretical course of study, purely for academic purposes… if people are going to do it anyway, they might as well teach it responsibly…”

“Lucius would have agreed,” he said, and her scandalized look was its own reward.

They passed a vendor stall of steaming hot caramel apples. The vendor, a wizened dwarf with lime green hair, had fallen asleep on his stool, and Draco plucked one of the apples for himself. Whistling, he strolled away, ignoring Hermione’s clucks of her tongue.

But as they turned the corner, it flew out of his hand, and danced away down the street, bobbing mischievously. Draco exclaimed in disgruntlement.

Then the air rippled, and Harry’s grinning head emerged, bodiless.

Hermione gasped. “Harry, you didn’t!”

“Did,” he said apologetically, and took a big, gloating bite of the apple. “Sorry.”

“Oi!” said Draco indignantly. “That’s mine!”

“No, it’s not,” said Harry cheekily. He shrugged out of the Cloak and draped it over one arm. “You stole it, and then I stole it, fair and square.” He offered the bitten apple back to him. “Want it now?”

“This isn’t safe,” fretted Hermione. She glanced over her shoulder, as if Sirius Black might come hurtling out of the sky. “And how did you get past the dementors?”

“Secret passage into Honeydukes. Fred and George helped me out.”

“Of course they did,” she fumed. “On their head be it, if you get hurt. That’s all I’ll say.”

“Bet it isn’t,” muttered Harry, and then shot her an apologetic smile. “Sorry. If I get murdered, you can have the first ‘I told you so.’”

“What a comfort!”

Inside the Three Broomsticks, it was dim and cozy and smelled like bread and ale. They found a booth in the corner, and bundled themselves into the cozy nook, while a shower of golden leaves and sunlight trickled past the window pane. Draco sipped from a tankard of butterbeer, which tasted like warm spiced butterscotch, with a thick crust of creamy foam on top. Ron bought a basket of something fried and curly, dubiously titled “pork scratchings,” which Draco refused abjectly to eat after discovering a piece of hair on one of them.

Then Harry showed them just what Fred and George had given him. It was a piece of paper which, when tapped, revealed a working, complete map of Hogwarts Castle. Hermione gasped and snatched it up immediately, trying to study it. Ron gave a crow of delight and ruffled Harry’s hair.

Draco could do no more than put his head in his arms and moan in anger at the infuriating good luck of Harry James Potter, God’s Favorite Child.

“Bloody hell,” said Ron. “So you could see anyone hooking up? Or out of bed?”

“Ron!”

“I’m just saying! You could!”

“It’s an outrageous invasion of privacy. And here’s another thing, Harry. I don’t trust the intentions of anyone who would try to track the whole student population like that.” She drilled the map with her finger. “I mean, what did *they* use it for? These… Marauders?”

“Probably just sneaking out,” said Harry reasonably. “You’d want to know where Filch was, and the teachers, and the prefects on patrol…”

“Easier to do the enchantment on the whole castle,” Draco mumbled into his arms. “And less invasive to track everybody than to track only a handful. Nobody’s singled out.”

“Yeah. Hey, you alright, mate?”

“No,” he said. “I hate you desperately. I want you to die.”

“Take a number,” said Harry cheerfully. “Refill?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Hermione sipped her butterbeer, leaving a mustache of froth on her lip. Draco tugged out his handkerchief and dangled it, smirking, on one crooked finger. She pinked and snatched it, scrubbing at her mouth. “Well,” she said, “I will say this. I’ll be a lot less worried about Sirius Black, now we have a way to monitor the castle perimeter.”

“Comrade Granger,” muttered Draco, and snickered when she hit him.

“Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs,” read Ron doubtfully. “Odd names. Must be nicknames, right?”

Draco grunted. “Or purebloods, more likely,” he said. “Dodgy names come with the territory. I’ve probably got a cousin named ‘Wormtail’ somewhere.”

“Oh, here’s an idea,” said Hermione brightly. “Let’s check for Scabbers!”

Draco tensed. Though he kept the party line (being that Crookshanks was a maligned innocent under persecution from prejudiced authorities), he secretly found it probable that the facts of the matter laid on Ron’s side, and that poor Scabbers, after several weeks missing, had exited this mortal vale of tears. That is: he doubted, very much, that Hermione would find him.

“Does it show pets?” asked Harry hesitantly. “I suppose it does, for Mrs. Norris… oh, and there’s Crookshanks, in the girls’ dorm…”

But none of them saw Scabbers on the map.

“Wow,” said Ron frostily. “Look at that! He’s not there.”

“Let’s — look somewhere else, then,” said Hermione, paging through the flaps. “He’s certainly here.”

“Nah, it’s fine,” said Ron bitterly. “It doesn’t show any of the other ghosts, so.”

“Oh, please! Stop being so dramatic.”

“Dramatic, am I? How about I drop that beast from the Tower window, and then we’ll see how ‘dramatic’ you are?”

Hermione recoiled, turning pale, and abruptly wriggled out of the booth. “I’m using the loo,” she said shortly. “And if you can’t be civil, Ron, I — well, I don’t suppose I’ll bother coming back.”

Draco sighed. “Granger, don’t be—”

“Don’t be what?” she snapped. Then, seeing his expression, she softened. “Never mind,” she said. “I’ll just… go powder my nose.”

She disappeared into the sea of cloaks, leaving Draco with Ron.

Ron stared out the window sullenly, cold October light paving his face and leaching the color from his ruddy hair. Draco spun his signet ring around his finger, absently, while he debated whether or not to say something.

“Weasley,” he said, after a moment.

“What?”

He caught his signet ring and covered it with his palm. “Have you heard the one about the wizard in the bottomless pit?”

Ron looked up. Draco shrugged.

Sitting back, he cast his eyes over the Three Broomsticks, giving Ron space to compose himself. He noticed a dark-haired wizard and a blonde witch perched side by side at the bar, both of them stock straight, as if someone had surgically welded some iron to their spines at birth. As he watched, the wizard disembarked from his stool, and it was Theo, dressed out of uniform in a charcoal overcoat and sage green scarf.

He murmured something into Daphne’s ear, and ducked out of the bar, sounding his exit with a jingle of the bell. Draco turned and watched through the window as he crossed the street and ducked into the shelter of an alley, where he disappeared.

Draco frowned.

“Did Potter leave his Invisibility Cloak?”

“Think so,” said Ron. “S’here. Why?”

“Let me borrow it for a moment.”

Draco threw it about his shoulders and flipped up the hood. Moving carefully, he slipped out of the Three Broomsticks and crossed the street — ignoring the occasional cry of surprise when he bumped into someone who hadn't seen him coming. He steered clear of puddles, and gripped the Cloak tighter when the cool wind threatened to rip it from his head.

In the alleyway, Theo had joined a pair of wizards in hooded cloaks. Draco didn't recognize them, but they all had their cowls up, so all he could make out was the foremost tip of their profile. They huddled together in the alcove under the eave, shielding from the windchill of dusk.

"...word of Black's whereabouts, as if it isn't obvious…"

"Obvious, is it, Jugson? Please do enlighten the rest of us."

"Going back to his family, isn't he? His traitorous bitch of a cousin's got her own mansion, and the Ministry won't touch it with a— ow!"

The other wizard had backhanded him.

"Speak of Narcissa that way again, and I will make her a gift of your thankless tongue," he said coldly. "She is a great lady. She is not to blame for the sins of her husband."

"What sins?" said Theo boredly. It was the first time he'd spoken; he leaned against the wall, arms folded, staring at the ground. "Crying Imperius? Isn't that what you did?"

The other two balked at his audacity; Draco was nearly impressed. The first wizard, Jugson, snarled, "I was in Azkaban while you mewled in nappies, boy—"

"And I weep for you, I truly do," said Theo, examining his fingernails. "We all missed you at the christening."

The second wizard cuffed Theo on the ear. He yelped and staggered away, clutching his head.

“Ow!”

“Mind yourself, Theodore.”

Jugson, pleased by Theo’s misfortune, returned to his original point. “If not his cousin, then the house,” he insisted. “Grimmauld Place, or Witherfell, even.”

“Witherfell has sat empty since the death of Regulus. It is cursed beyond habitation. If he returns there, he shall surely die, and he knows it.”

“But it is his by rights,” Jugson insisted. “Cursed or not, its walls and stones are his to break and bend.”

“Bellatrix’s,” said the second wizard sharply. “Not his. Never his. Walburga ensured it.”

“Bellatrix Lestrange, who’s in Azkaban?” Theo said, sounding amused. “Master of a house she’ll never see again?”

“The Laws of Blood are old and strange, Theodore,” said the second man coldly, ignoring this. “It is hers until death… unless, of course, Regulus named another heir.”

Jugson threw his hands skyward. “Not this, Sibby.”

“It’s plausible.”

“Regulus Black did not write a bloody *secret will,* and if he did, he wouldn’t name you, a man he never even met—”

“I never claimed to *be* the Secret Heir,” said the second wizard indignantly. “But for a man in his position, without issue, at frequent risk of life and limb, it would have been exceptionally strange—”

“He had two lawful cousins! Both married! One pregnant!”

“In the female line,” sniffed the wizard.

“You old chauvinist,” said Jugson amusedly. “If I had a galleon for every conspiracy theory I’ve heard about Regulus Bloody Black....”

“Are there many?” inquired Theo.

“Course there are,” snorted Jugson. “He disappeared, didn’t he? Walked out one day and never came back. No body, no will, evidence. Broke his mum’s sweet old heart.”

A slot opened in the wall behind them, and a pair of beady eyes peered out.

“Password?”

“Morsmordre,” intoned the second wizard. The slot closed, and part of the brick wall swung open, revealing a secret door.

The two wizards and Theo filed inside, and the door swung hurriedly closed behind them.

Draco let out a long breath he’d been holding.

A gaggle of Hufflepuffs passed by, chattering boisterously. The sun inched closer to the rooftops, carving half the street into a canyon of shadow, and storefronts blazed with the last rays of afternoon. The taste of butterbeer had gone sour in his mouth, and he laved his tongue over his teeth, wishing he could brush them.

He wished more that he could speak to his mother. He wondered if Snape would take a letter that evening, if he begged him.

Why didn’t you tell me Regulus was a Death Eater? Why didn’t you say he disappeared?

A trio of familiar heads bobbed out of the Three Broomsticks, one red, one black, one bushy.

“...don’t know where he went,” said Ron, fastening his cloak. “Took the Cloak and scrammed. Maybe he forgot something up at the castle.”

“Wouldn’t explain why he needed the Cloak,” said Hermione, worrying her lip. She peered up and down the street. “Did he seem worried? Was he all right?”

The concern in her tone would have warmed the cockles of his heart, if he cared about such things, which obviously he didn’t.

“He seemed fine. Bit mysterious, but that’s Malfoy, for you. Sooner gnaw his own arm off than answer a personal question, I swear.”

Draco waited for one of his loyal and generous friends to defend him against these scurrilous allegations, but each soundly disappointed him. Backstabbers, the lot of them. Deserving of punishment.

“Try the map?” Hermione suggested tentatively. “See if he’s gone up to the castle? Or at least check if he’s on the grounds— *oh!”*

Her hat leapt from her head. She squealed, spinning around, and made a grab for it, but he danced it out of her range, laughing.

“I — *oh,* Draco Malfoy, I can’t believe I was worried about you!” He let her snatch it back. Hermione scowled. The wind and the surprise had turned her cheeks the color of honeycrisps, and her hat-hair had reached heretofore uncharted measures of volume. It was sort of like getting glowered at by a winsome hedgehog. “Is that the big idea? A dumb prank?”

“Good one, mate,” Harry laughed, holding out his hand for the Cloak. “Got to give it to you, I didn’t expect it.”

Ron was snickering, too. Draco thought about telling them what he'd seen, but he didn't even know himself what to make of it. He needed to put his thoughts in order. And Harry had said outright that he wasn't interested in any more gossip about Sirius Black.

They waded back up to the castle through a striped corridor of sunlight, shadow, and fallen leaves. Ron and Harry jabbered merrily about their haul of sweets and the various ways the Marauder's Map would make their life easier — "No more Percy!" Ron said happily, "no more Filch!" — and Hermione, embroiled in the fight of her life between curiosity and disapproval, was struggling not to join in.

As they cut through the last stretch of trail, Draco noticed a dark shape flitting through the trees. It was a stray dog, sprinting through the underbrush, tongue lolling joyfully from its mouth. At first, he thought it was Fang, but it was the wrong breed — it was a black German Shepherd, its tattered ears shaped like mountain peaks, its body thin and skeletal from underfeeding. But it ran with a breathless, breakneck speed, as if it were a mere puppy, and it let out little yips of excitement and joy as it careened through the sun-streaked forest.

"Did you see that?" he said, but the others did not; and when he blinked, it vanished into the coppery underbrush, leaving him to question whether it had been his imagination after all.

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and... spooky season arrives to hogwarts castle. next chapter goes up this weekend! it will involve:

-quidditch!

-aerial action scenes

-oliver wood's worst nightmare

-another pair of very special cameos

Wronski Faints

Chapter 20: Wronski Faints

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

With a few days until the first quidditch match of the year, the Scotland climate remembered that it was, in fact, Scottish, and erupted with an ocean’s worth of storms.

But Oliver Wood, who was also, in fact, Scottish, refused to take this slap from his ancestral grounds, and with the ancient furore of the clans, he shepherded his vassals onto the pitch through swells of thunder and rain alike, emptying bellyfuls of Shakespearean curses at the heavens, often shouting himself voiceless in the course of a single lesson.

Draco Malfoy, who was English, would have just as soon stayed inside.

“They’re going to cancel it, aren’t they?” he begged Harry (of origin indeterminate, but tolerance respectable). “They must. They can’t expect us to play in this.”

“You’d better hope they do,” said Harry darkly, peeling the gray leech of his sock from his foot. He twisted it, and emptied almost a gallon of water onto the floor. “Can you imagine what Wood will do if they don’t?”

Chilled to the bone, Draco shook his head. Oliver had become nearly unbearable as the match approached. He was temperamental and irritable, prone to snapping at all of them, especially Fred and George, who admittedly took joy in provoking him. At the last practice before the match, they had pretended to miss every bludger that came their way, which drove Oliver into such fits of apoplexy

and fear that afterwards they had to talk him down from a panic attack in the shower.

“We’re sorry about that one,” George admitted to Draco, as they shrugged on their school robes. “Didn’t think he’d take it *that* seriously, to be honest. It’s kind of a tradition — we always fake him out before the first game of the year, pretend to lose our edge. He must’ve forgotten.”

“Not like he didn’t get us back, either,” Fred said glumly, casting a Waterproofing Charm on his cloak. “Last year, he made us fly practices in cheerleader uniforms for a month… I miss the old Oliver.”

“Joke’s on him, we looked fantastic,” said George. “I have shapely thighs.”

“Course you do, Georgie. Best in the family.”

A gust of wind shuddered violently through the bleachers above them, which groaned under the strain. Water gushed from the eaves.

“The visibility is *zero,”* Draco protested. “It’s asking for a crash. Hell, I’m worried for *me,* let alone Potter, and he’s out there in glasses.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, with what Draco thought was rather a lot of sass, for someone who had flown into the goalhoops earlier that day.

George shrugged. “It’ll probably clear up,” he suggested. “Chin-up, kiddies. Maybe Flint will fly into a tornado, and we’ll kill two birds with one stone.”

But it did not clear up, because Draco did not have the kind of life where such things were allowed to happen to him ever. Instead, the day of the match dawned every bit as wet, cold, and angry as the one before. He listlessly consumed four mouthfuls of porridge and a cup of tea, and then one slice of the bacon trencher Hermione kept nervously pushing at him, and sort of held a bit of toast in his mouth

for a while until it felt easy to swallow. Harry fiddled with the athletic strap on his glasses, which had developed a worrying habit of coming undone during practices.

“I can’t believe they’re going to let you fly in this,” Hermione muttered darkly, poking at her (also untouched) plate of eggs. “Quidditch is incredibly dangerous to begin with, but this is beyond the pale. One of you is going to run into somebody, or fly into the stands, or fall off, or—”

“Thanks, Hermione,” Harry said. He swallowed forcefully.

Sensing her defeat with Harry, she turned to Draco. “Harry’s done this before,” she whispered. “You haven’t. Are you sure you want to —”

“Granger, stop.”

“Nobody would blame you! Oliver can’t possibly expect you to play in this!”

“He can,” said Draco, “and he should. I’m his chaser. He’s depending on me.” He sat up straighter, talking as much to himself as to Hermione. “Anyway, faint heart never won fair match. In 1987, Ireland and Estonia played the finals of the World Cup right through a sandstorm. They didn’t find the snitch for three days.”

“I don’t think that’s how the saying goes,” said Hermione worriedly. She pushed another trencher of bacon at him. “Eat more, then, if you must. Your body temperature drops faster when you haven’t enough calories. I read about it in — never mind where I read it, but you should eat.”

He looked at her in interest. “You read a book about sports?”

“In a misguided attempt to reassure myself you weren’t both going to get yourselves killed,” she huffed, “which was unsuccessful, incidentally, and by the way, if you ever want to get really scared out

of your skin, just ask me to show you some statistics about quidditch injuries. You'll never look at flying the same way."

"No, yeah," said Ron, through a mouthful of egg, "I'm sure you're right and all, but could you do us a favor, Mione — wait until after the match to scare our players into retirement?"

He had dared to hope that the weather would scare some people away from the match, but the lure of an old-fashioned faceoff between Gryffindor and Slytherin triumphed over the weather, proving once and for all the indomitable nature of human pettiness. A caravan of umbrellas ran down the lawns to the pitch, heads bowed against the concussive rain, losing umbrellas and scarves left and right to the thieving fingers of the storm. As they hurried into the locker room, Draco saw Lee Jordan escorting a gaggle of first years up the stairs under the shield of a Water-Repelling Charm. McGonagall had banned him from wearing his 'GRYFFINDOR RULES' windbreaker while commentating, so he had stitched the letters '& ETC' underneath it.

Oliver had no words of encouragement for them in the locker room. He sat with his elbows on his knees, head drooping from his shoulders like a fig. It was not impossible that he had entered a prayer state.

"Team," said Fred gruffly, doing a very bad 'Oliver Wood.' He threw his knee up on the bench and leaned on it. "Listen. You're terrible players. Each of you. Couldn't hope for worse. Katie? You got noodle arms. Harry? Couldn't find a snitch if it snuck up your bum. Angelina? Maybe try modeling, because flying ain't for you."

"Stop it," complained Oliver miserably, amidst giggles from the team. "S'not true. You're wonderful players. Fantastic… best I've ever had…"

"O captain, my captain!" George fell to his knees, hands aloft in supplication. "Is that you? My God! It's like I can still hear his

voice…” Meanwhile, Fred clasped his hands and began humming the tune to ‘Amazing Grace.’

“Alright! Alright,” cried Oliver, wobbling to his feet. “Enough! Let’s go.”

The wind blasted them as they walked onto the field. Harry, the smallest of them, nearly floated off his feet, and George hastily hauled him back to earth. “Easy, tiger,” he shouted. “You get on the broomstick first, remember?”

The Slytherins approached from the other side of the field, their emerald robes blending into the grass. Flint and Oliver briefly tried to shatter each other’s knuckles; neither succeeded, and they took up starting positions. Draco caught the eye of a rain-soaked Theo, who seemed at least half as miserable as he was, but who offered a grim smile and called: “About time, Malfoy.”

Draco smirked and jerked his chin at him. Beside him loomed the lockjawed giant of Gregory Goyle, who had apparently spent the summer growing into a handsome young mountain troll. A sweatband hauled his square fringe out of his eyes, and his uniform yawned at the seams.

“Greg,” shouted Draco. “Good to see you. Your mum would be proud.”

He wasn’t being sarcastic; it really was nice, especially since no one who knew a young Goyle would have expected him to participate in a team sport— at least any that didn’t involve crunching bugs with rocks. But Goyle scowled at him, apparently under the impression that he was making fun.

“Go piss in a cauldron, Malfoy,” he said. “I’m gonna knock your skull down through your pelvis.”

Which, if he hadn’t been about to piss himself in fright, would have impressed Draco, too: he felt Greg deserved a hearty slap on the

back for correctly using the term ‘pelvis.’ Perhaps Slytherin had been good for him, after all.

“Right,” he said faintly. “Very good. Carry on, then.”

Fred elbowed him. “C’mon, mate,” he muttered, “you’re embarrassing us here.” Lifting his voice, he shouted, “Not if I punch a tunnel through your proboscis first, you putrid, pustule-brained pack of meat on a stick!”

“WEASLEY!” shouted Madam Hooch, with a tart blast of the whistle. “No trash talk! I want a good, clean game!”

“Sorry, ma’am, but it’s too late, Slytherin’s playing no matter what,” shouted George.

She gave him a quelling look. “Mount your brooms!”

With much squelching and squishing in the mud, they did so. The Nimbus thrummed to life under Draco’s hands, and he gripped its slick handle with all his might, turning his fingertips numb.

A shrill blast pierced the air. The crowd roared. Draco kicked off hard from the pitch, and plunged into the rain.

The wind shoved him sideways, twisting all his flight lines into curves. He adjusted for it as best he could while the rain and sleet drove him downward. The keepers split off for the goalposts, and Harry plummeted into the gray oblivion, but the chasers swirled into a formation at centerfield. Katie won the initial tossup and ducked through a two-chaser guard, missing Flint’s greedy claw, and with a start, Draco remembered that he ought to be flanking her; he shot forward, pulling up aside and below her, so she could drop it instead of throwing against the wind.

“Katie!” he cried.

She saw him, and pitched it without a second thought. He let go of his broomstick — dizzied, momentarily, by the wobble it created, and the wind that tried to rip him from the seat — and fumbled a messy catch, clutching the quaffle to his chest. For a moment, he was delighted at having caught it at all; and then Marcus Flint descended on him like the ugliest angel in God's creation, and he remembered that he was supposed to be flying. He shouted a word he was glad his mother couldn't hear and shot off for the goalposts, clinging to the broomstick like a life preserver.

A dark shape whizzed past his ear. He yelped and spun out of its reach, whirling end over end in midair, only to right himself once he'd pulled way off his line and moved out of reach of a good shot. He searched wildly for its source, and saw Theo floating nearby, spinning his beater's club casually around one finger.

"Training for the ballet, Malfoy?" he called pleasantly.

"Nott!" he shouted, furious. "What the hell was that?"

Theo quirked an eyebrow. "A bludger," he said. "I'm sorry, were you under the impression I was on your team?"

His smirk was interrupted when the same bludger came hurtling for his knees. Theo twisted and dove, but it caught the straw end of his broomstick, and sent him wheeling wildly through the air, scrabbling to regain control of his broom. The stands roared with laughter; only the Slytherins booed. Draco felt a quick pulse of strange, complex gratitude — it appeared that most of the school was on his side.

Fred whizzed by, shaking out his club-arm. "That'll fix him," he shouted. "And oi, Draco, that thing goes *in the goalhoop,* ta!"

"Got it," he gritted out, and flew on.

The spectators' faces were lost under a sea of cloaks and umbrellas. Some Gryffindors had painted the shields of their umbrellas to spell W-O-O-D, but in the gloom it was hard to see them unless you flew

directly overhead. Lee Jordan's commentary was lost to the storm. Bludgers shot in and out of the mist like birds of prey. Draco weaved in formation with Katie and Angelina, clinging to his broomstick, growing lost in the lulling rhythm of catch, pass, shoot. The cold seeped into his skin and he lost track of time. Occasionally, he caught sight of Harry drifting somewhere above the pitch, clearly lost.

Lightning flickered in the distance. Hooch's whistle blasted, and they splashed down in the muck. Under a small tent on the edge of the field, they huddled up and wiped the rain from their faces. Harry was polishing his glasses furiously.

"What's the score?"

"We're fifty points up," said Oliver, to Draco's pleasant surprise. He'd long since lost track of the score, since he couldn't hear Jordan. "But we're fading fast. Have you put eyes on the snitch?"

"No. And these things aren't helping," said Harry tightly, scrubbing at his glasses.

The tent flap burst open, and they all turned. A witch in Gryffindor robes hurried in, using her cloak as a makeshift umbrella, her face splattered with threads of mud and rain. Draco startled, and then felt queerly warm: it was Hermione. He'd never seen her dirty before.

"Harry, your *glasses!* They're no use!" she gasped. "You can barely see!"

"No, really?" said Harry savagely.

"Yes! But I have an idea. Give them here."

"You're not allowed to be in here," Oliver said weakly, but Draco waved him off.

She tapped the glasses with her wand and said, *“Impervius.* There — they’ll repel water.” Handing them back, she said, beaming: “Now you won’t die horribly!”

Oliver was having a transcendental experience.

“Now you can see the snitch!” he shouted.

Hermione blinked at him. “Yes,” she said. “I suppose that’s true… also…”

Draco leaned over her. “You’d better get out of here, or he’ll try to kiss you,” he murmured. “Of course, maybe that’s your game. I know it’d be Lavender’s.”

She snorted. “And for you,” she said, turning to him, “you ought to be more careful of Goyle. He’s sending half his bludgers at you, but he always misses to the left, because he overcompensates on the swing, so they go for whoever’s behind you — maybe you can use that, somehow, I don’t know.”

He realized she must have been watching the match quite closely, and grinned. “You clever thing, Granger, who says you don’t like quidditch?”

Hermione’s eyes did the baby-deer thing. It was excellent.

“I don’t,” she said passionately. “I don’t at all. This isn’t an approval, or endorsement, of any kind!”

The whistle blasted. “Got to go,” he told her. “Thanks for the tipoff. Keep watching out for me, would you?”

“I’m not *watching* you!” she shouted after him. “I’m just observing the match! It’s raining bullets, there’s nothing else to do!”

The team filed out. Harry was flying far better than he had before. Draco, Katie, and Angelina braided a complex play across the field and scored twice, but Slytherin recaptured and got three shots on

goal. Draco flew in a tight line with Pucey, trying to tempt Goyle into taking a shot; he wanted to get him to tag Pucey's broom on accident… Katie passed to Draco passed to Angelina back to Draco again, and he shot dodged Pucey, ducked Flint, outpaced Warrington…

A clap of thunder rattled the posts. "Harry!" shouted Oliver, pointing.

Draco spun around. Harry had flung himself flat on the broomstick and was racing across the pitch, in the opposite direction of Higgs, chasing a glint of gold at the far end of the stands. Draco let out a bark of delight: he'd spotted it, the sharp little git.

Another clap of thunder followed — and died. Silence swept over the stadium. Draco touched his ear, fretting he'd gone deaf, but he could hear his own breath, and the scrape of his gloves against his temple. Only the rain had gone quiet, and the roar of the crowds, and the howl of the wind. It was the kind of silence that left you alone with your body, the kind that bred fear and alarm.

Cold descended from above, not windchill, but bone-deep, arctic cold, the cold of being without warmth for so long one forgot its feeling. Draco gasped and clutched the quaffle with stiff fingers, resisting the urge to curl into a fetal ball.

Black shapes poured over the sides of the stands. The tide of darkness converged on the field, knitting a black sea over the green pitch, and then rose in a swirling spire, their dead fingers protruding in hungry open claws, talons reaching for the players who drifted above them like shipwrecked sailors on their brooms…

He could hear the stands screaming, but distantly, as through water. Highest above them all, Harry floated, his head swaying; Draco watched with his heart in his throat and a shout on his lips as the boy swayed, lazy fingers fumbling for his broom handle — missed — slipped free of it—

Harry Potter became a falling star.

The screams broke through the water. A pulse of fear sharper than any cold seized Draco’s limbs, and he breathed sharply.

Harry fell. And fell. And fell.

Draco hocked the quaffle at Marcus Flint, who caught it with a surprised grunt. Then he threw his weight forward and dropped like a stone.

And fell, and fell, and fell.

Draco flew and flew and flew.

Wind shredded his hair and his face and his hands. Rain stung his skin. The ground came roaring hungrily at both of them, close and hard and deadly. Harry’s body lolled in freefall, strangely limp, almost like he was floating.

Somewhere below them, a white shape exploded onto the field, vast and glowing, and the dementors cleaved like the Red Sea. They peeled away from the pitch.

And still, Harry was falling, but now Draco was close enough — and the ground was so very close — that he could reach his hand — and so very hard — tug him onto the broomstick — and so very deadly — and pull *UP.*

The whiplash almost snapped his neck.

The ground almost snapped his spine.

The force almost snapped his broomstick.

But they skidded out of the fall, hurtling a few bare feet from the ground and parallel to the earth. Draco had just enough time for a bellow of pure victory before Harry’s weight finally spilled sideways, and they both went tumbling together into the mud.

Draco landed on his elbow, and there was an insidious *CRACK,* and a flower of pain exploded in his arm. He slid twenty feet from his broomstick and rolled to a halt, his face half-buried in mud.

Someone was screaming. A lot of people, actually. That was gratifying. Unless he'd killed Harry after all, in which case: less gratifying; also, very bad.

"Potter! Potter, are you—? Good — where is Malfoy — Malfoy! *Malfoy!"*

Footsteps splashed towards him. The roar was deafening. Several people were shouting his name at once, and it was confusing. He was in a lot of pain.

"Malfoy!" The shrill brogue sounded beside herself. A *splotch* came in the mud beside him, and then hands bullied him onto his back, smacking his cheeks, patting his chest. "Are you living? Say something, boy!"

"Something, boy," he groaned, prying his eyes open.

McGonagall's lined face peered down into his, alight with commingled fear and exasperation.

"Sorry, professor," he said. "You left it wide open."

"Thank Merlin," she breathed. "Thank Christ — thank *whomever* — that was an exceptionally stupid thing to do, Malfoy!"

He spat a mouthful of mud onto the pitch, delicately. He shrugged. "Hat was right," he mumbled.

She looked away and covered her mouth with her hand, eyes suspiciously bright.

"Fifty points to Gryffindor," she said abruptly. "No, seventy points to Gryffindor. *A hundred* points to Gryffindor, for — for saving the life of

another student, and — and for selfless activity at the risk of great personal injury, and — and—”

“And the finest Wronski Feint to grace this pitch since James Potter,” roared Hooch, striding up behind her. “Notwithstanding it was completely against the rules. Malfoy! Are you hurt?”

“Yes,” he said candidly, rolling onto his unhurt arm. The other flopped inappropriately. “I don’t think my arm is supposed to move like that. Or feel like that. Ow.”

Both women eyed his elbow in clear agreement. “Hospital Wing,” said McGonagall crisply. “Now. Get a stretcher.”

“A stretcher?” he said delightedly. That would be a great hullabaloo.

“DRACO!”

Harry came sprinting out of the rain. A bruise the size of an eggplant ran across his cheek, and there was a bloody spot on his nose where his glasses must’ve bitten him during the landing, but he was nevertheless very much alive, which had been the general idea.

“DRACO! ARE YOU ALRIGHT?”

“Oh, good,” said Draco, flopping back in the grass. “You can join me in my convalescence. Bad news, Potter: they think I’m going to die —”

Harry dropped to his knees, hard, and wrenched Draco into a rib-crushing hug.

“Oof, ow. My bones.”

“You shit,” said Harry giddily. “You looked dead. You weren’t moving. I thought…”

“Me? I’m not the twit who dropped his broomstick at eighty feet. And by the way, for the record, I have dibs on the hot water for the rest of

time immemorial, thank you, so get comfortable with that idea."

Harry only hugged him tighter, so maybe he hadn't understood. Draco decided to clarify later.

Now more people dropped onto the field, first the rest of the team, and then the Slytherins, who descended reluctantly after Flint made a half-hearted shot on goal. "That was *sodding amazing,"* hollered Fred, shaking his broomstick over his head. "Almost makes you not care that we lost!"

"Lost?" Harry cried. "What? What, 'lost'?"

"Higgs caught the snitch just before Harry fell," said Angelina breathlessly, landing with a *thump.* "Sneaky bastard. Saw the dementors coming and gunned it. He wouldn't have even known where it was without Harry… then Dumbledore came running onto the pitch, and he cast a spell, and the dementors ran away… it's all right though, Harry," she added, at Harry's crestfallen expression. "It's not over. There's lots of games left in the season, and… I mean, talk about unfair conditions…"

"You're still the best seeker we've ever had," Fred reassured him, but Harry remained quiet.

"Why's everyone consoling him?" Draco complained. "There's an invalid over here. Perishing of his wounds. On death's doorstep."

"Yeah, you're fine," said Fred, cracking a grin. "Play it up when Hooch comes back, though, she might card Higgs for it. We can say Flint pushed you or something. Oi," he said sharply, as Theo landed a mere handbreadth from Fred, splattering mud everywhere.

"You alright, Draco?" he said breathlessly.

Draco gestured lazily to his bad arm. "You see," he said, *" this* is what a successful beater's work looks like, Nott. I thought you might need someone to show you."

Theo stared at him, and then, belatedly, a bewildered smile twitched his mouth open. “Ha,” he said. “Really funny. You know if you died for Harry Potter, Narcissa would never forgive you, right?”

“Certainly not,” Draco said grimly, as McGonagall and Hooch collectively shimmied him onto a stretcher. It lifted him into the air. “Which is why I have no intention of dying for him or anyone else. Besides, I can’t risk her writing you into the will.”

Another pair of voices joined the clamor on the field, and Draco turned in time to see Hermione hurtling at top speed across the pitch, cloak abandoned. Ron loped behind her, his cheeks painted with the words GO + POTTER. The sight of long-legged Ron struggling to keep up with Hermione was so funny that Draco almost didn’t notice that she wasn’t slowing down.

She sprang up and threw herself at the stretcher, with a short, tight shriek that was a little relieved, but mostly angry.

“I told you so!”

“Thanks,” he said, patting her shoulders. “Your bedside manner is heinous. What, no flowers?”

“Oh, don’t. Please, just — don’t.”

Her eyes were bloodshot, and it was hard to tell how much of her face was wet from rain. He felt bad.

“Easy, Granger,” he said uncomfortably.

She put her head in his shoulder and squeezed him so tightly he feared for his remaining bones.

“I listened to you,” he said lightly, patting her back. “Tried to fly close to Pucey. Thought I could get Goyle to clobber him for me.”

“If you had *listened* to me, you wouldn’t be on a stretcher.”

“And you’d be short a Potter,” he reminded her, knocking her gently atop the skull. She shuddered. “Seems an awful waste.”

She shuddered powerfully, again. “I *hate,”* she said, quivering, “watching quidditch.”

Then she squeezed tighter, and he said, urgently, “Bones,” and she said, “Oh! Sorry! Sorry!” and unsqueezed him.

Harry and Ron huddled around the stretcher, ignoring Madam Hooch’s attempts to shoo them away. “Draco,” said Ron admiringly, “I think that was the dumbest thing you’ve ever done. We’re confused, but we’re proud.”

“The Slytherin delegation will draw it at ‘confused,’” drawled Theo. “Out of respect for your reputation, we elect to chalk it up to possession by the spirit of Godric Gryffindor. Pansy is preparing an exorcism.”

Draco caught Harry’s shy, owlish stare, and he sighed. Another thing that wouldn’t have happened in Slytherin: all this exit interview nonsense. If he’d saved Theo’s life, they would have shaken hands and walked away, and maybe insulted each other’s pocket squares, if they were feeling especially tender.

“Let me be clear. Most of the time,” he said to Harry, “I would personally drive a bowie knife into your heart to prevent myself from suffering so much as a hangnail. However. Occasionally…” He cleared his throat. “Occasionally, a man gets locked in a girls’ bathroom with a mountain troll.”

(“What,” said Theo.)

But Harry smiled.

“You didn’t need to.”

“I know you think that,” he sighed. “It’s part of why you’re so detestable.”

Then McGonagall came to scold them all away, and Draco had the extraordinary pleasure of being carried up to the castle by a crowd of quidditch fans. There was so much chatter and cheering that he was sorry he hadn’t broken his arm years ago.

They kept both Harry and Draco in the Hospital Wing until nightfall, Draco for his arm, and Harry for several cosmetic injuries that Pomfrey fussed over probably longer than needed. A stream of visitors came throughout the afternoon, including Hagrid, who brought them each fat bouquets of gorse and wild heather, and Ginny with a get-well card for Harry, which sang a very sweet and obviously self-composed tune that made Draco laugh so hard it brought him to tears. (Harry, red from humiliation, stuffed it under his fruit bowl.) Oliver came, accompanied by Angelina (who appeared to be part of a suicide watch), and told Harry solemnly that it hadn’t been his fault. Ron and Hermione stayed until nightfall, and left after bringing them both plates of food from the Great Hall.

Pomfrey gave Draco a foul potion to take with dinner, and he struggled to sleep. He could feel the bones of his arm shifting and rearranging, plastering over the places where they’d cracked. It was a horrible feeling, like a host of worms traveling under his skin. Around midnight, he gave up and tossed back the covers, staying mindful of his arm in a sling, and padded out of bed to the window.

The moon was the shape of a lemon, edged with a smile of black, and spilled pale light over the courtyard below. Draco sat on the windowsill, gazing over the grounds, wishing he’d asked Hermione to bring his walkman. When he couldn’t sleep at home, he usually played something quiet, like that muggle band R.E.M., and lit a candle. Here, he could do neither, and so he killed time by counting the cobblestones, one at a time, until his eyelids grew heavy.

Sometime around one o’clock, a pair of shadows crossed the courtyard. Draco was so drowsy he almost missed them. He blinked awake and knuckled one eye, rubbing sleep out of it, as the figures crossed into the moonlight.

It was Professor Lupin; the silhouette was unmistakable, from his shabby traveling cloak and fluffy hair. Beside him padded a large black dog, tail wagging so strongly it was like to fall off, which kept pausing to bump and nose at Lupin’s knees with quiet little yips. Lupin stumbled, laughing, and shoved its nose away. He tried to say something stern, and it jumped up on him, almost knocking him into the fountain.

Lupin sat down hard on the fountain ledge, and the dog hopped up, licking his face wildly. He threw his head back, and gave the loudest, clearest, happiest laugh Draco had ever heard from him.

Draco shrank back from the window, a little, suddenly worried that Lupin would see him. Presently, both man and dog continued out of the courtyard, heading out of the castle and across the grounds.

He frowned. He hadn’t known that Lupin had a pet. Dogs weren’t on the list for acceptable familiars at Hogwarts; however, he supposed a professor could do as he liked.

He crossed to Harry’s bedside, and flicked him on the forehead.

“Oi. Potter.”

“Hnngmrhg,” said Harry.

“Potter. Don’t wake up all the way, I just need a favor. Can I use the map?”

“Hnngrhgnrnnmgmngnng,” said Harry. “Sure.”

“Class. Thanks.” He crouched and dug through Harry’s satchel, tossing out books at random until he found the Marauder’s Map at

the very bottom. He carried it back to his bed, where he drew the curtains closed, sat cross-legged, and unfolded it on the mattress.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,” he yawned.

The world of Hogwarts unfolded before him in parchment and ink. Gryffindor Tower etched itself, full of a dark cluster of names in the dormitories; a few prefects scattered across the hallways, and Filch he found lurking near the second-floor dungeons. Dumbledore, he discovered, lived in a suite near the headmaster’s office, where, for some reason, he was having a conference with Professor Snape.

Turning his eyes south, he moved across the grounds, until he found a pair of names drifting somewhere between the south courtyard and the Whomping Willow. One was Remus Lupin. The other—

He blinked, and scrubbed his eyes again. The other was still Sirius Black.

He flipped the map over, breathing hard. He looked around. The infirmary was as still as the grave, except for Harry’s snoring.

Draco turned the map over again. Both names had disappeared.

“No,” he said out loud. He ran his thumb over the place they’d been, searching the area nearby, but they were gone. Not only that, Lupin was nowhere in the castle. He had completely vanished from the premises.

Harry woke up more fully when the map hit him in the face.

“HMMMNRG.”

“Potter,” hissed Draco. “Look at that for me, and tell me if you can find Lupin anywhere.”

“Wot?” said Harry blearily, lifting his head.

Draco repeated himself. With some complaint, Harry obliged, but he couldn't find Lupin, either.

"Alright. You've got me. Lupin's out for a night with the lads. Is that your point?" he said tiredly, replacing the map in his satchel. "Teachers are allowed to leave the school after hours. Being adults, and all."

"I know." Draco sat on Harry's bed, ignoring the soft sound of protest, and massaged his temples. "Alright. I might be going insane."

"Also my first thought," said Harry, the brat.

"But I swear I'm not lying, and I know what I saw. Potter, I saw Remus Lupin on that map," he whispered hoarsely. "And he was with Sirius Black."

"Sirius *Black?"* said Hermione, in tones incredulous, as if there were any other Sirius he could be talking about.

"Hush!" He shoved his finger to his lips — his left one, since the right still laid in a sling. "Lower your voice."

"Oh, because the dementors will hear you from the Tower, will they?"

"I don't want anyone poking around until I'm sure!"

Harry said, for the umpteenth time: "Are you *sure* it was Lupin, though?"

Draco threaded his fingers through his hair. "Quite certain," he said thinly. "I saw his face, and I saw his name on the map."

Hermione worried her lip. "You *do* know what you're accusing Lupin of, if you're right? Failing to surrender a wanted man? You're essentially calling him a criminal, himself."

Ron, who was working on a chess problem from the day's *Prophet,* moved his knight and raised his voice. "I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "It'd be sort of fitting, wouldn't it? We were all getting a little too comfortable in Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, on a scale from 'one' to 'having You Know Who in the back of your head,' harboring a murderer is barely worth a call to the headmaster. Lupin hasn't even done anything to us." He yawned. "If he hasn't tried to murder me, or Harry…"

"Yet!" hissed Draco.

"Yeah, but if he wanted to kill Harry, he'd have done it, right?" said Ron reasonably. "He's had loads of chances. He had Harry in after class that one time, for the boggart—" Harry shifted, embarrassed— "and he could have held us back for detention whenever he wanted."

"You think he's innocent because he hasn't successfully killed you yet?" demanded Draco. "That's your best argument?"

"Maybe he was Imperiused," said Harry stubbornly. "Maybe Black has him under control, like Podmore and Yaxley."

"That's even worse," Draco said, scandalized. "That means Black has a way into Hogwarts. He could come inside the castle at leisure."

"All right. But he's not," said Hermione patiently, putting her foot down on what she clearly considered a frivolous tangent. "We have the Map. It's been a week, and we've checked it every night, and Black's nowhere to be found. Meanwhile, Lupin is perfectly fine, and he's been in his bed every night since! At this point, I think we should consider the more likely possibility that you had a very long day, and had taken a very strong dose of medicine, and — Draco, you admit this! — were very tired, to begin with, when you looked out that window."

“It *wasn’t* a dream. Ask Harry. I woke him up to get the map, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” said Hermione doubtfully, “Certainly you were awake, *then…* but there are lots of medicines whose side effects include powerfully vivid dreams, unlike the ones you’re used to, and…”

“And Skele-Gro isn’t one of them,” snapped Draco. “If you don’t believe me, that’s fine, but I still think we ought to tell a teacher—”

“And tell them *what?”* breathed Hermione, in tones of amusement that rankled him sore. “That you thought you saw Sirius Black? On a magical map of the castle that tracks all of its residents at all times, in violation of at least three school rules? And that you saw Lupin with a dog? Through a window? At a distance? What, exactly, do you think McGonagall is going to say?”

He glared at her and sank further on the sofa, folding his arms. She would say exactly what Hermione had, of course; Hermione had an uncanny ability to evoke a teacher.

“Yeah, Hermione’s right, though,” said Ron suddenly, startling Draco and Harry both — Ron was still upset with Hermione, and more so whenever Crookshanks was around. “You don’t want to go telling a teacher about the Map, Draco. They’ll confiscate it.”

“Which they probably should,” muttered Hermione, but at Ron’s raised eyebrow, she fell quiet.

“It’s a gift for Harry,” said Ron firmly. “Fred and George used it for years, and it didn’t curse them, or anybody else. It’s not Dark magic. And it belongs to Harry.”

“It won’t for long, if he gets offed by Sirius Black,” said Draco sourly.

“Again, I’m not saying you’re wrong,” said Ron, with a fair measure of sympathy. “But look at it from someone else’s perspective. I’m your mate. You could come in here yelling that you saw a unicorn

cross-bred with a pygmy puff, and I'd go, fair enough, let's have a look. A professor's not gonna give you that sort of credit."

"I mean," said Harry in a small voice, "we could try asking Lupin."

After a pause, when everyone looked at him, he shrugged uncomfortably. "He seems reasonable," he said. "And he might have an explanation for it — maybe, I don't know, he named his dog after Sirius Black—"

"Harry," sighed Hermione, while Ron covered a laugh.

"I mean — really, though! We could at least try — even Draco admits that he doesn't know exactly how the dog fits in—"

"I'm not going to ask Lupin," said Draco haughtily. He stood up. "I don't fancy getting you killed, Potter, even when you make remarks as insipid as that one." He held out his hand. "Give me the Map."

Harry held it out of reach, quick with wariness. "Why?"

"Because I'm going to check it. Starting tonight, every night, I'm going to make sure that Lupin stays where he should be. And if he's not — or if I see so much as a *trace* of the words 'Sirius Black' on that parchment — you're going to hear about it," he said grimly. "And so will the rest of this bloody castle."

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alternate titles for the prizoner of azkaban, from this AU:

-"Draco Malfoy and That Time I Saved Harry Potter's Life,"

-"Draco Malfoy and the 'Hey, Did I Mention That Time I Saved Harry Potter's Life?',"

-"Draco Malfoy and the Boy Who Lived (Because Of Me)",

-"Draco Malfoy and the Quest for a Single Normal Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor"

it appears that even in an alternate universe, draco cannot get through third year without injuring his arm. at least this time it's real, and not a feigned injury by an unjustly persecuted hippogriff... lest you think I've forgotten buckbeak, though, fear not! he is to return later.

next chapter goes up on tuesday or wednesday! sneak peek: it will be called "The Last Marauder."

cheers!

The Last Marauder

Chapter 21: The Last Marauder

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Draco, you look terrible,” said Hermione, proving once again that she never let sympathy interfere with the important business of telling everyone things they already knew.

She was not wrong, however. He’d awoken late the night before, as he had each day for the past two weeks, and made a nightly pilgrimage to the Marauder’s Map, where he pored over the castle and grounds until he was satisfied that Black was nowhere to be found.

Which he wasn’t. He was totally absent, which didn’t help Draco’s argument for not being in the preliminary stages of madness. At this point, he was starting to hope that the murderer would come after Harry sometime soon, if only to justify the amount of effort Draco had dedicated to preventing it.

When he woke up, it was almost noon on the last Saturday in November, and the common room was completely empty except for Ron, who was busily disemboweling a Peppermint Toad, and Hermione, who had colonized the better part of three tables for her homework. Harry was gone.

“Cheers,” he said groggily. “Make a man feel welcome. Where is everyone?”

“Hogsmeade! It’s the last trip before the holidays,” said Ron. “Harry went down to shop for bubotubers with Hagrid.”

“Is he getting a new broomstick?” he said, stealing a bit of Hermione’s hazelnut scone. She made a cross noise like a poked

cat. “He should at least buy a stopgap broom, we’re getting murdered on the school’s old Comets.”

“He’s still in mourning,” said Ron wisely. “Best not to rush him. A man grieves in his own way.”

“We’ll all be grieving if Wood kills him,” said Draco, stealing some of Hermione’s tea to wash down her scone with. Too exasperated to defend her terrain, she simply pushed the mug at him and let him have it, which was precisely the outcome he intended, and he rewarded her with a pat on the shoulder. “Which he might do, if Harry doesn’t show up for practice soon. Between that and my arm, he’s down two of seven. Anyway, he can afford a new one.”

In a Gryffindor tragedy of historic proportions, Harry’s Firebolt had drifted into the Whomping Willow during his fateful crash, and it had returned to him in a bag of splinters. Since then, Harry had refused to let anyone throw them away, choosing instead to keep them in a pouch near his bedside, which had at first seemed solemn and respectful and now verged increasingly on unhinged levels of grief.

Both he and Draco had returned to classes after a weekend in the Hospital Wing. The late days of the term were good ones, and not just because Draco’s arm meant everyone else had to carry his supplies around for him. Lupin had moved into the more dangerous and interesting amphibious creatures, and Neville had ceased to ask Draco questions like “where’s the burner again?” and “what’s a pipette?” in Potions. His success with answering Snape’s question, albeit through Draco’s coaching, had conferred on him a degree of confidence that appeared to be producing material — if not terribly impressive — results.

After lazing about the common room for a while with Hermione and Ron, Draco decided to make a pilgrimage down to the dungeons and visit Snape; he wanted to pass a letter on to his mother. He hoped to broach the subject of staying at Hogwarts for Christmas: the twins were going around with a sign-up sheet for something called a White Elephant, and it seemed the general consensus in Gryffindor Tower

was that there was going to be a rather lively party, which he thought it might be a shame to miss.

The castle dropped precipitously in temperature during the winter months, so he dressed in a pale cashmere jumper, with a burgundy scarf that Dobby had knit for him years ago. Thus attired, he found the Potions Master in his study, brewing something over his personal cauldron near the fire. The gutter of firelight paved the study in cozy, warm tones, which clashed with the cool colors of the various bottles and beakers decorating the walls. He tapped on the door, and Snape, after a preliminary suspicious glance, bid him come in.

“Afternoon, professor. Brewing something interesting?” He nudged the door shut with his ankle and hung up his cloak on the coat rack.

“Come and see,” said Snape, which, for him, was downright friendly. Perhaps the Christmas spirit was infectious.

Draco peered into the cauldron’s depths, but all it held was a clear, bubbling liquid, indistinguishable from water. He sniffed, but the scent was either nonexistent, or so faint that the general dank of the dungeons obscured it.

“I can’t get anything.”

“No, indeed. What does that tell you?”

He sucked his teeth. “...That I should get a hint?”

“In the real world, you will not have the luxury of asking what lies hidden in your goblet,” said Snape curtly, crushing a line of beetle shells with the flat of his blade. “You must rely on your five senses and your wits. Come, think. You know it is not water.”

“Right,” he said doubtfully, “that’s one thing off the list.” He took a stirring spoon and agitated the potion, testing for viscosity; he managed a few strokes before Snape, noticing, slapped his hand away and repossessed the stirrer. “It’s not very viscous, and there’s

no residue on the cauldron, either… It's remarkably featureless, actually. There can't be that many potions that are totally clear and scentless, are there?"

"No. In fact, there are few." Snape's tone was flat, which was a good sign; he always rewarded competence with indifference.

"Plus, you're brewing it, so it's probably something difficult," he said, "because if it was easy to do right, you wouldn't bother. Your time's too valuable for that."

Snape tipped his head to the right, a tacit assent. "A logical assertion," he said, "though not one that requires knowledge of potioneering."

"No, but it's true," said Draco, pleased. "So based on your ingredients, then, I'd say… what's that, monkshood?" He frowned. "Fresh monkshood. Which is inedible, actually. A poison? Okay, I'm lost again."

"What is monkshood, Draco?"

"A plant?"

He gave him a scathing look. "Recall your Herbology lessons. I told you once that you should pay ample attention to them. I will be dismayed if you did not listen."

Draco, scowling, leaned against the table and folded his arms. He remembered Neville chattering about something in the greenhouses last week — it'd been about taxonomy conventions, how some plants had more than one name. There had been something that prompted that conversation, too — a plant in the greenhouse itself, something Neville was growing with Sprout…

"Aconite," he said suddenly, snapping his fingers. "Monkshood is another word for aconite, which is also called…"

He broke off, and stared at Snape. “Why are you making a Wolfsbane Potion?”

If Snape was pleased, he did them both the favor of hiding it well. “It took you enough time,” he said coldly. “Outside the classroom, you will have seconds to make those kinds of deductions, not minutes.”

“Great, sir, I’ll work on that. Why are you making a Wolfsbane Potion?”

“Because it is a tremendously difficult brew, and it requires an expert hand.”

“I’m sure, but that’s not a reason,” he said brazenly. Snape’s cheek twitched at his insolence. “You haven’t answered the question. It’s not regulation-approved, so you can’t sell it. And the ingredients are too expensive for it to be a lark. Did someone commission it?”

“If they did, I would be strictly bound by terms of non-disclosure, as you surely understand,” said the Potions Master. He sprinkled the crushed beetle shells into the cauldron, gave it a brisk stir, and left it boiling. Examining the brew, he frowned, and then made a note in the textbook to his right. Draco noticed that the pages were covered in scrawl so thick it covered the printed text.

He huffed, and plucked a stray beetle shell from his jumper. “Fine. Keep your secrets,” he said sourly. “Wouldn’t be the first time. Speaking of which, are you visiting the Manor anytime soon? I have a note for my mother.”

“I am not your owl. As I have often told you.”

“Oh, I know, sir. Only if you’re going anyway. I know my mother wanted to have you over for dinner sometime between now and the holidays, and I just know you could make her *terribly* happy if you happened to bring a letter from her son. Something to brighten her day, perhaps? With Dobby gone, it’s frightfully lonely, at the Manor.”

Snape set down the knife, glowering. He stuck out his hand in bad grace. “Give it to me, and cease these frightfully inept manipulations.”

“Thank you, sir,” Draco said cheerfully, handing over the letter, and it disappeared into the folds of Snape’s robe. He flopped into an armchair by the fire, and watched as Snape fretted and fussed over the cauldron, giving it the odd counterstir now and then while it bubbled to completion.

“Do you require something,” said Snape, presently, peeved.

“Such as, sir?”

“I do not know. You have inflicted yourself on me, heedless of my time or priorities, so I should think I would be forgiven for presuming you had a purpose of some urgency. Perhaps a Healing Solution for your arm.”

“Oh, that’s quite fine, sir, thank you. Although I will say,” he added severely, “that Skel-Gro is some nasty stuff. And Granger’s got me nervous about it, now, too — she says that when muggles break their bones, their Healers sometimes have to cut them open and rearrange their bones in the right order, so they don’t heal in the wrong way. Have you heard about this? Obviously, that’s barbaric and horrible and wrong-headed, but it got me thinking that I don’t actually know whether Skel-Gro makes sure your bones are in the right order before it starts working. And I admit, it’s no great reassurance when you ask Madam Pomfrey that question, and she looks at you and goes, ‘Darling, I’m not a muggle Healer.’”

“Draco.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Before you speak,” said Snape, “I implore you to give serious and extenuated consideration as to whether or not I am likely to care.”

Draco rolled his eyes, kicking his feet up on the ottoman. “All right, here’s one you might care about,” he said. “Do you think Sirius Black is coming to kill Potter?”

There was a clatter from the desk, and he craned his neck. A stirring spoon had fallen.

“Alright, sir?”

“Fine,” gritted Snape. He Summoned it into his hand, and dropped it in a bath of sterilizing agent with the other used tools. “Is this what consumes your idle hours? Thoughts of muggle Healers, and concern for Harry Potter?”

“There’s a lot of quidditch, too,” said Draco, truthfully.

“Tsk.”

Snape put the cap on the cauldron and swept over to the fireplace, removing a bubbling pot from its midst. “It is hardly Potter who has to fear Black’s return.”

“What do you mean?” Draco slid his feet from the ottoman and sat up, intrigued. “Why not him? He went after Potter’s parents, anyway, didn’t he?”

Snape knelt to stir the coals, leaving his back to Draco and his face to the fire. The flames glazed his silhouette in gold. “Sirius Black would not have lifted a finger against James Potter with a knife at his throat,” he said.

Draco shivered.

“But he sold him out,” he said. “To the Dark Lord. And he killed—”

“Oh, murder, yes,” said Snape easily. “Of murder, he was capable. He was a cruel and selfish bully in his youth, and he remained one all his life. I could believe that he killed thirteen muggles; I could believe even that he killed Pettigrew. Peter was always a shadow

beside them, a hulking, servile creature. Him, Black could have killed. But Potter, Lupin — no."

"Lupin?" he repeated sharply. "What's Lupin got to do with it?"

"Don't you know?" said Snape, in soft, sly tones. "Remus Lupin was the fourth piece of their little set. A marauding band of wastrels, flouncing about the castle, smashing up things and people wherever they went… but popular, of course. Rabidly, fanatically popular. The handsome, swaggering quidditch star… the prodigal son of a falling dynasty… the wounded prince of Gryffindor Tower…"

"...Sir?"

"I suspect Lupin still feels stricken," he said, mostly to himself, with no small degree of satisfaction. "To err so grievously in judgment, and for so many years, must do terrible things to a man's confidence. I expect that is why he has never confessed his history to you, or to the other students, even when he — supposedly — has nothing to atone for. Two dead, and the third imprisoned, wanted for murder… the Marauders are no longer the sort of group to which one might eagerly profess his membership."

Snape straightened, still holding the poker, which glowed red at the tip. "Do not speak of this with Lupin," he ordered. "He will know I told you, and there is no telling how angry he will become. For your safety, you should endeavor not to irritate him."

"Endeavor not… sir, you don't think he's dangerous?"

Snape traced the blade of the poker with one finger, lost in thought. "Consider this," he said, at length. "The day Sirius Black was apprehended by the Ministry, Remus Lupin went into hiding. He has not resurfaced since. He has never taken up new acquaintances, or found a new place for himself in the world. This professorship, to all evidence, is the first steady job he has held since the Order disbanded, thirteen years ago. Does that sound like a man you

would gladly trifle with? A well-adjusted man, suited to the trials of teaching, who has no secrets in need of protecting?”

Draco, who thought Snape was perhaps not one to talk about being secretive *or* well-adjusted, wisely kept silent. He said only, “I don’t think Dumbledore would hire him if he were dangerous.”

“Dumbledore hired Sturgis Podmore while the man was in the grips of the Imperius Curse,” said Snape grimly. “It does not serve you to think him omniscient. It does not even serve you to think him always wise. It serves you to protect yourself, first, last, and always, against all those who have not walked through fire to earn your trust.”

Unwittingly, and a touch ironically, Draco thought of the line of fire in the Vault, back from first year. How did that seem so long ago? It had only been a year and a half. He felt ages older than he’d been then.

Perhaps sensing Draco’s hesitation, Snape added, “And that, if you would care to know, is wisdom from the mouth of Lucius Malfoy.”

Draco bent his head and nodded, dutifully committing it to memory.

“Professor?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know Regulus Black?”

Snape paused. Draco fretted at first that he’d provoked him to anger, but the Potion Master’s expression was not irate, merely perplexed. “Yes,” he said. “He was two years behind me. A clever boy, but quiet. He lived in his brother’s shadow.” He paused again. “Why do you ask?”

“I just heard someone mention him the other day. Mother never said much about him, even though he’s part of the family. I thought you might have known him.”

“I could speak, within reason, of his actions; I could not speak to his character. This hedging tires me. Ask your real question.”

“Did he have a will, or something?”

Snape clucked his tongue. “A conspiracy theory,” he said briskly. “Drummed up by daydreamers and pilgrims of a lost cause, dreaming of a pureblood resurgence. No. Regulus Black died without issue, and there was never any question as to whom Witherfell belonged.”

“Which is me, right?” said Draco pointedly. “I mean, my mum. But me, eventually.”

“Have you forgotten your Blood Laws? Did Narcissa fill your brain with porridge, those long eleven years? Your line of succession should be prayer and scripture to you, by now. Upon her death, the rights to Witherfell reverted from the line of Orion and Walburga, who disinherited one son and lost the other, to the next superior direct descendant of Phineas Nigellus—”

“A line running from Cygnus Black, Senior, to Pollux to Alphard, disinherited, whoops, for the crime of being bad at embezzlement,” said Draco impatiently, “passing thereon to his brother, Cygnus Minor, but whoops again, dead, therefore: *his* firstborn, Bellatrix Lestrange, neé Black, who will die in prison long before the true and final heir of the Black estate: his secondborn, my mother.”

Snape said, “Save for neglecting Lucretia—”

“Oh, come *on,* you sound like Mummy. You have to go three generations back for her to even have a claim, besides which, she never had children, and, oh, also, she’s *dead,* so she couldn’t make a claim even if she had one.”

“Nevertheless, save for her, you are correct. You will hold Witherfell, eventually, provided you survive your aunt and mother. Is that the root of your familial inquisition?” Snape’s mouth twitched. “Do you

fear a secret bastard of Regulus coming to contest your claim? An Edgar to your Edmund?”

“No,” said Draco. “I’m perfectly happy with my father’s inheritance, thank you, sir. I was merely wondering.”

A crystal instrument on the desk gave a shrill whistle, and Snape cracked the lid, releasing a bath of foul-smelling steam from the cauldron. Draco wrinkled his nose and discreetly pressed the back of his hand over his mouth. “It is done,” said Snape in satisfaction. “What you smell is the accelerated fermentation of the wolfsbane; it produces a rather unpleasant odor.”

“Delightful,” he said. “The wonders of potioneering.”

Snape clamped the lid back onto the cauldron, and with a swish of his wand, he siphoned away some of the steam. “If you intend on dining with your friends, you should make your way upstairs,” he said. “It is nearly six o’clock.”

Draco rose quickly, checking his watch, and found that more time had passed than he thought. “I should. Thanks, sir.”

“This is not a courtesy. It was a polite recommendation for you to leave the room.”

“Naturally, sir. Will you be eating upstairs, or shall I bring you some food from the Great Hall?”

“I will dine after the brew is done,” said Snape, with grim resolve. “Several hours’ work remains in this, before it goes to ferment for next month. I must continue.”

Draco blinked. “Alright,” he said. It seemed to him that a potion could stand to wait the time it took to wolf down a sandwich, but perhaps he’d been spending too much time with Ron. “Well, good luck with it, sir. Thanks again, about the letter.”

Snape grunted, absorbed in the process of measuring something slimy and green. Draco let himself out.

His godfather was something of an odd duck, he reflected. A good man, but an odd duck, no two ways about it.

He encountered Ron and Hermione coming up the Grand Staircase, while they were coming down. “Ah, you made it,” said Hermione, who was wearing a corduroy coat in velvety, autumnal brown. She had put up her hair, and cradled Crookshanks in the crook of one elbow; she looked vaguely like she was going to work on a farm. In these and other ways, she and Draco would never be alike. “I wanted to let Crookshanks out for a walk before it gets dark. Would you like to come?”

“It’s a cat,” he told her. “It doesn’t need walks. That’s the whole point of having a cat.”

“That’s what I said,” said Ron emphatically.

“Living things need fresh air and enrichment,” she declared. “Hagrid says that nothing ever felt worse after running around in the grass.”

“You asked Hagrid for advice on cat parenting? Hagrid, who keeps an illegal monster in his backyard? Hagrid, who makes buddies with giant spiders?”

“Lower your voice,” said Ron darkly, as if, like demons, the Acromantulae materialized when invoked.

“Hippogriffs aren’t illegal, they’re merely proscribed without a Special Creature Handling License,” said Hermione, primly, but uneasily.

“You think he’s got a license, do you?” said Draco, sternly. “You think he sat down and filled out the paperwork? In triplicate?”

“Truly, a hippogriff is a Class Four only by taxonomical accident,” said a mild, hoarse voice, descending from above. Lupin rounded

the banister of the Grand Staircase and limped his way down the stairs, leaning heavily on the railing. “The rating system classifies both of its parent creatures, the griffin and the pegasus, as Class Four, so the rules of categorization insist that its rating follow suit. Most magizoologists, however, consider it functionally a Class Three, for which one requires only a General Creature Handling License, which Hagrid has.” He stopped on the step below them and smiled, adding, “Good evening, you three. Did you get out to Hogsmeade today?”

Draco, miffed at being corrected, felt the need to point out: “Being ‘functionally’ Class Three doesn’t change the licensing problem. The law is the law.”

“Indeed it is,” agreed Lupin. “Though for myself, if I could choose between Hagrid or a paper license to stand beside me in the face of a rampaging hippogriff, I would much prefer Hagrid. What does that say? Maybe nothing. I don’t know. All I know are the facts, which I find generally have very little bearing on matters of the law… excuse me, if you would, Mr. Malfoy, I must go. We must let these questions percolate for another time. Have a marvelous evening.”

Cryptically, and peacefully, he limped out of the Entrance Hall and through the oak double doors, disappearing into the twilight beyond.

Ron scratched his head. “You think he took something?” he muttered.

“Ron!”

“I’m just saying! It’s his day off, he could have! I wouldn’t blame him.”

Still frowning at the double doors, Draco slowly drew the Marauder’s Map out of his satchel. Harry had loaned it to him to keep him from waking up the whole dorm whenever he wanted to check it at night.

“Not *again,”* said Hermione immediately.

“Hold on, I want to check something. ‘I solemnly swear…’”

“I know! I know what you want to check! It’s an obsession! I really almost think I should confiscate it, just to cure you of the predilection —”

Balancing the map on his forearm, he flipped to the section containing the grounds, and ran his finger across the whorls of ink until he found the dot marked ‘LUPIN.’ It was moving quickly across the lawns, headed in a straight line for the Whomping Willow. It was alone.

Before he could feel disappointment, however, he noticed another pair of dots moving together in a nearby quadrant. The first was marked ‘HARRY POTTER,’ and it was coming up the pathway from Hogsmeade. The second — which was approaching the first from within the dark scrawl of the Forbidden Forest — read ‘SIRIUS BLACK.’

Draco almost dropped the map.

“Look! Granger! Weasley! Look, right now!”

“What is it? You can’t really exp… oh, my God.”

Hermione took one glance and thrust it violently aside in Ron’s direction. He peered at it, and lost what little color he had to his name. “Bugger,” he said loudly. “That’s — that’s him, isn’t it? The guy?” He looked gravely from one face to another. “That’s Black.”

“Yes! And he’s coming for Harry — oh, God!” Hermione squeezed Crookshanks, who gave a yowl of indignation, and was obligingly dropped. “That *idiot!* I told him not to go out! I told him it wasn’t safe!”

“You believe me, then?” Draco demanded eagerly. “You believe that I saw him? I wasn’t making it up? That’s real?”

“Yes, yes, of course, but who cares? That’s utterly beside the point now, we’ve got to figure out what to do!”

“We’ve got to go get him,” said Ron suddenly. He folded the map, businesslike, and stuck it in his back pocket. He sniffed. “Nothing for it. Gotta go fetch him. No time for anything else.”

“Yes,” said Draco, grateful that Ron’s mulish resistance to overthinking — or, more generally, thinking per se — had intervened on their behalf. “We can… we can get Lupin, on our way out. He’s the closest professor.”

“I thought you said you didn’t trust Lupin,” said Hermione shrilly. “Didn’t you see him with Black?”

“Yes, but in an emergency—”

“He might be a contact! He might have let Black into the school!”

“Who cares?” said Ron pointedly, brushing through both of them, and striding past the entrance to the Great Hall. “Harry’s out there, and he’s alone, and there’s a murderous loony headed straight for him. Either Lupin helps or not, but if he doesn’t, I’m still going to go shove my wand so far up Sirius Black’s arse that he’ll still be sneezing magic when they bury him.”

He shoved through the double doors, giving Draco and Hermione no choice but to follow.

They raced down the lawns — Draco swallowed a short, potent swell of deja vu — and along the rock path. The last lighted minutes of twilight slipped through their fingers, and the sky seemed to flush a darker color every time they lifted their heads, plunging precipitously from indigo to black. Their shoes crunched over a slippery plate of frost, and Draco could barely see past the silver cloud of his breath hanging in front of his face.

For what it was worth, he scanned the lawns skirting the Whomping Willow, but Lupin was nowhere to be found.

The inky colonnades of trees rose like an iron grill from the edge of the lawn, and Ron plunged between them without hesitation, his wand blazing white to carve a path out of the darkness. After a moment's hesitation, Hermione followed, whispering *"Lumos maxima,"* and under the pale umbrella of her wand, the three of them hurried down the path to Hogsmeade.

It was eerily quiet. Most of the students had returned already, in observance of the sunset curfew. Draco wished fervently that Harry hadn't taken the Cloak, so that the three of them might not be quite so conspicuous through the trees, but at the same time, he was glad that Harry had it, since perhaps he would have the good sense to make use of it now that darkness had fallen. The pathway seemed longer at night than it did in daylight, though rationally he knew it was the same length. He kept expecting to see the gates of Hogsmeade rise from behind each bend in the path, only to encounter another forested stretch of dirt, another wall of foreboding trees. Every rustle in the darkness made him jump, wand at the ready, with a curse cocked on the tip of his tongue.

The knowledge of just what kind of creatures *did* lurk in that darkness did nothing to allay his fears.

The three of them didn't speak. The only sound was their breath, which came faster the longer they hurried, and the crackle-snap of twigs and leaves and animal bones underfoot.

So complete was their focus that they failed to notice the small figure scurrying up the path towards them, until Ron plowed straight into it, and the two of them went down with a great shout in a tangle of limbs.

"Ron!" cried Hermione, and her *Lumos* vanished, plunging them all into darkness. *"Flipen—"*

“No! No! S’fine! Fine!” Ron threw up a hand, just barely visible through the dim. “It’s him! It’s Harry!”

He staggered to his feet, hauling the smaller boy up by the collar, and shucked the Invisibility Cloak from his shoulders. Harry’s face emerged from nothing, visibly rumpled, but unhurt.

“Blimey, you lot,” said Harry. “What are you all doing down here?”

“Looking for you!” Hermione exclaimed, weak with relief. “We saw Sirius Black on the Marauder’s Map, and he was headed for you, so we tried to get Lupin but he was gone so we ran straight here just in case—”

“Sirius Black?” he gasped. “Are you joking?”

“No, she’s not, because what do you know, I was right, surprise, surprise, kiss my royal, *et cetera,* I will accept apologies in the form of cash or check, and would someone *please* put a light back on, it’s pitch out here.”

“That’s you, isn’t it, Draco?” said Harry, squinting. “I can’t see.”

“Nae, ye dumb pillock, it’s Professor McGonagall.”

“Lumos maxima,” said Ron, and light poured from his wand-tip, a beam only somewhat smaller than Hermione’s. He lifted it high, like a torch. “Think we ought to get back, shouldn’t we? Seeing as the baddie’s probably still out here?”

“Yes,” said Hermione fervently, shivering. Something rustled in the trees closeby, and Draco stepped closer to her, putting his back to the circle of the four. “I think we should hurry. And Ron, maybe you oughtn’t hold that light so high — it’s quite visible, especially now that it’s so dark.”

“I hear you, but problem is, it’s easier to kill us if we can’t see anything,” said Ron, not unreasonably. “So we’re in a Catcher 22.”

“A Catch-22, yes.”

“What did I say?”

They crept up the path, moving more slowly now. Harry offered them use of the Cloak, but between Ron and Draco’s growth spurts, the four of them could no longer fit under its reach, even with their ankles showing, so they let Harry and Hermione share it between them. With the sun down, the temperature sunk almost to freezing, and Draco kept flexing his fingers to keep them from growing stiff around his wand.

“Is it just me,” whispered Hermione, “or is it very cold?”

“Yeah, no kidding, I’m losing toes over here,” said Ron. “Let’s pick up the pace, I didn’t bring my cloak.”

“No,” she said, drawing up short. “No. I mean *very* cold.”

Harry said, in a small voice: “Do any of you hear that?”

“What?” said Draco, his heart thudding.

“The screaming,” he said.

They all looked at him.

“No,” said Ron. “Do you?”

Hermione took a sharp breath. Draco couldn’t see her through the Cloak, but he could imagine the way her face had gone tight, electrified with realization, because he could feel his doing the same. The hairs on the back of his neck pricked up, one by one, like gazelles lifting their heads at the scent of a lion.

“I think—”

“We need to run,” he finished for her, and started walking backward, quickly, away from the castle. “Run fast.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. Hogsmeade’s closer, we can go there —”

A hoarse, shrill rattle pierced the air directly over their heads. Hermione screamed. Ron thrust his wand into the air, and it illuminated the fluttering black mass of a dementor, floating mere feet above them in the trees.

Its gaping mouth yawned wide, and another deafening rattle scraped out of its throat. At the sound of Hermione’s scream, it swept down on them, descending like a vulture, with talons outstretched. Draco made a sound that was part shriek, part war cry, and part exhortation, and then he ran like hell.

More rattles chorused from the trees, a whole cacophony of shuddering cries, like a flock of ghostly birds. Black cloaks poured from the branches above in a swarm and frenzied in the canopy above them, blotting out the few starry patches of moonlight. The four of them thundered down the path back to Hogsmeade, feet fumbling over the slippery dirt. Harry moved the fastest, easily overtaking Hermione, and slipped free of the Invisibility Cloak, passing Draco. “Hogsmeade!” he shouted, above the riotous shrieks of the dementors. Draco nodded, gasping for breath, and fumbled his wand into his left hand, ignoring the pangs of pain that rocketed through his injured elbow with every step.

Hermione, lagging between Draco and Ron, thrust her wand into the sky. *“Verdimillious!”* she cried, and a shower of red sparks flew up through the trees, piercing the veil of dementors and crowning the canopy.

“What’s that do?” shouted Ron. “Does it kill them?”

“No,” she cried. She leapt over a fallen log and stumbled through the landing, barely catching herself. “It’s a flare — Lupin’s still out there, he might see us!”

Draco found himself battered by a wave of affection so strong it numbed the sharp edge of terror. It was so wonderfully competent. They didn't have any spells that could deal with the dementors on their own, so she'd just — of *course.* He was irritated he hadn't thought of it himself.

"Verdimillious," he shouted, and sent a coruscating lance of green sparks through the trees.

"Verdimillious!"

"Verdimillious!"

They rounded the final bend, and Ron bellowed in dismay: the gates of Hogsmeade were closed and padlocked. Curfew had passed.

"Around the side!" cried Hermione, after only a moment's pause. She banked left and plunged through the trees, scrambling over a stump the size of a boulder. "Up through the trees!"

"Guys," gasped Harry, "I'm sorry... I, I can't…"

Draco finally paused to look at him. The boy was absolutely drenched in sweat, and listed against one of the tree trunks, trembling like a leaf in a storm. Whatever strange power the dementors wielded over him, it was taking its toll.

He swore. "Granger! Wait! It's Potter, he can't—"

"N-no — d-don't — just go, go on without m-me—"

Draco was duly considering a full-blown panic attack when, without breaking stride, Ron crouched and hoisted Harry over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Harry made a small noise of protest, swatting feebly at Ron's back, but then his head flopped down, and he went limp.

"Good man, Weasley," cried Draco, faintly awestruck, but Ron ignored him, breaking into a dead run after Hermione. The speed

that he achieved with a full person slung over his back was incredible. Draco wanted to give him some sort of medal.

They ran.

The chill made it hurt to breathe. A swarm of dementors profused from the forest behind them, oozing from every clump of foliage, their cool breath laying a crust of frost over each naked finger of every bush and tree, settling a bone-deep ache of cold into Draco's limbs. Every time he glanced over his shoulder, his heart skipped again at the horrible sight of a black morass — a billowing fog bank of tattered cloaks and horrible, decaying hands, faceless, except for the horde of yawning mouths — racing up the path after him, clawing its way out of the endless dark, like a living, hungry nightmare. The sound was like a steel rod drawn across the surface of a lake, piercing and horrible.

Hermione led them on a strange and winnowing path through the skirts of the Forest, keeping close to the Hogsmeade fence. "Granger!" Draco shouted. "Where are we going?"

"The most haunted place in Britain!" she replied, and dove through a narrow gap in the trees. Draco had to slot himself sideways and leap through, landing clumsily in the foliage beyond.

They broke at last onto a worn footpath, and scrambled up a steep hill. At the top of the hill sat a dilapidated shell of a house, its pitched roof protruding into the sky like an accusation, its shabby walls and windows paved with filth. The hill around it was shaved ugly and clean of foliage, save for clumps of frost-matted heather that shattered under their feet as they climbed to the door.

A new, deafening howl burst from ahead of them, and a dementor swept down from the open sky, its wide arms outstretched, cloak flapping. In the rich bath of moonlight, it looked almost gray, ghostly, like another phantom of the Shrieking Shack.

Hermione screamed, backpedaling. She ran into Draco, who had been a footstep behind her, and they collided, hard. She turned, starting to run away, but he gripped her and held her still, for they couldn't go back — the swarm was still surging up the hill behind them, like a tide of smoke.

Ron roared a word that Draco had never encountered outside of a book before.

"What do we do," said Draco tightly, as Hermione shook violently in his arms. "What do we do, Granger, *tell us,* what do we do—"

"I don't know! There's nothing about dementors in our textbooks! Cover to cover, they don't mention dementors *once!"*

"Then *think,* you're the smartest one here, if you can't think us out of this—"

The dementor sank down over them, its howl so piercing it blotted out the sound of his own voice. He could count the individual flakes of decaying skin on its weathered hands. It blotted out the sky above. It swallowed the blanket of stars. Draco made up his mind, shoved Hermione behind him, and closed his eyes, wondering what his soul would look like, if he had one, when he lost it.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

White light blazed against the backs of his eyelids. He pried them open and saw a white shape fly over his head, tackling the dementor, which shrieked and swept away from them. It clawed fervently at the silvery creature — which was bipedal, but unmistakable animalistic, with stifle-jointed legs, long, unnatural arms like an ape, and a fanged snout. It would have been terrifying, had it not been in the process of saving Draco's life.

The dementor shook itself free of the silver beast and tore off into the night sky, its cloak fluttering behind it. One enemy vanquished, the beast whirled, trailing gusts of mist, and galloped head-on for the

swarm of dementors, moving alternately on an eerie combination of two and four legs. The dementors peeled back as it approached, repelled by the exuberant shine coming off its skin, and fled in the wake of it. It chased them down the hill, back into the Forbidden Forest, with a speed that was both fearsome and deeply relieving, considering that it was driving them away from Draco's general direction.

"What was that?" Hermione whispered, pressed against Draco's back.

"A Patronus," said a gravelly, barrel-deep baritone.

Standing beneath them on the path to the Shack was a skeleton in a man's clothing. He was so thin that his skull pressed through the wax-paper skin of his face, and the hollows of his eyes were all but lightless, save for the faint sparkle of dark brown eyes lodged faintly in their depths. A tattered skein of muddy, matted hair hung to his elbows, and his clothes were gray rags, shapeless, like blankets hastily transfigured into robes.

He lifted his lips in a weak smile, and his teeth gleamed yellow.

It was Sirius Black.

"Hello," he rasped. "That's Harry Potter, isn't it?"

He pointed with his wand to Harry's body, still draped over Ron's back. Now that the dementors were gone, Harry was starting to stir, his hands twitching.

"If you want to kill Harry, you'll have to kill us, too," said Ron, lifting his wand.

"Kill him?" Black's jaw went slack, his expression almost crestfallen. "Why?"

When none of them answered, the criminal stepped forward tentatively, wetting his lips. “You’re his friends?” he rasped out. “Yes? Harry’s friends?”

“Stay back,” warned Draco, waving his wand. “You might be dangerous, but there’s four of us, and only one of you.”

“I have no intention of being a danger to any of you,” said Black, vaguely indignant.

“What do you want, then?” said Ron warily.

“What do I… what do I *want* — so many things. But if you must know… most immediately… at this juncture, I want to get inside that house.” He pointed at the Shrieking Shack.

“The Shack?” said Hermione, after a pause. “Why?”

“My, ah… my friend is in there, right now, at the moment,” said Black, full of a nervous energy that sent his eyes darting back and forth from Hermione’s face to the door. “And he needs me. So I hope you forgive me for the very rude thing I’m about to do.”

“What are you about to d—”

“Stupefy.”

The red spell caught Hermione in the chest. She crumpled to the ground soundlessly, her eyes fluttering closed.

Draco’s heart rate kicked somewhere into his throat. He dropped to his knees and snatched up her wrist, where to his relief, her pulse thrummed, hale and healthy, against his fingers.

“Hermione!”

Ron had no such assurances. He threw out his wand-hand at Black and roared, *“Reducto,”* but Black deflected the spell with a twitch of his wand and fired another Stupefy at Ron’s heart. It landed

squarely, and Ron keeled over, sending both him and Harry tumbling into the gorse.

Draco scrambled back, wand outstretched. “Stop,” he begged, his voice thin with panic. “You’re — you’re my uncle. We’re family. You shouldn’t kill me. I’m your nephew. Well — once removed.”

Black did actually pause at that, his wand listing ever so slightly off-course. “You’re Cissa’s boy?” he said, in tones of wonder. “Cissa Black?”

“Yes! Yes, I’m her son. Narcissa’s. Narcissa’s son.” Draco was awash in relief. “Your nephew. I’m sorry we didn’t — we never got to meet.”

“You’d be her son with Lucius, then,” said Black, his eyes flitting over Draco’s person with the air of one taking inventory.

“Y-Yes. He was my father.”

“That explains the hair,” he said. “Was? Isn’t he still?”

“He was. He is. He’s — dead.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Really?” said Draco, surprised.

“No,” said Black. “Your dad was a thin squirt of blond shit. Ruined your mum’s personality while I knew her. Glad he’s dead, to be honest.” He lifted his wand. “But if you ended up friends with James’s boy, I guess she made a recovery. So I *am* sorry about this one. Truly.”

“No — no, no, no, *don’t—”*

The last thing he saw was a flash of red.

A strange, rhythmic creaking interrupted his sleep.

Draco lifted his head, blinking stars out of his eyes, and shoved back a hank of his hair. Above him, a shattered chandelier listed drunkenly from one of its supports, twirling on its axis. The brass arms creaked with each slow rotation of the ornament.

He was sprawled across the floor of what very well may have been the filthiest room he'd ever occupied in his life. The wallpaper peeled in gouged stripes, shaved through by cavernous claw-marks, and the furniture lay in cratered remains around a floor twice paved in detritus. Glass bejeweled the floor beneath shattered windows, through which a cool wind drifted, and between slats of nailed-up boards, the dark of a pitch-black sky lay thick behind the panes.

Beside him lay Harry, Ron, and Hermione, all of whom were stirring to life alongside him. They had been laid out together on a relatively unlittered patch of floor, away from the sharper rubbish. As if in consolation for their less than comfortable lodgings, a pillow had been tucked beneath each of their heads.

Draco sat up and braced himself on his elbows. Sirius Black sat on a chair in the corner, holding one wand in his right hand, and four in his left. In the corner lay a magnificent four-poster bed with dust-encoated hangings, and on that bed lay something large and furry, its chest undulating in the slow rhythm of sleep.

"What is that," Draco said, quietly, so as not to wake it.

Black, deep in thought, took a moment to respond. "Hm? Oh, he's no threat," he said. "I mean. Well. Technically he is, but he won't be. By the time he wakes up, he'll be alright again."

"That's a werewolf," said Hermione, in a very small voice. She had sat up, too, and drawn as far away from Sirius Black as she could without phasing through the wall of the Shack.

Black frowned. “Bit pejorative, when you put it that way,” he said. “He’s a person.”

“Be that as it may, on any other day of the month,” said Hermione, slowly, “right *now,* he’s a Class Five magical creature.”

“No, he’s napping,” said Black pointedly. “And I told you, you don’t have to worry about him. He’s taken his medicine.”

“I’d still like my wand, please,” she said, with laudable steadiness.

“Yes. No, that’s understandable. Unfortunately, I can’t give it to you just yet,” he said. “It’s nothing personal, I just don’t have very much confidence you won’t try to kill me.”

“Why?” said Harry. Draco hadn’t known the boy was awake, and turned, in surprise, to see him sitting upright against the leg of a sofa. His face was schooled in a plain serenity that only ever touched Harry when he was on the verge of apoplectic rage. “Why would I try to kill you?”

“It’s what I’d do, if I were you,” admitted Black.

“That’s fair,” said Ron, mostly to Harry.

Harry stood up. Black followed the movement with his wand.

“Are you going to kill me?” said Harry calmly. “My mum and dad weren’t enough, so you came here? Finish the job?”

Black did something strange, then: he convulsed, as if physically struck.

“No,” he said hoarsely. “I didn’t, Harry, and I won’t. Wouldn’t. You’ll never…” He closed his eyes, shook his head once, powerfully — like a dog, Draco thought — and opened them again. “I would let you kill me first, before that happened, Harry. Do you understand? I would let anyone kill me first. And I would want them to.”

Harry tilted his head, not understanding.

Black stood up, dropped the wands — all five of them, including his own, which clattered to the floor along with the others and rolled away from his feet. With trembling hands, he pointed to his own chest. “Harry, you haven’t seen me in a long time, so I understand if you don’t remember,” he said, “but I’m Sirius. Your godfather. I — I was your father’s friend, and I—”

“Don’t,” spat Harry.

“I *was,”* said Black, louder, “it’s the truth, I swear it on his grave, his and Lily’s both. I was his friend. No, hang that, I was his brother. I loved him, do you understand? I loved James Potter more than I have ever loved any — almost anything, certainly myself—”

“DON’T LIE!” shouted Harry. “Don’t lie to me — you KILLED him—”

“Peter Pettigrew killed your father!” Black roared, and rushed forward, his hands outstretched — to do what, to embrace Harry, to shake him, to claw at his shirt, Draco couldn’t tell, and never found out, for Ron read the act as some intolerable combination of the three, and leapt in front of Harry, arm coiled, just in time to haul his fist brutally into Black’s nose.

The force snapped Black’s head back on his neck and sent him reeling backwards, bellowing in shock. Blood splattered on the floorboards, joining a diverse menagerie of preexisting stains, and Black staggered to the wall, clutching his face. Hermione seized the opportunity, and scrambled forward on her hands and knees to snatch up three of the closest wands within reach.

Keeping her own, she held one each to Ron and Draco, who snatched his and trained it on Black.

The wanted man groaned, fingering his nose, but failed to respond in kind, either by magic or force. Instead, he croaked, “That's a cracking good arm, boy. Chaser or beater?"

Ron blinked. “What?”

“Well, I merely assumed,” he said, mopping the blood off his chin with a filthy sleeve. “Didn’t see you at the match, but that’s not to say you can’t play. Harry, you’re the best seeker we’ve had in years, James would have been in spasms… sorry about the dementors, by the way, I had no idea they’d swarm…”

“Sorry about the dementors?” said Harry, strangely, at the same time as Hermione exclaimed: “Oh, they came for *you!”*

“Course they came for me,” said Black grimly, shooting a scurrilous look out the window. “They did just now, too, in the Forest. They always swarm when I leave the Shack. This place is warded with enough Concealment Charms that they can’t get a whiff of me, that’s thanks to Dumbledore… he made sure it was good and hidden, for Moony… but that’s the trick of it, I can’t leave. I made it just by the skin of my teeth when I first arrived.”

“Then why did you come?” demanded Hermione. “You were free. Why come to the one place with the most security in the Wizarding World?”

Black gave a small, tremulous smile. “You sound like Moony,” he said fondly. “Did *he* ever read me the riot act, when I turned up here. But I couldn’t help it, I told him. You spend thirteen years dreaming of something, you can’t just let it go.”

“Dreaming of what?” said Hermione.

Black turned his smile at the floor, and put it away, like he was boarding up a house. “When James and Lily went into hiding,” he said, instead of answering, “I volunteered as Secret-Keeper. I wanted to do it. Who better, I said. Who do you trust more than me? But James said no, it would be too predictable. He said that anyone who knew him would assume it was me, and if I ever got captured, he didn’t want to make me lie.” He smiled a new smile, stiff, starched, deeply bitter. “As if I would have broken,” he said. “As if all

the Cruciatuses in the *world* — anyway. They chose Peter, instead." He spoke now directly to Harry, who was staring at him.

"Peter Pettigrew," said Harry. "The man you killed?"

This, too, Black ignored. "Do you know how many minutes it took for Peter Pettigrew to break?" he whispered. "How many minutes of torture it took, to give up the life of his oldest friend? Guess how many minutes. I know the answer. I know it *very* well. I shared a cell with Antonin Dolohov." He repeated, louder, "How many minutes, Harry?"

"I don't know," said Harry, faint.

"Nine."

It was loud enough to make the chandelier rattle. The beast on the bed snarled, still dozing. Draco edged away from it.

"Nine minutes," said Black, glassy-eyed with rage. "Didn't even hold out into double-digits. Not even for James, he couldn't. James! His childhood friend. His *only* friend, sometimes. The man who defended him, and trusted him, and gave him a home, when no one else would've looked twice at him — the man he should've loved more than anyone, by rights — he gave him up after NINE MINUTES!"

Draco twitched up his wand, a Knockback Jinx on the tip of his tongue. But Black wasn't aggressive, at least not towards Harry; he turned, and paced the floor, full of a restless, animalistic energy.

"So I went after him," he said ruthlessly. "You say I killed him? I wish I had. And I would've whistled my merry way to Azkaban for it, too, if I'd only done the job right. But he got away from me, you see. And they found me, with blood on my hands, laughing at the sick joke of it all — that you were an orphan, little baby Harry, the spit of your father even then, and I couldn't even do you the honor of *avenging* them."

“But he’s dead,” said Harry woodenly. “Isn’t he? Peter Pettigrew, he’s —”

“Very much alive,” spat Black. “Trust me, I would have known, otherwise. Slimy little lump of pus, Wormtail, he always did know how to save his own skin. He got away from me, then. Not now, though. Now we’re together again, me and Moony, we have a deal — we’re going to find him—”

“Hang on,” said Ron, lifting a quelling finger. Black obeyed. “Sorry. Cool monologue. Problem: who’s Moony?”

“Who’s Moony?” repeated Black. “Why — it’s him.”

He gestured at the bed. “My friend,” he added, a little proudly.

“The *werewolf?”*

“No, a person,” Black retorted.

“You’re friends with him?” squeaked Ron. “How do you know he’s not going to — I don’t know, *eat* you—”

“It’s Lupin, isn’t it?” said Draco suddenly.

All turned to stare at him.

“The werewolf,” he added, jerking his chin at the bed. “It’s Remus Lupin. Your ‘friend.’”

To Harry, he added, “They were all friends at Hogwarts. James Potter, Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew, and Remus Lupin. And Lupin leaves the castle on full moons.”

“I’m not even going to ask how you know that,” said Black softly. “I suppose any number of people could have told you, your mother being only one. But yes. Remus was the fourth Marauder.”

“Marauder?” exclaimed Harry. “Like the Map?”

Black broke into a brilliant grin. “Found it, have you?” he said. “Thank God. I dreamed a hundred terrible dreams where it wasted away in Filch’s closet, never to be misused again.”

“My dad made that map?”

“More like Remus did, actually,” said Black, tipping his head at the sleeping werewolf on the bed. “He came up with most of the spellwork. We merely mapped out the castle. Then he did the rest. He was always the cleverest of all of us.”

“Wait,” said Ron. “You called your friend — the werewolf — *Moony?”*

The grin reappeared, with an attitude that could only be described as ‘hangdog.’ “Padfoot,” he said, placing a hand on his own chest. “Nice to meet you.”

“Wormtail, for Peter,” said Hermione, reciting from memory. “And then—”

“Prongs, for James,” said Black, nodding. “It was, ah… something of an inside joke.”

“Okay,” said Ron, rubbing his temples. “Okay. Give me a second, would you? *Moony.* Merlin’s tits.”

“How do we know you’re telling the truth?” interrupted Hermione, though Harry was already staring at Black with an expression akin to reverence. “It’s a terribly convenient story you’ve got. Blame the whole thing on a dead man, and convince us you’re here to avenge someone who’ll never turn up to defend himself.”

Black sneered at her. “Could start with the fact that you’re alive. *That* was none too convenient to pull off, let me tell you.”

“Answer the question,” snapped Draco. Black flicked up his fingers, surrendering.

“It’s the truth, all right?” he said, still speaking mostly to Harry. “You can ask Moony when he wakes up. He believes me. He and I share too much history, for him to not… give me some Veritaserum, I’ll tell you the same. It was Peter Pettigrew, mark me. That’s the man who deserves to die. Not me.”

A pitiful whine came from the bed. Black hurried over to the four poster and snapped shut the hangings, hiding the creature from view. “He’s transforming,” he said quickly. “You lot should clear out, for a minute, if you don’t want to hear — it’s not always the prettiest thing—”

Groans and whimpers escaped from the bed, combined with a horrible crackling sound, like bones being shattered and ground into each other. A high, animal howl pierced the air. The sound grew thinner and reedier the longer it went on, and strains of a human yell emerged underneath it, segueing gradually into a full-throated scream of tremendous pain.

Black hurriedly cast off his outer cloak of withered gray, and leapt forward. Draco at first thought he was going to flop down on his face, but instead, the criminal transformed in midair into a large black German Shepherd, its fur matted thickly over its flanks. The dog leapt onto the mattress, and disappeared behind the hangings.

“What,” said Ron. “What. What!”

“Oh!” exclaimed Hermione. “Now, that makes sense!”

“What does?” said Harry, echoing Draco’s sentiments.

“He’s an Animagus,” she explained excitedly. “That’s how he traveled without being seen, and it’s probably how he snuck past the dementors. I wonder how long he’s been…? Because if that’s how he got close to Lupin while they were in school, that’s tremendously interesting. I suppose perhaps the werewolf doesn’t attack him in animal form, because it doesn’t read him as a threat? Or it perceives

certain other animals as kin? I don't know, I'll have to ask him about it. *Padfoot,* oh, ha, ha, very funny…"

The horrible noise from within the bed was receding, replaced by the wet, raspy breathing of a very exhausted human being, combined with the whining and sniffling of a very large dog. Soon, Black reappeared from behind the hangings, swung his shaggy head around the room, and delicately picked up his discarded cloak between his teeth. He carried it daintily over to the bed and disappeared again.

"Thank you, Padfoot," said a calm, ragged voice.

The hangings drew back, and Remus Lupin peered out at them, blinking away the faint light of the chandelier. He was swaddled in Black's shabby traveling cloak, which draped about his bare shoulders and covered most of his scrawny, scarred body.

"Ah," he said. "Well. I suppose I have a lot of explaining to do."

"Not as much as you'd think," said Harry, unexpectedly kind. He put a hand on Ron's wrist and lowered his wand. "Professor, you're a werewolf."

Lupin looked down at himself. "Yes," he said. "It appears so."

"Does Dumbledore know?" said Hermione, minutely.

Lupin smiled. "Yes, he does," he said. "He's known ever since I was a student. He built this place for me, years ago, so that I would have somewhere to transform that wouldn't risk the other students… that was before we had a Potions Master quite so talented as our Professor Snape, and before I had access to the Wolfsbane Potion."

"Still can't believe Snivellus is a professor," muttered Black, who had transformed back to human form, and now reclined, nigh-luxuriant, on the pillows. "Of all the people. Did the corpse of Gellert Grindelwald turn him down? The Giant Squid?"

“Severus Snape is a genius,” said Draco, coldly. Black eyed him without affection.

“You think so? He told you that, did he?”

“I know it. And he’s the reason Lupin isn’t rampaging through the castle grounds right now, so—”

“Oi, watch it,” snapped Black, as soon as the word *rampaging* escaped his mouth. “Moony isn’t a danger to anybody, and it’s not as though Snape’s doing it from the kindness of his heart, is he? Dumbledore’s had to lean on him pretty hard to get him not to run and blab to the Ministry.”

“Yes, what a terrible person, wanting to tell the *Ministry* there’s a *werewolf* at a school for *children,”* said Draco coolly. “Certainly he’s got no one’s interests at heart but his own.”

“Remus,” said Black lowly, “is a threat to no one.”

Lupin tipped his head one way and then the other. “Well, I hope that’s not true,” he said mildly, shrugging the cloak higher about his shoulders. He poked around the bedding, presumably searching for his clothes. “I should like to think I’m something of a threat to my enemies, if not a terribly impressive one. And to your point, Draco, yes, Severus Snape is a remarkable Potions Master. Far better than Slughorn, who at his best could never have approximated the quality of Wolfsbane Potion that Snape produces for me monthly, and for which I am duly grateful. Nevertheless,” he added, “he remains, as he has always been, a hopeless and colossal knob. Sirius, where’s my wand?”

Harry guffawed in delight. Draco scowled.

“Right here, Moony.”

“Thank you.” He Summoned his clothes, and discreetly donned his shirt, which increased Draco’s comfort level by a non-inconsiderable

amount. “Now. At this point, there are several avenues open to us.”

“Is this the part where you kill us?” said Ron fearfully. “I’d really like for this to not be the part where you kill us.”

“Play your cards right, we’ll try to work something out,” said Black easily. Ron gulped.

Lupin scoffed, flapping a hand chidingly in Black’s direction. “Nonsense. Ron, we’re not going to kill you,” he said kindly. “We’re not going to hurt you at all. For one thing, I’m still your professor, and I have a duty of care, which I take very seriously. So seriously, in fact, that Padfoot and I are going to have *very* cross words later about the inappropriateness of bringing you here during one of my transformations.”

Black folded his arms, frontloading a pout for this conversation in advance. “What was I supposed to do? Leave them out there as carrion for the dementors?”

“I believe that the terms we discussed involved you not leaving the Shack at all,” said Lupin, in a faux pleasantness that dripped with warning. “Seeing as doing that tends to bring down swarms of dementors, the likes of which gave *cause* for you to rescue, and subsequently Stun, the children in the first place, and Sirius, when I said we were going to have words *later,* I did mean all words synonymous with ‘later,’ and not ‘now.’”

Black clucked his tongue, mulish, and fell silent. Lupin turned back to the four of them, smiling calmly.

“No,” he said, “I really meant there are several avenues open to *you.* You know my secret now, obviously. Once I acquire a pair of trousers, I will escort you back to the castle, and you may do one of several things. You may find your way immediately to the headmaster’s office, where you will report that I am harboring a dangerous criminal in my custody on school grounds, in violation of Wizarding laws and Hogwarts bylaws alike. I will be prosecuted,

probably imprisoned, and Sirius will be taken back into Ministry custody."

"Some of those things will happen," Black clarified, in sour tones. "Not all. Let's not get carried away." He said pointedly to Lupin, "Neither of us are going to Azkaban while I'm still breathing."

"Be that as it may," Lupin said, acknowledging it, "that is one option available to you four. Here is another: you may find your way instead to the Owlery, where you will write to the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, and report an unregistered werewolf in residence on Hogwarts grounds. The aurors will come for me, attempt to take me into custody, and Sirius will do… whatever he intends to do to prevent it. Best case, we flee, and end up in hiding somewhere damp and unpleasant. Worst case, we die."

"In a blaze of glory," said Black.

"In a blaze of glory, yes, thank you. Yet a third option," continued Lupin patiently, "very similar to the second, is that instead of the Ministry, you address your letter to the Board of Directors. They will react with shock and horror to the suggestion that a werewolf has been lurking amongst their children, ready to strike at any moment, but out of concern for the reputation of their school, they will probably insist that Dumbledore sack me quietly, to prevent the scandal from getting out. No aurors; no dementors; no dying blaze of glory." He smiled sadly, and spread his hands. "There you have it. You will note I have ranked these options in descending order of unpleasantness for me."

"But you haven't mentioned the other one," said Hermione, after a pause.

Lupin inclined his head at her, his expression very like he was calling on a student. "Which is?"

"We keep your secret," she said, as if it were obvious. "We don't tell anyone."

Draco made a noise of protest. “Hold on,” he said. “Let’s not make hasty promises—”

“I like this one,” said Black immediately. “What’s your name, again, girl?”

“Hermione,” she said. “Hermione Granger. But Professor, it’s the obvious answer, isn’t it? You haven’t hurt anyone. You have it under control. You’re not responsible for it, I mean, you can’t possibly help it. It’s a medical condition, if anything.”

Draco groaned. They were doomed: Hermione’s laser-focused Gryffindor Instincts had identified a Person Slash Group In Need, and there would be no preventing her from offering help. One could only climb aboard the Charity Express or get swept into the undertow.

Black was nodding heavily with every word. “Listen to her,” he said, pointing. “Exactly right. Medical condition, Moony, you hear that? Totally not responsible — entirely blameless—”

“And it wouldn’t be fair to dismiss you, or punish you,” she said passionately, “when you’ve been the best professor we’ve ever had, and worked so hard for us all year, only for us to turn around and reward you by — by betraying you. It wouldn’t be right.”

“I agree,” said Ron unexpectedly, speaking up for the first time in a while. He had apparently ruminated on the many nickname-related wrongdoings committed by the Marauders, and deemed them insufficient to merit prison. “You’re a decent bloke. Didn’t kill us. Barely hurt us, if you count a knock on the head. Saved our skins from dementors, that was class.” He nodded stiffly to Black. “Stands to reason. Shouldn’t turn you in.”

“As much as I appreciate that, you two,” said Lupin, with great tenderness, “you have quite kindly skirted around the part where I harbored a wanted man on Hogwarts grounds. To lie about that — to merely do nothing, even, to elect not to report me — would make

you complicit in my crimes, and I do not know that I can accept infecting you all with my guilt."

"Infecting them all with your — oh, listen to yourself!" said Black irritably. "Would you stop trying to fall on every sword that sticks its nose out of the dirt? For five minutes? It's putting me right off."

"They deserve to make an informed judgment. I could not accept their sacrifice without knowing that they undertook it willingly."

"All right, so we'll undertake it willingly," said Hermione boldly. "I know what the law says, about reporting. I also know that we're students, and if you get discovered, it's not like they're going to come after a bunch of thirteen-year-olds for failing to… to turn in their favorite teacher. We can just say we didn't know the law."

"We're all moving pretty quickly past the part where we decide they're not guilty," Draco said pointedly. He looked around at the others. "Have we actually resolved that? We believe they're telling the truth? Full, complete, and entire? No reservations about this, none?"

"I respect your skepticism, Draco," Lupin said. "If you have any questions that would make you feel more comfortable, if answered, I would be pleased to do so."

"It's not — alright, it's not that you don't have the right answers," he said begrudgingly. "It's the principle of the thing. I don't exactly *fancy* getting someone tossed to the dementors, I just feel as though we should have a bit more of an inquest first, before we all throw in."

"A proceduralist," said Lupin, smiling. "Like your father before you."

"Well, yes!"

"I believe you," said Harry suddenly, interrupting them all. Lupin and Black both pivoted towards him with an almost amusing attentiveness, a hunger for his attention that Draco had often seen,

but not recognized, in Lupin's gaze. "Both of you. I believe your story, and I believe you about Pettigrew. I don't… I don't want you to get captured. Or to die." He swallowed. "You're my godfather, you said?"

"Yes, I am," said Black, hungrily. He moved forward on the bed, with an animal grace. "He asked me the night you were born… I was first," he added, with a glance at Lupin. "By mutual agreement. The second — they always planned to have a second — would have been Remus's…"

"A second," said Harry, thick with emotion. "So there would have been a sibling. For me."

"Or two," agreed Black. "James was an only child, and he loathed it. He wanted a nice big family, he said, lots of boys and girls, plenty of people to play with. He joked about having a quidditch team, but Lily drew the line at three, so they probably would've landed around four or five, if you average it."

"It would have been three," said Lupin, in tones of amusement. Black shrugged, relenting.

"What else can you tell me about them?" said Harry, and there was hunger in his voice, too. "My parents?"

"Oh," said Black, looking at Lupin. "Oh. Harry — *everything."*

The answer lit Harry from inside, like a flame catching a wick. He glowed. "Everything?"

"Yes. No one knew James like me," he said proudly, puffing out his chest. "Not his own mother what changed his diapers. Ask me any question. I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

"Really?"

“Yes. But not tonight,” said Lupin firmly, standing up. He had acquired and discreetly vested himself with some pants, and hitched them up with a bit of string for a belt. “The sun will rise in a few minutes, and you all should be back in Gryffindor Tower when it does. If you do intend to keep my secret, then it will be easiest for you if you do not have to explain to Filch why you are starting your morning on the wrong side of the castle doors.”

“Great,” said Ron loudly. “I’m knackered. Let’s go—”

“Will I see you again, though?” Harry said to Black, worried. “You’re not leaving, are you? You’ll still be here?”

“’Course I will. ’Course. Can hardly leave, can I? I’m here whenever you need me.” Black crept all the way forward, until he perched on the end of the bed, like a filthy bird of paradise. “Come back to the Shrieking Shack, sometime, and we can talk about it,” he said, full of terrible bruised hope. “I’ll tell you everything. Whatever you want.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah? You’d like that?”

“I would,” said Harry, and Draco could barely look at him, so bright did that candle shine.

They gathered their wands, and Lupin healed a few minor scrapes and bruises they had picked up on their flight from the dementors. Harry received what must have been the millionth repair for his broken glasses, and Hermione fussed at a bump on her head where she’d hit the ground after being Stunned. Then Lupin took them down to the basement of the Shrieking Shack, where a hidden passage led them all the way under the Forest and up through the Whomping Willow.

Sirius Black accompanied them all the way to the very mouth of the passage. There, hunched in the earthy antechamber of the tunnel, he visibly dithered over how to bid them goodbye, and settled on

pumping Harry's hand in a firm, energetic handshake that made them both eminently uncomfortable.

"Goodbye," he said. "For now. Come to the Shack. Really. Any old time. I'll — spruce it up a little, I know it's not the prettiest—"

"Well, it's not like you've got an interior decorator," said Ron generously, sticking out his palm, and after a moment's hesitation, Black clasped it.

"Good arm."

"Good aim," said Ron. "Teach me that spell, would you? The Stupefier?"

"What, a Stunner? It's simple. I imagine Moony could show you, too, but — of course, I'd be happy to. Not that you need it, with that right hook." He gave Ron's hand another respectful shake, and turned, halting, to Hermione.

"We don't have to shake hands," said Hermione, eyeing the crusts of fungus and miscellaneous brown matter under his fingernails.

Black cracked a grin. "You," he said, "remind me very much of a girl I used to know quite well as a boy. She was wise and terrible, and said all the right things at all the wrong times."

"That's nice," said Hermione. "I'd just as happily not remind you of anyone, though. I'm myself, and that's quite enough."

"Seems like it," said Black sagely, and tapped his forehead in a salute. She shuffled her feet, awkwardly, and did the same. Draco snickered.

Which brought Black's attention, finally, to him. "You and I," he said, "are long overdue for a conversation."

"We've known each other for about nine hours," said Draco. "I was unconscious for eight of them."

“I know. I’ve been carrying most of our conversations on my back, boy.” Black croaked a laugh, and slapped him on the shoulder. If his arm had held a scrap of muscle on it, instead of skin and raw sinew and bone, Draco might have been shaken. “Really. I mean it. You and me, the full ten rounds. Everything you never wanted to know about the Black family, and everything that’s happened since. You understand?”

“Not at all,” said Draco honestly. “You’re nothing like my mother. I’m not sure I currently believe the two of you were related.”

“No? You didn’t know your mother at Hogwarts. I did. You’d understand it more, if you had… but you’ve got to go,” he said, catching Lupin’s eye. “So I’ll make you the same offer I made Harry. Come back. Anytime.”

He had resigned himself long ago to the necessity of shaking Black’s hand, and now, having thus girded himself, managed to execute the gesture with minimal skulking or flinching. He wiped his hand surreptitiously on his pants when it was done.

They emerged from the tunnel under the Whomping Willow as the first pink fingers of dawn split the sky. Lupin hung behind, saying whatever his own goodbyes were to Black, and emerged belatedly from the tunnel-entrance to hurry after them, his matted hair ruffling in the morning breeze.

“What do you think the deal is, with them?” said Ron quietly, before Lupin came within earshot. The lake glowed with the burgeoning sunrise, and the air tasted crisp and cold, like fresh mint in cool water, the flavor of a bright winter morning.

“What do you mean?” said Hermione.

“Black and Lupin,” said Ron, nodding at the approaching professor. “There’s something up there, right? That’s not exactly a friendship, is it?”

“God,” said Draco immediately and soulfully, “please, don’t let’s talk about this. I have had a rough enough night without you deciding we should all let’s talk about this.”

Heedless of his prayers, Hermione said thoughtfully, “I assumed they just had a close bond. Sirius did say James was his brother, you know — perhaps it’s the same for them.”

“Yeah?” said Ron. “You got any brothers?”

“Admittedly, no.”

“Well, I do,” he said. “Five of them. And there’s not one of them — not one, not even Fred or George — who acts that way with each other.”

Harry, wandering up ahead of them, had no comment on the matter. He was apparently lost in thought. For that silence, Draco loved him, deeply and earnestly.

“Hm,” she said doubtfully. “I suppose it’s a very… intimate thing, when you get down to it. Enduring all those transformations, side by side, for years. You’d probably end up acting a bit odd around each other no matter what. It’s an intense physical experience.”

“Granger,” said Draco, with religious intensity, “I will pay you *so much* money to never say the words ‘intense physical experience,’ with respect to a teacher, ever again.”

“I was using the words literally! I didn’t mean anything salacious!”

“I could see it,” mused Ron. Lupin was now close enough that they were sailing close to dangerous waters, talking about this, and if he gave any sign of having overheard them, Draco resolved to walk straight into the lake. “Not that I love thinking about it, mind, he’s still my professor. But I want to get out ahead of this, in case the opportunity comes up to say ‘I told you so,’ later on: I could see it. For the record.”

“It is *inescapably* so noted,” said Draco. “Now, can we talk about something else, please? For instance: I’m thinking of greens and blacks, for my funeral. Closed-casket, obviously; death by humiliation is bad for the skin.”

They trekked up the grassy knoll to the castle, tousled by the morning wind, and the last leaves of November fluttered down around them in a ballet of brass and gold. In daylight, the grounds no longer seemed so ominous, nor half so full of terrors, as they had the night before; indeed, there was a warmth to them that had not existed yesterday, as they had met the terrors full in the face, unearthed the monster under the bed, and known it by daylight for a friend.

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miscellaneous notes:

-shoutout to the person in the comments who was like "oh are we going to see Peter?" in response to the sneak peek last chapter. the answer is: sort of! for my self indulgence is limitless and my patience is not.

-in retrospect that is on me for using "Marauder," singular, though I thought it was a fun play on words. the gag is that lupin is supposedly the "last" Marauder, according to Snape, but the twist of the chapter is of course... that he's not!

-shoutout also to severus "never not bitter" snape, who eats spite for breakfast lunch and dinner. sir please put down that poker. you're scaring your godson. go eat a snickers

-sneak peak for next chapter: just in time for the holiday season, it's a christmas episode! writing ch22 was the most fun I've had writing any chapter yet, and that's saying something, because writing this thing only gets more and more fun with time.

CH22 is slated to drop tuesday or wednesday of next week; I'm traveling this weekend, and workslammed to hell, but since the fic is

pre-written up to like CH30, I'll be sure to have something out on schedule. cheers!

A Hairy Little Christmas

Chapter 22: A Hairy Little Christmas

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

As the term ended, the sky blanched a white so clear it was almost iridescent, and a gilt of glittering snow erased the muddy grounds. Strains of Christmas music floated through the halls, and the Charms classroom hung with enchanted illusions of real fairies. Thoughts turned toward vacation plans, and on the last day of term, the faculty elected to dismiss classes at noon, rather than struggle through the illusion that anyone was still paying attention.

The last weeks of Defense Against the Dark Arts were strange. Watching Lupin lead a class exercise, calm and dignified in his professor’s robes, Draco could simply not imagine it was the same man he had seen emerge naked from the tattered bed in the Shrieking Shack. He wondered, a bit wildly, whether the gaggle of girls who trailed him at speed through the hallways would react the same way if they knew his secret — and then he wondered who else knew. Snape was brewing his Wolfsbane Potion, at Dumbledore’s behest, so there were at least two on the faculty. But did McGonagall know? Sprout? Hagrid? Surely not Hagrid; the giant couldn’t keep a secret to save his mother’s life.

Harry, meanwhile, started to hang back after class in D.A.D.A. These chats with Lupin would only last for fifteen or twenty minutes, and he would come hurrying in late to lunch, making excuses for the delay, as if they didn’t know exactly what had kept him. Draco would have begrudged him nothing except the flimsiness of the excuse, but he did wonder what all the two were doing, once everyone else left. There couldn’t possibly be that much to say about one’s parents, could there?

But when Hermione — whose curiosity could be relied on to conquer her tact — finally plucked up the courage to ask him, Harry surprised them all.

“He’s helping me with dementors,” he said. He examined the architecture of a towering BLT, deemed it wanting, and added another floor of bacon. “I asked him to help me stop, er…”

“Swooning like a girl?” suggested Ron helpfully. A sprinkle of enchanted snow from the Great Hall ceiling piled on his shoulder, and he flicked it off.

“Passing out, yeah, thanks.”

“Is there a way to stop them?” said Draco curiously. “I thought they couldn’t be killed.”

“Can’t kill them. There is a spell you can do to ward them off, a bit,” said Harry, mortaring mustard. “It’s complicated, though. Sirius did it, when he rescued us, and Lupin can do it, too, but it’s hard to pull off.” He gave them a rough account of the Patronus Charm.

“A happy memory?” said Hermione, intrigued. “That’s all? Why, that’s easy.”

“You think?” said Harry, a bit tartly. “Try pulling one when you’re staring down seven feet of misery in a cloak, and get back to me.”

“Oh, could I?” she said, missing the point spectacularly. “Would he mind? I wouldn’t want to intrude. But if he’s already teaching you…”

“Merlin,” said Ron. “Term’s only just finished, and you want more homework already?”

“Actually, no,” she said. Draco choked on a bit of potato. “I’m worried — clear your throat. Do you need a napkin? — I’m worried about the amount that we’ve already got. I started on some of it this morning, and I don’t think we’ll have time to do that and the Charms essay

and the practice potion Snape's assigned unless we pull a double-shift on Boxing Day…"

"That's it," said Ron, standing up. "We're going to see Hagrid."

"Why?"

"Because you need to be removed as far from any all books as possible, and I want to talk him out of giving us homework."

Meanwhile, the rest of the castle waxed festive near Christmas. Coronets of holly and mistletoe wreathed each window, and the Great Hall sprouted twelve stout Christmas trees, bedazzled with rhinestones and popcorn garlands. A group of students had lit a twelve-foot menorah at the foot of the faculty table earlier in December, and it was left there, decked with red bows, even though Hanukkah had passed. In the Great Hall, seven candles the size of Douglas firs rested on a dais near the entrance, three red, three green, one black. The smell of roast goose and baking bread filled the castle at all hours as the kitchens threw themselves into preparing the feast. Draco watched it all with the curiosity of a first year. He had never stayed at Hogwarts over the holidays before. Now and then he thought about the Manor at Christmastime, and how the snow piled on the gables, and the enchanted topiaries bounded around like deer in the fresh snow, and felt homesick for it. But these thoughts were increasingly few and far between, especially because he had so little time by himself in which to think them. It was astonishing how often there was something happening in Gryffindor Tower, now the term was done: either Fred and George were making a pilgrimage to the kitchens, or Seamus was offering to trade cassettes; Hermione wanted to review their Charms homework, or Angelina and Harry wanted to squeeze in an extra quidditch practice, or Ginny wanted them to teach her to fly chaser. Altogether, he spent more hours on his feet during the holidays than he did during term.

On Christmas morning, Draco woke first, sleepily, to the sound of doves cooing in the eaves, and several moments later, fully, to a

pillow in the face.

“Presents!” roared Ron, scrambling back to his bed before Draco could reply in kind. “Geddup! Geddup, Harry! Presents!”

The Boy Who Lived was fumbling with his glasses. At the foot of their beds sat heaps of parcels in wrapping paper and twine. Draco found, to his satisfaction and slight embarrassment, that his pile was the largest and most numerous of any in the room.

A tap came at the door. “Are you decent?” Hermione called, muffled, and Ron bounded over to open the door.

“Close enough! Come in.”

“Merry, merry.” She wore a fluffy pink bathrobe and fuzzy slippers, and her hair was pinned up. She carried an armful of presents, and bustled around the dorm, handing out. “Ron, that’s for you. And Harry… Draco, there you go…”

It was just as he’d hoped: three new cassettes of muggle music, with little notes in her neat scrawl explaining who they were. He tucked them carefully away beside his Walkman, which he kept in a velvet purse in his bedside table, positively swaddled in anti-theft enchantments.

“Cheers, Granger,” said Draco happily. He ducked under his bed, and retrieved her present from its dusty, top-secret confines behind the skirt. “Merry Christmas.”

“You didn’t have to,” she said, but he could tell she was pleased.

“Go on, open it, then.”

She did, peeling away the leaves of tissue paper, and shook out a long tyrian peacoat, with shiny gold buttons and lining of black silk. She gasped.

“But this must have been expensive!”

“Hardly, it’s not even custom,” he said. “Now you needn’t wear those ridiculous muggle clothes when it’s cold out. Check the box.”

A set of Swiss caramels hid under the last layer of wrapping. She gave a coo of delight, and sat down on his bed to tear them open at once.

Ron had demolished half of his pile already. “Sweater, from Mum,” he said carelessly, tossing something hideous and maroon onto the bed behind him. “Bet you’ve got one, too, Harry.”

Harry had. So, to his surprise, had Draco, who unearthed a shaggy woolen sweater in sea-green, with a white lion stitched into the back.

“Oh, she used the good yarn, for you,” said Ron enviously. “The twins and I always get stuck with the colors she can’t get rid of, after she’s done Bill and Charlie and Dad.”

“That wasn’t necessary,” said Draco, surprised. He shook it out, found it more or less fitted to his measurements, and shrugged it on. The wool was pilly, and somewhat loose around the shoulders, but it was perfectly warm. “I like it,” he decided. “Weasley, what’s your address? I’ll send a thank-you note.”

“Don’t you dare,” hissed Ron. Draco smirked and hocked a pack of nut brittle at him.

They dawdled so long over presents that by the time they made it down from the dorms, it was almost midday. The Gryffindor table piled high with a mountain ridge of griddlecakes, crowned by peaks of syrup and powdered sugar. Ron and Hermione competed to see who could construct the most horrifying monument to tooth decay, and then annihilated them with similar grace, giggling when they got powdered sugar on their noses and in their hair. Fresh snow lay in a blanket over the lawns, spotted by looping chains of footprints and several snowmen of various elaborateness, including a full-scale, architecturally sound reconstruction of the Tower of Pisa undertaken by a club of Ravenclaw seventh years. After breakfast, the four of

them went on a tour of the snow menagerie, and a small argument broke out over the tower's construction: Hermione remarked that it was listing several degrees too far, and Draco asserted that it was not, merely settled on a hill, and they got into an argument about whether or not one measured the radial angle from sea-level or the foundation, and ultimately agreed that they could not settle the question without building their own to find out.

While the two of them bickered and sniped at each other over blueprints, Harry and Ron built a lumpy, hunch-backed snowman of their own. The miserable creature wore a threadbare wig of willow leaves, and had a pair of V-shaped twigs for eyebrows. Ron called it "Snowpe."

Flushed and wet from snow, they tramped back up to the common room when the sun started going down, and dressed for the party.

Fred and George had promised a shindig, and Gryffindor parties never failed to deliver. Out of respect for inter-house unity, and fear of Percy's legendary scoldings about messes in the Common Room, they held it in the Astronomy Tower. To prevent it being shut down, twins had negotiated a cautious ceasefire with the faculty on condition that only third years and up would be in attendance, so they were met at the entrance by Lee Jordan in a beefeater hat and a long fake beard.

"PASSWORD," he bellowed, flinging his arms over the door. Music thumped from behind him, and laughter.

"Oh c'mon, Lee, it's us," said Ron.

"WRONG!"

"You *know* us! I've been sleeping two doors down from you for three years!"

"Also WRONG," boomed Lee. "Here is a HINT! It rhymes with 'WHEEZE'!"

“Please?” said Hermione, politely.

The door swung open abruptly, and Fred poked his head out. Glitter dusted his hair, and he wore a pair of antlers on a headband. “God bless,” he said fondly. “It’s ‘feces.’” He handed Lee a red plastic cup of punch. “Go on and let ’em in, anyway, Jordan. Except for that redhead, I don’t like the look of him.”

“I’m your brother!”

“No wonder, then.”

“CORRECT,” intoned Lee, and stepped aside.

He opened the door into a sea of bodies and twinkling lights. The Astronomy Tower had decked out in fairy lights and chiffon streamers, and filled with loud muggle Christmas music; at least, Draco assumed it was muggle (some breathy-voiced man was whining about ‘last Christmas’ to a profusion of synths). Every student left in the castle had attempted to cram themselves into the Tower. Lavender Brown and the Patil twins were perched on a table, sipping cups of punch, wearing short little skirts with white fluffy trim. Oliver Wood and Roger Davies, tied neck and neck for the ugliest sweater in attendance, were having a profound, philosophical, and indelibly drunken debate in the corner. And dancing happily on a tabletop, swaddled in enough knitwear to warm a legion, was — Draco startled in pleasant surprise — Dobby the house-elf, holding a fingerbowl of butterbeer.

“Merry Christmas, Mister Draco!” he squeaked. He was obviously a bit tipsy. He threw his arms around Draco’s neck, and then whisked up his sleeves, showing off a row of elaborate hair ties and bows running from wrist to elbow. “It is so good to be seeing you! You are growing more handsome every year! Dobby is sorry he is not visiting, but he is having many adventures with his new friends, and is always working hard on kitchen duty. Spratt is having him guard the pantry, since this year there is always someone sticky-fingered

trying to sneak around — but look! Dobby has found more crunchies!”

Hermione giggled. “That’s nice, Dobby,” she said. She pulled a blue one from her wrist, and offered it to him. “Would you like one more? Merry Christmas.”

“Grain Jar!” cried Dobby. “Thank you, thank you! Merry Christmas!”

He gifted them both aluminum tins full of ice cream — “Dobby has made it himself! Haggis flavor, you are not finding it nowhere else!” — and bobbed off to dance with some of the other kitchen elves. Hermione cracked hers, sniffed it, and turned a verdant shade of green.

A bowl of something bright blue and sparkling sat on a table with some Christmas cookies and snacks. Draco could have clocked it as alcoholic at fifty yards, merely by its context, but when they got close enough to smell it, his suspicions were pungently confirmed.

“Eugh, jungle juice,” said Ron, sniffing his cup. “You could clean bedpans with this stuff.”

“But that’s *illegal,”* said Hermione, scandalized. “We’re all underage!”

“Butterbeer’s alcoholic, technically,” said Draco idly, scanning the crowd. The bulk of the party was Gryffindors, with a respectable showing of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, but he had yet to spot any green ties. He had mentioned the party to Theo in passing, about a week ago, but he didn’t know if he would remember, or if he’d come, even if he did. He wasn’t quite sure what had propelled him to do it; perhaps it had occurred to him, on some level, that Theo had so far invited Draco to two parties, and he’d yet to repay the invitation.

“In traces,” Hermione sniffed. “This smells like moonshine. Look! That person is drinking *vodka!”*

“What, neat?”

“Is this normal?” she hissed at him, whaling on his sleeve. “Is underage drinking part of Wizarding culture? I didn’t read about that, anywhere!”

“Yes,” he said gravely. “I’m afraid you’re witnessing the practice of a time-honored tradition, sacred to our culture. It’s been venerated by our people since the beginning of time.”

“Purebloods?”

“Teenagers,” he said.

They took sparkling ciders and struggled their way over to a table. The music changed to a jazzy, syncopated standard about a sleighbound vagrant called Zanna Claws, and people took the slower song as a break for drinks. A fourth year in a short red dress pressed out of the crowd and tapped Harry on the shoulder. “Hi,” she shouted. “D’you want to dance?”

Harry spit juice back into his goblet. “Oh,” he said, fumbling it back to the table. “Um, I don’t know how. Sorry.”

“Well, that’s okay,” she said, twisting her fingers nervously. “I don’t either, really.”

“You don’t?” said Harry, baffled. “Why’d you ask, then?”

Draco and Ron both seized with twin spasms of grief. Hermione, hand sealed over her mouth, heaved with silent laughter.

The poor girl faltered. “Oh,” she said. “Sorry. If you don’t want to—”

“No, no,” said Ron firmly, kicking Harry to his feet, “he does. Ignore him, he keeps his brain in the quidditch locker—”

“Oy!”

“—but he’d love to dance, honest. Just take the lead, he’ll get the picture. Go on, Harry,” he added, as Harry, wild-eyed, stumbled to

his feet. “Make a friend, eh?”

Smiling shyly, the girl took his hand and led him to the dance floor. Harry stared at Ron over his shoulder, begging wordlessly for help.

“Poor Harry,” laughed Hermione. “You steamrolled him.”

“Nah. It’ll be good for him. About time he threw one of those girls a bone.”

“One of them?” said Draco suddenly. “You don’t mean to tell me there are girls, plural, afflicted with some incomprehensible measure of — *feelings,* for Potter?”

“Oh, yes,” said Hermione serenely, and her lack of surprise disturbed him even more. “He’s quite popular in the girls’ dorm. Parvati had a mean crush on him, in first year; and of course, there’s Ginny.”

“Who we think’s in recovery,” advised Ron. “Still claims he’s fit, though. Blech.”

“But — but—” Something toothy in the back of Draco’s head pricked up its ears. “But he’s scrawny. And doesn’t dress. And he never brushes his hair.”

“So?” said Hermione, amused. “You’ve seen pictures of muggle rockstars, haven’t you? It’s in style.”

On instinct, he touched his own carefully gelled coif of hair. “Maybe for muggles, it is,” he said dourly.

This opened up a world of possibilities both daunting and novel. Did Ron have a crush, too? Hermione? Did she stay up at night, dreaming of boys with shaggy hair and too many rings? That felt dreadfully out-of-character, and somehow disappointing. He gave her a skeptical once-over — she sipped her pumpkin juice, placid in her ignorance — and reassured himself that he would have heard about it. Hermione couldn’t hide her feelings to save her life. Draco

hadn’t any crushes; maybe that put him behind the curve. The whole business felt horridly premature.

“Granger,” he said suddenly, shaken to the core by the most wretched idea of all.

“Hm?”

“You don’t have a crush on Potter, do you?”

He glared at her suspiciously. She stared back, jaw agape, and then burst into laughter.

“No!” she exclaimed. “He’s — why, I don’t — Harry? *Me?* He’s like my brother!”

“That’s what they always say,” said Ron sagely, rendering Draco aghast.

“You can’t,” he told her severely. “Granger, I mean it. You’re forbidden from having a crush on Potter. I won’t allow it.”

“You won’t *allow* it,” she repeated, amused. “Okay. Well, if I detect any touchy-feely sensations, I’ll be sure to file a permit application with your office.”

“Seriously. For your own good.”

“Oh, and I do appreciate it, really. What about Ron? Is he out of bounds too?”

“Mione, I’m flattered, but it would never work out between us,” said Ron, putting a hand to his breast. “It’s me or the cat, and I know where I stand.”

“Shut up,” she laughed, and went to get another cookie, putting welcome end to an altogether vexing conversation.

Harry staggered back to the table after two songs, sweaty and too discombobulated to give a thorough report. “She was sort of, like — handsy,” he said at length, upon a full press from Draco and Ron. “She kept trying to, er… put her head on my shoulder.”

“What was her name?” inquired Hermione.

He blinked at her, stone-faced. “You know,” he said, “I didn’t find out.”

“Harry!”

“Oy, Draco!” called George. He was standing by the door, one foot out, one foot in. “These three weirdos out here claiming you invited them.”

“What?”

George stuck his head out the door, conferred briefly, and reappeared. “Do you know anyone called Theodore Snot?” he said loudly. “Or Dagny Green Ass?”

“Let them in, they’re with me,” he said hurriedly, springing up. George reluctantly opened the door.

“You’re killing me, Blondie,” he added, as the three new guests trailed in. “Slytherins? Really?”

“They won’t cause trouble.”

“Trouble is fine,” said George severely. “Trouble is good.” He gave Theodore — looking thoroughly out of place in a black suit and tie — a stern glance. *“Bullies* get hoisted upside-down by their panties from the Tower rafters.”

Draco went tense, anticipating friction. But the bait was left untouched.

“Noted,” said Theo calmly. “Let me know if you find any, that sounds fun.”

George stared at him. Then he turned to Draco, pained.

“And don’t let him near me,” he ordered, pointing at Theodore. “If I start to like him, I’ll be so mad, you’ve got no idea.”

He disappeared into the crowd, presumably to go deal with another group demanding entrance.

“Really feeling the Gryffindor hospitality,” remarked Theo, sliding his hands into his pockets. “You lot do know how to throw a party, though it’s not quite the atmosphere I’d have chosen.”

“It’s *splendid,”* said Daphne, who had dressed to absolute murder in a silver evening gown and heavy bangles. Her hair swept into a chic chignon at the base of her neck, and she compensated for the lack of crutches by leaning on the arm of their third member — who was not, Draco realized with a start, their usual counterpart. It was a short, willowy Slytherin with a close-shaven head like a small brown egg, and voluminous hazel eyes, ringed in gold eyeliner.

“Blaise Zabini,” he said smoothly, extending his hand. “It’s nice to meet you. My mother is Tatiana Ortelagn neé Zabini. Neé Septimus. Neé Mountbatten—”

“Quick, Draco, introduce yourself, or we’ll die here,” drawled Theo. Blaise smiled at him sweetly, and lifted his middle finger.

“Draco Malfoy. Obviously.” He shook hands. “At the risk of being rude,” he added, “not that it’s not nice to meet you, Zabini—”

“Pansy’s home for the holidays,” explained Daphne. “She sends her regrets, though. She’d really rather be here.”

“And the thing is, she’s not even lying,” said Theo. “Muggle music and all. Poor thing. We’ll have to kidnap her, one of these days, I

need the other half of my brain back… anyway, I hope you don't mind we've sprung Blaise on you, but he was simply rabid to meet Harry Potter."

"Liar," purred Blaise. "I was conscripted. You told me Daph needed a date."

Daphne's face did a strange thing, and she swept her fringe quickly behind her ear. It was a movement so uncharacteristically awkward that Draco frowned at her, but no one else seemed to notice, least of all Theo, who shrugged. "I like an entourage," he said. "It makes me feel important. Let's say hello, anyway, and be polite. I shouldn't like to end up in the rafters."

He brought them back to the table of Gryffindors. Harry stood up, ever courteous; Ron, after a long, long pause, did the same. Hermione said awkwardly, "There's not — we need a chair—" and darted off to get one.

There was a lot of inelegant scuffling around as they arranged themselves, trying to avoid stepping on each other's toes, and nobody quite seemed to know what to say to each other.

"Hello, again," said Ron to Theo, surprisingly civil. "Nott. Good to see you. And Greengrass, isn't it? I like your bracelets."

Daphne beamed. "Thank you, Ronald," she said. "You're a darling."

"If we're on first names, you'd better call me Ron," he said. "My mum's the only one who calls me Ronald."

Draco was briefly glad of Ron's random and incandescent strokes of good form, which always seemed to fall when you least expected them.

"Introductions," Draco barked, finally finding his voice. "Blaise, you don't know anybody yet. This is Harry Potter. Boy Who Lives, mostly for lack of trying, second best player on the Gryffindor team. To the

left: Ronald Weasley, of the Devon Weasleys, who if he weren't a champion pighead of a Cannons fan might not be an entirely deplorable man to talk to about quidditch. Next—"

"I can introduce myself, Draco, really—"

"—Hermione 'Eat My Dust' Granger, so-called for the invisible annotation in the class ranks, probably the only reason McGonagall hasn't offed herself yet. Ask about her favorite book, if you've got a few years to kill." He turned to the table. "Did I miss anything?"

"Hullo," said Harry.

"Cheers," said Ron.

Hermione said primly, "It's nice to meet you."

Theodore nodded, listening, and then held out an arm to his companions, presenting them. "Daphne Greengrass," he said. "A.K.A. 'The Face,' eldest scion of the Wiltshire Greengrasses, loather of school, lover of cats. The smirk that launched a thousand ships." He moved his hand. "Blaise Zabini, A.K.A. 'The Egg,' everyone's favorite accident, stands to inherit about six different castles, if any of you are in the business of gold digging. He likes strawberries and long walks on the beach."

"Six?" said Ron faintly.

Blaise wiggled his hand. "Last one's more of a villa."

Ron set down his goblet, hard.

"Like to go out some time?"

Blaise grinned at him.

"Do you have any cats?" said Hermione to Daphne, leaning over the table.

“Two. Duchess and Princess, four and six. Colourpoint Persian and Sphynx purebreds, respectively.”

“Very nice,” said Hermione politely. “I have a red one. His name’s Crookshanks.”

“Marvelous,” said Daphne appreciatively. “Is he fat?”

“A bit plump, maybe.”

“Excellent.”

“Draco,” murmured Theo, leaning into his ear, “I regret to inform you that the cross-cultural exchange is going alarmingly well. We must reintroduce house tensions *posthaste.* Quick, say something stupid and melodramatic.”

“I’m Theodore Nott. I like an entourage, it makes me feel important.”

“Pratt,” exclaimed Theo, though Draco refused to apologize for taking the obvious shot. “Now I can’t say something clever and subtly bigoted in rejoinder. We’ve missed our chance.”

Draco held his tongue between his teeth. He thought about asking Theo what he’d been doing in Hogsmeade, with the two wizards outside the pub — nefarious or not, all the slinking-around made him want to be wary of Theo on principle — but he couldn’t think to explain how he knew about it, and frankly, his chances of getting a straight answer were slim, anyway. At any rate, Theo kept his own business. If he had certain shady connections, well, he couldn’t help his father’s politics. It didn’t mean there had to be anything insidious about it.

A triple harmony of laughter broke out from Harry’s side of the table, where he held Blaise and Ron spellbound, trying to explain his uncle’s occupation. “No, it’s real,” Harry was saying, struggling not to laugh, “it’s a thing you hold in your fist, and then you turn it on, and

the bit drills into — into whatever you're trying to bore through — Ron, *stop,* I'm trying to — to explain—"

"Drills in, does it?" said Blaise delightedly, twirling his index finger. "This long, pointy appendage? Penetrates things?"

"Right. So it spins, and you push it in—"

"You *push it in?"* hooted Ron. He and Blaise elbowed each other excitedly. "You push it in!"

"Quickly, or slowly?" demanded Blaise, rapt.

"It — I don't know, I've never used one—"

"No?" said Ron thickly, knuckling his mouth. "Makes one of us — I use mine all the time—"

"Gross," Harry said, grinning, while Blaise shrieked and threw his head onto Ron's shoulder. "Actually gross. What are you, nine?"

Meanwhile, Daphne and Hermione had burrowed into the arcane science of cat pedigrees. Hermione was listening intently as Daphne conducted an energetic tour of the European breeding genealogies, with enough detail to fill a dissertation. In a stroke of extraordinary luck, Draco thought, she had found perhaps the one person in the castle, nigh Britain, who would remember every word.

For the next hour, Draco played little part in the conversation. The combined forces of the other six churned the conversation into a rip current, which swept back and forth depending on the vivacity and energy of a given party. Theo and Ron traded relays of barbed remarks across the table, an elegant dance up to the very knife-edge of rudeness without crossing it, though undercut by the distracting cross-current of Blaise and Hermione's attempt to have a perfectly genial conversation about *Middlemarch.* Daphne performed a brief, abortive attempt at seduction on Harry that failed emphatically on every cylinder, and served to amuse everyone at the table, which

was obviously the point. Draco watched the strange social ecosystem thrum to life, pleased and a little amazed, for though none of them seemed to quite trust each other — and though more than a few jabs crossed the line from poking to piercing — the animal families of snakes and weasels suffered a great deal of metaphorical abuse — the bonds of courtesy held fast. They strained, and whined, and sometimes splintered, but they never broke, and so the fourteen-legged creature at the table staggered forward in their arms, miraculously alive.

He liked Blaise, though after watching him, he decided he was too much like Theo. He had a native fluency in tact that made him an unflappable conversation partner, and yet was somehow still capable of enormous earnestness, a combination that only ever came from remarkable self-confidence, as if he had seen the rotten depths of himself and had not been unsettled in the least. He reminded Draco a little of Narcissa.

Theo, too, was in rare polite form, going so far as to compliment Hermione's sweater (it was not good) and tell her he was glad to hear she had made a full recovery from last year.

"It was the strangest thing," he said, "I'd spent all those months waiting for top ranks in Transfiguration, and once I got there, I found it didn't suit me at all. There was all this pressure to do everything *perfectly,* instead of simply do well — just ghastly. Never don't be the best again, Granger, I insist on it."

"Thanks," she said. "I won't. And I'm sorry Draco threw you into the wall."

"Under false pretenses," Draco objected.

"You *did* do that, didn't you?" said Theo, revelatory. "Hm. Well, I've made up for it by bewitching his mum. Speaking of which, how is Narcissa? Not home by herself, is she?"

"No, she's off in the Maldives with Briselda."

“She writes to me, you know. We have a lovely correspondence.”

“You’re about to have a lovely correspondence with my hand, if you take that tone.”

As the evening went on, they had more drinks, ate slices of a towering Yule Log that Fred had to cut with some kind of scimitar, and Seamus tried to launch a firecracker from the Tower window, the aftermath of which saw Dean Thomas sprinting through the crowd with a bucket of water. Daphne begged a dance off every boy at the table, starting with Harry, and working clockwise through Draco, Blaise, Ron, and Theo — or would have done, had Theo not excused himself. Blaise chivalrously offered a second round, but Daphne, with all the bravado of a queen, said: “No, let’s be modern. Hermione, fancy a quadrille?”

“I suppose so, if you show me how,” said Hermione gamely, and they departed together just as Theo returned to the table.

“Is Daphne a traditionalist, much?” Draco asked Theo, watching the pair of girls twirl in stumbling giggles across the floor.

“Hm?” He followed his eyes. “No. Not really. She’s not politically-minded enough for it.”

“So she doesn’t care that Granger is…”

“Well, even if she did,” Theo said reasonably, “it’s a party, and Daph’s your guest, and Granger’s your friend. There are rules to be observed.”

“That being said.”

“That being said,” he agreed, “Daph doesn’t care. Not when it comes to this stuff, anyway. She’s not going to *breed* with a mud— muggle-born, now. But if it’s someone like Granger, and they’re polite, and sentient, and everything—”

“What about you?” Draco interrupted.

Theo sighed and sprawled into his chair, one arm draped over the back. “Who knows,” he said. “I’m percolating on it.”

“Finish percolating.”

He rolled his eyes. “I respect Granger. All right? Is that the issue? Considering her circumstances, she’s done something rather remarkable, getting as far as she has, and I can see why you’re fond of her. I grant you, she’s very close to our level.”

“How do you mean, ‘close’? She trounces all of Slytherin in the class ranks, and you know it.”

“Pardon me. That’s not what I meant, and I confess I didn’t expect to be misunderstood, considering that I’m speaking to a *Malfoy.* What’s this about?” said Theo suspiciously. “I thought this was about Granger. It sounds like you want to talk politics.”

“It’s not politics,” he said irritably. “I’m not making some radical statement, I just haven’t a clue what you’re trying to say. Or if you mean blood purity, then come out and say that, but then you can’t say it’s ‘close’; she’s not less muggle-born just because her grades are good—”

“Draco, I don’t know what you want me to say,” said Theo incredulously. “It was a euphemism. I was trying to be polite. She’s your friend? Fine. I’m friends with some half-bloods on the gobstones team. It’s like your mum would say: you’ve got people, and then you’ve got politics. I’m not going to go after Granger, but I’m not going to pretend we don’t both know full well what I’m talking about.”

Draco pressed his lips together.

Abruptly, he said, “Is something wrong with you and Greengrass?”

Theo blanched. “What?” he said. “No. Did she say something to you?”

“I have it reliably,” he said, “that it’s rude for a wizard to refuse a dance to a witch.”

The boy deflated. “For one, that’s a Samhain tradition,” he muttered. “For two: nothing’s wrong between us. Things in the dungeons are just — confused, right now.”

“Has she insulted you?”

“No. Nothing like that. She wouldn’t, she…” Theo watched Daphne spin Hermione under her arm, with surprising dexterity, for a girl supposedly not used to leading. “Daph’s perfect,” he said.

“So you’re the problem,” said Draco.

“The soul of tact, you are, Draco Malfoy. Yes, you got it. I’m the problem. Hold your applause.”

“Well, fix it, then.”

“Good idea. And while I’m at it, shall I just order some nice weather for tomorrow, too? A spot of sunshine, an easterly breeze? Since I’ve got the catalog open?”

“You know what I mean. Go in and do something,” he said. “It’s pathetic to mince about. Whosever feelings you’re trying to spare, stop sparing them. Get it over with.”

Theo lifted his goblet. “Thanks, Coach.”

“You’re welcome,” said Draco impatiently. “And dance with her, for Merlin’s sake, you’re coming off as downright boorish.”

Theo blinked. “You know,” he said, “sometimes you sound uncannily like your mother.”

He stood up and straightened his coat. “Granger!” he called, cutting through the crowd. “Just *what* is that lovely creature on your arm? I believe she’s in my debt, and I’ve come to collect.”

Between the dancing, the drinking, and the physical impossibility of ending a Gryffindor party before three A.M., the celebrations raged well into the morning of the 26th. Draco started losing memories the longer after midnight the party went; later, he would recall leaving the party in a blurry vignette, drunk as he was not on alcohol but on exhaustion, braced against Harry and Ron at either shoulder so that all could keep upright. As they stumbled down the torchlit hallway, Daphne, half folded over Blaise’s arm, had pointed at something in the ceiling, and cooed, “Theo, look,” and Theo had said “That’s nice, Daph,” and then he fell back to talk to Hermione. And Blaise had murmured something in Daphne’s ear, and kissed her cheek, and she said — “Oh, you’re a darling, really,” but in tones of no happiness whatsoever; and in the next vignette, the Slytherins were gone, and he was tumbling into bed.

The days between Christmas and New Year’s vanished in the same idle fog they always did, and on New Year’s Eve, they woke up to find themselves on the verge of their vacation’s end. Hermione flung herself into her (already completed) homework, and successfully guilted Harry into following her example; Ron and Draco, immune to such tricks, played a game of wizard’s blitz chess on their side of the table. They worked thus in quiet for a few hours, silent save for the scratch of quills — Hermione’s much faster than Harry’s — and the rhythmic click-click of the chess timer. As Draco found himself marveling, for the fourth or fifth time, at the ruthless speed of his own downfall, Ron took pity and suggested they go to lunch.

Leftover pudding and Christmas crackers piled up on the tables, being removed from the kitchens in preparation of the night’s New Year's Feast. Dumbledore, seated up at the high table, took up one of the crackers with an exclamation of delight, and offered the other end to Snape, who murderously complied. The cracker gave a

startling BANG and revealed a plush beaver skin hat, which Dumbledore swapped for his own at once.

“Dig in!” he exclaimed, beaming.

As Draco helped himself to stewed onions, the doors of the Great Hall opened, and Professor Trelawney swept through, wearing a green sequined dress and a feathered hat. He’d heard complaints about the loony Divinations Professor from Harry and Ron, though they admitted that she was rather likable on account of being wholly easy to fool — their Divination homework was a joke. Hermione scorned her, but then, so did all Arithmancists to Divinators; it was something of an academic rift.

“Sibyl!” cried Dumbledore, rising to his feet. “This is a pleasant surprise! You have decided to join us…?”

Trelawney rarely appeared during school feasts. Draco thought she might have a touch of agoraphobia: her gaze flitted around the hall with trepidation, anxiously kneading her own arms.

“I dare not,” she said. “If I join the table, we shall be thirteen. When thirteen dine together, the first to rise will be the first to die…”

“Ha!” said Hermione, her voice low with scorn. “This is too much. There’s not twelve at that table — she can’t even count.”

Draco scanned the table. There were ten professors there, including Dumbledore, plus Filch, so it seemed Hermione was correct.

McGonagall, who quickly made the same deduction, said thinly: “What a happy accident, then, Sibyll, that we number eleven.”

Professor Trelawney did a double-take, her fingers digging tight in the flesh of her arms. “No?” she said, bewildered. “But where is dear Professor Lupin?”

“I’m afraid the poor fellow is ill again,” said Dumbledore, loading some turkey onto McGonagall’s plate. “Most unfortunate that it should happen on Christmas Day.”

Harry cleared his throat discreetly, and traded a look with Draco. The full moon came several days ago.

“But surely you already knew that, Sibyll?” said McGonagall, in delicate tones, sawing at her turkey.

Trelawney shuddered, lifting her nose imperiously away from McGonagall.

“Certainly, Minerva,” she tinkled. “But one does not abuse the All-Knowing Eye for such inferior matters… I should not like to frighten those around me by appearing to possess knowledge outside their ken…”

“Never worry,” said McGonagall crisply. “I can assure you, I fear that not at all.”

Professor Trelawney’s voice suddenly became a good deal less misty. “If you must know, Minerva, I have seen that poor Professor Lupin will not be with us for very long. He seems aware, himself, that his time is short. He positively fled when I offered to crystal gaze for him—”

“Astonishing,” said McGonagall, every syllable like a different deadbolt sliding home. Her inflection had even Snape looking minutely impressed.

“I doubt,” said Dumbledore, in a cheerful but firm voice, “that Professor Lupin is in any immediate danger. Severus, can you reassure us as much?”

“...Yes, Headmaster.”

“Good,” said Dumbledore. “Then he should be with us again by New Year’s. Now, would you convey unto me that scrumptious-looking platter of chipolatas?”

After lunch ended, Harry was quiet on the way out of the hall. By and by, he said, “D’you think he was alone on Christmas?”

“Who?” said Draco, still distracted with Trelawney.

“Si—” Harry caught himself. “Padfoot. It must have been pretty miserable, out there in the Shack. Without hot food or anything.”

Draco waited. He suspected Harry was working up to something.

“Sometimes,” he added, “during Christmas dinner, the Dursleys would have me stay in my room, so that they could eat as a family first. Then they’d have Dudley bring me whatever was left, afterwards. So I’d sit in my cupboard, and sort of… wait there, hungry. Not to complain or anything, I got food eventually, most of the time. But it was pretty rubbish, when it felt like, er… everybody was having a party without me.” He shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Oh,” said Hermione softly. “Oh, Harry. Of course it did.”

“So, erm,” he said, stopping at the foot of the Grand Staircase. “I actually — you lot don’t have to come with me, I don’t expect you to. But I’m going to go bring some food to Padfoot, and see if he’d like company. Since it’s New Year’s.”

Hermione made a noise of sympathy. Ron nodded, scratching his neck.

“But you’ll miss the party,” protested Draco. “The twins are planning fireworks—”

“I know,” said Harry, apologetic. “It sounds fun. Have a good time, really. But I can’t, if he’s…” He shrugged. “Sorry.”

“I’ll come with you, mate,” said Ron. He nudged Harry’s elbow. “Can carry more food with two than one.”

“Yes, I’ll go, too,” said Hermione mistily.

“Thanks,” said Harry gratefully. “You really didn’t have to.”

They looked at Draco, expectantly.

“What if I want to go to the party?” he said, almost whining.

“Then go,” said Ron easily. “No one’s making you.”

“No, but you’re going to *look* at me differently, and you’ll all think — oh, stop it. This isn’t fair. Fine, I’ll go, you *harridans.”*

“Seriously,” said Harry, “it’ll be fine if you don’t—”

“Like I trust any of you to have an adventure without me,” said Draco, darkly. “You’ll end up dead in a ditch by sundown. Let’s just go, shall we? Apparently my cousin’s wasting away as we speak.”

They visited the kitchens to load up on goose and roast potatoes and big tureens of pumpkin soup, and hiding these beneath their cloaks, they plowed through the snow down to Hogsmeade. Draco suggested it would be faster to take the tunnel under the Whomping Willow, but none of them could figure out how to approach without getting — as Ron put it — Whomped.

It took almost a minute of knocking before Sirius came to the door. He wore a slightly fresher shirt, and had combed about ten to fifteen percent of his hair, the rest of which remained matted. Nevertheless, the effect was appreciable. “What?” he demanded, at the sight of them, *sans* greeting. His eyes skittered over the array of faces. “What’s happened? Is somebody hurt?”

Draco, who caught a splinter in his finger on the way down, opened his mouth. Hermione stepped on his foot.

“Er, no,” said Harry awkwardly. He lifted a foil-wrapped platter. “We thought you might be hungry.”

Sirius stared at him. He had the drawn, tense expression of someone who had been handed a baby dormouse and told he had to sit in a nest of hungry snakes.

“I am hungry,” he said, in the softest possible voice.

“Right, yeah, that’s what this is for,” said Harry.

Draco wanted to fling himself to the ground at the whirling nexus of Stupid rapidly emerging on the doorstep. *Gryffindors,* he thought hopelessly.

“Can we come in?” he said, narrowly resisting the temptation to stomp his foot. “It’s cold as Merlin’s armpit out here.”

“Oh. Oh! Yes, yes, of course,” babbled Sirius, hurrying out of the way, and swept them into the Shack with the grandeur of a receiving king.

Efforts at refurbishment had been made since they last saw the house, and it was very nearly habitable. The worst of the detritus had been swept away, and the tears in the furniture were stitched over with clumsy patches. The chandelier remained dark, but a bevy of candles blazed from almost every flat surface, filling the room with a buttery and shivering light. Someone had even cut down a fir sapling and put it up in the corner, where it bent under the weight of a single ornament made from pinecone.

“Sorry about the chill,” said Sirius, hastily clearing some books off the sofa. “We can’t light the fire, people will see the smoke… would you like a blanket? We’ve got several—”

He fussed around, retrieving blankets of dinginess various, and pressed them into their arms. “Here, I’ll take that into the kitchen. Remus,” he called excitedly. “Harry’s here!”

“He is?” Lupin poked his head out of the kitchen. There were fresh dark circles under his eyes, and a new scar on his cheek, but he seemed in good spirits. He was wearing a cable-knit cardigan and a pair of thick-soled leather boots, with muggle jeans, and he held some kind of strange black pitcher with a cord dangling from it. “Oh, hello, you four. This is a pleasant surprise.”

“And he’s brought food!” Sirius jubilated. “Can we get one of the burners going, to warm it up? I know you said we had to be careful about too much lektrisitty—”

“Electricity,” said Lupin and Hermione at the same time.

“—but surely, a little more couldn’t hurt? For a New Year’s feast?” He held up the soup tureen, hopefully.

Lupin tipped his head this way and that. “Alright,” he said. “But we really have to start being careful about using the lights. I’ve jury-rigged some power from the muggle village down the way, but they’ll notice if the power bills really go up,” he added, mostly to Hermione. He waved his right hand, which was bandaged. “Burned the hell out of my fingers trying to do the wiring, too.”

Draco startled a little at hearing a teacher swear. He didn’t know why it surprised him, but it felt simply *wrong* somehow, like it ought to have been against the rules. From Hermione’s wide-eyed expression, she felt the same.

“It’s made a world of difference,” called Sirius gratefully, carrying the food into the kitchen. “Mostly I use it for hot showers — *Aguamenti* gets the job done, and everything, but when it’s been about thirteen years since your last warm bath, my God! I’m living in heaven.”

It was eerie to hear Sirius talk about the austere conditions of the Shack like it was some kind of luxury. But of course, after Azkaban, it must have been.

“So you’ve been camping out here together?” said Ron conversationally, leaning over the sofa back. “When Professor Lupin’s not at school?”

“I stay at the castle during the week,” replied Lupin, plugging the pitcher into a socket in the wall. He flicked a switch, and a bulb on the bottom glowed orange. “It raises fewer questions. Usually I come down on weekends. And, obviously, during full moons.”

“Been staying more during the hols, now you lot are off classes,” Sirius added. “We’ve been remodeling. You should see the bedroom upstairs; Moony worked wonders on it. Like new, I daresay.”

“As you can see,” said Lupin, gesturing amusedly at the fir sapling, “there have been heartfelt, if modest, efforts at holiday decorating—”

“It’s a *perfectly good* tree! Stop shaming it in front of the guests!”

“But since I’m the only one who can leave the Shack, our resources are somewhat limited,” he finished. The pitcher trembled, bubbling, and began to whistle. Lupin flipped the switch and took it back into the kitchen. “Tea?”

He served them Earl Grey in chipped ceramic mugs that smelled faintly of lye, and laid out a package of muggle biscuits that Hermione fell on at once with a cry of, “Jammy dodgers! I’ve *missed* these,” and when the food was warm, they laid it out on the coffee table and ate sitting down on the rug (the dining table having undergone a recent double-amputation, the circumstances of which Sirius loyally refused to report, but had Lupin blushing and muttering to himself).

Later, after watching Sirius single-handedly annihilate a legion’s rations of roast goose and potatoes, they sat around the coffee table among the gallery of used crockery, bathed in candlelight, lounging on pillows and swaddled in blankets. Sirius launched into story after story of Hogwarts hijinks from years past, including several that made Draco quite pointedly cover his ears, and Lupin brought out a

bottle of firewhiskey that had probably been ancient already when his grandfather's eyes started twinkling, of which he and Sirius both splashed ample shots into their tea when they thought the children weren't looking. Ron begged a taste off Sirius, who with a furtive sleight-of-hand slipped it to him when Lupin stepped out for another blanket.

They looked like a band of bohemian peasants, Draco thought despairingly, but between Lupin's more-than-occasional laughter and Harry's brilliant, unyielding smile, he found himself unable to rue the shame of it. *Happy* peasants, perhaps. If there indeed was such a thing.

"Alright," said Lupin, once the firewhiskey had been substantially reduced, and everyone was in a giggly, sedentary mood. "Padfoot, our guests have graciously brought us dinner. I think it falls to us to provide the show."

"Hm?" Sirius was sprawled in contrapposto across Lupin's lap, like a Greek etching. He hauled his head up. "Always game for a show, Moony. What have you got in mind?"

"If I recall correctly," said Lupin, "I think Mary left her violin somewhere in here."

Sirius rocketed upright. "That's right," he breathed. "Winter of '77, wasn't it? We hid it all in the storage closet—"

"—with the Ogden's and Peter's leftover stash—"

"Yes, I'll go look," he gasped, and darted out. When he returned, he carried a dust-ridden fiddle of weathered wood over his head, like a knight brandishing a sword.

"Aha!" said Lupin grandly. "Good woman, Mary!"

Sirius blew across the strings, lifting a cloud of dust, and wiped the bow on his pants. "Give me a tune, Harry," he said jovially. "Chef

chooses the music. Only fair."

Harry, leaned forward eagerly on his haunches, said, "I don't know — what can you play?"

"What *can* I play?" He scoffed. "Walburga Black didn't piss a thousand galleons into music lessons so you could sit there and insult her soiled name. As I said: give me a tune."

"Do 'Farewell and Adieu, Spanish Veela,' or 'Blow the Troll Down,'" suggested Ron. "Or 'The Lusty Hufflepuff.'"

"Do 'The Unspeakable's Kiss,'" said Draco, enjoying himself. "In C-flat minor."

By now they were all snickering, but Sirius tossed his hair and prepared his bow with a flourish. "All ye of little faith," he said slyly. In his smirk, there was nothing of the Azkaban escapee, the wanted criminal, the hungry refugee: merely a man, partly drunk, faintly handsome, with a shabby overcoat and a trick or two up his sleeve, piping out the first shrill trio of notes. The strings squeaked; Draco smirked, and Hermione giggled. Then Sirius took a breath, and all laughter snuffed out.

Draco thought he would be amusingly bad. To both his relief and his dismay, it was rather the opposite. When out of his mouth poured a silken baritone that shuddered pleasurably in his throat, booming, *"My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,"* Draco's jaw came unhinged. So did Hermione's, who grabbed his shoulder in excitement, and Harry's beam split his face open. Lupin, lounging against the sofa, merely smirked.

Sirius finished "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" with a bellowing refrain of "glory, glory, hallelujah," followed by "Love Grows (Where My Amortentia Goes)," a heavily ironic "If I Were a Rich Man," and then shredded his way through a "Devil Went Down to Georgia" that had all five of them on their feet, shouting.

He pleaded out of ‘Modern Major General’ for another drink, and flopped down on the sofa, flushed and sweat-shiny, to passionate applause.

“Your turn,” he gasped to Lupin. “You sing something.”

“Me? You know I couldn’t keep a tune on a maraca.”

“Excuses, Moony! Rank cowardice! Sing one of those muggle songs.”

“Sure,” said Lupin, setting down his mug. “Happy to. Harry, have you ever heard ‘Henery the Eighth, I Am’?”

In fact, Harry had, and together, man and boy revealed in cheerful fashion that neither of them could carry a melody to save their lives. Harry listed against Lupin’s shoulder, his face bright from shouting, and when Lupin ruffled his hair, he looked like a boy who’d caught a falling star.

Hermione, half-swaddled in a blanket, murmured: “To think we thought they were going to kill us.”

“Shows you the importance of grooming,” he said. “Get him a hairbrush, it might have been a different conversation, off the bat.”

She hummed and snuggled deeper into the blanket. A spray of curls had come out of her bun, and she wrapped her hands around her mug, leeching warmth from its sides. The firelight turned her whole face yellow and shiny like the sun.

She had very small hands, Hermione. He could probably fit both of them in one of his own, and he wasn’t so much bigger than she was, really.

He frowned and stood up to go get some air. He was being odd. Heat-addled, probably, or some such nonsense.

On the porch of the Shack, he could watch the snow fall in a gray powder through the pitch-black night. He took a bracing breath of cold air and felt it wash all the nonsense out of him. He wondered where his mother was and what she was doing on a night like tonight. It was the first Christmas they'd spent apart in thirteen years. And without Dobby to take care of her — would Briselda be enough? She was only a housemaid. Perhaps he should have gone home, after all. If she had an episode, who would take care of her?

But he thought about the warmth inside, and the sound of Sirius' violin, and Hermione's happy shrill of laughter, and a wave of exhaustion swept over him. He was so tired — and he felt guilty for thinking it, but he couldn't help himself — he was *tired* of having to worry about his mother. Why couldn't he run away sometimes, and spend the holidays with his friends? What was wrong with it? Daphne and Blaise could. It wasn't as though their mothers would fall apart without them.

He was a bad person for thinking these things, and he loathed the thoughts as soon as he had them. He loved his mother, and he took care of her gladly. He was her son. It was his duty as the last Malfoy. Freedom of choice was a poor man's luxury.

The door creaked behind him. Sirius stepped onto the porch and said, "Oh. Hey, kid."

Speak of the boggart, Draco thought.

"Hello."

Sirius stepped out to the rail and lit a cigarette with his wand in the cup of his hands, muttering *"Inciendo."* Smoke blossomed, and he took a drag with a cool sigh.

"If there's one thing they don't warn you about," he said, "it's how much you're going to miss cigarettes. Food, hot water, human kindness — yeah, they warn you about those. But man, they don't tell you how bad you're going to want a cigarette."

Draco made a noncommittal noise and turned to watch the snow fall. He wasn't sure how he was supposed to respond to that, so he didn't.

"Sorry," said Sirius after a moment. He tapped out some ash, and it fell like black glitter on the snow. "Guess you probably don't want to hear about all that."

"I don't mind," said Draco. And he didn't. He had gathered that it bothered Harry, from the way he reacted whenever Sirius mentioned it. But Draco was vaguely curious about it. He'd never been to Azkaban, and what he'd heard from his father had left more to the imagination than it told.

Sirius caught him watching and mistook his interest in the cigarette. "You want a drag?" he said affably, extending it between third and fourth fingers.

Draco considered. "Should you be offering?"

Sirius had the decency to cringe. "Right, sorry," he said, abashed. He withdrew his hand. "Forget how young you lot are, sometimes."

"I didn't say no. Give it here."

Sirius snickered and passed it over. Draco pinched it delicately between his lips and inhaled. The smoke scalded his throat and he broke into a messy cough.

"Classic," said Sirius. "Not bad, for your first time. Here. You want to try a smaller drag, though. Just get used to the burn. It's like drinking. If you've ever done that, which, er, you definitely shouldn't."

"Thanks," he said, still coughing and watery-eyed. "Some role model you are."

He laughed. "Don't think you're the first to notice. I've been corrupting the youths since I was a youth myself. Think your

grandma still blames me for what happened to Andy."

Draco took a more careful drag. It didn't burn so much the second time, or the third, and by the time Sirius said, "Alright, don't be a hog," he had grown used to the sting in his throat. It was sort of like the feeling of being about to cry — pleasantly so, the good ache that said catharsis was about to follow. He didn't fancy the taste, though. It left his mouth savoring of tar. He ran his tongue around his teeth and grimaced.

"In my year there was a whole trade of these going around the Tower," said Sirius reflectively, tapping it out again. "A couple of seventh-year muggle-borns would load up from drugstores over the hols and sell them at a markup for anyone who'd buy. Minerva drove herself nutters trying to bust us, but what could she do? With something like that, it's going to get into the castle anyhow. Plus, it was good for inter-house relations. The Slytherins couldn't be too much of arseholes to us, because they needed us to get their fix."

"The Slytherins bought from you?"

"Well, yes. Not like their rich daddies would fix them up with dirty muggle smokes, would they? At least back then, it wasn't fashionable to smoke cigarettes. Thought it was a 'muggle thing.' Course, they still did it, they just called them something different — *smokesticks,* or *cigarinos,* something pretentious like that. I remember Cissa once cornered me in a broom closet and threatened to jinx my hair short unless I told her where I got my stash—"

Draco was startled. "My mother?"

"Oh, yeah," crowed Sirius. "Wild, that one. More than anyone gave her credit for. She *was* head girl in her year, which was a bloody coup, since I can count on one hand the number of students who snuck out more often than she did — fair play to her, too, just wish it'd been for a better bloke than Lucius — oh, er. Sorry."

“What *is* your problem with my father?” said Draco tightly. “Since you have one, obviously.”

“My problem with him is that he was a Death Eater,” said Sirius casually, examining the cigarette saddled between his knuckles. “Not that I would’ve liked him too much if he wasn’t, I’d still think he was one of the meanest, coldest bastards that ever walked those dungeons. Respectfully. But frankly, that’s nothing compared to the in-laws *he* got stuck with when he married in.” He took another drag and blew out. It occurred to Draco that Sirius was slightly tipsy; he was slurring his words a little, and Draco had never heard him talk this much about their family before. “To be fair — to be really, utterly fair — I did tell her she should marry him. Actually I told her, listen, you can’t do much worse than me or Reg, so you might as well hunker down with the first warm body that’ll take your skinny arse and hope for the best—”

“You?” Draco said incredulously. “You and my mother? What — together?”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought, too,” said Sirius, snickering. “But Mum always wanted a dynasty. I mean, she had two sons, Cyg had three daughters, I’m sure she thought it was perfect. One time she got sloshed and went on about this barmy dream of a double marriage, two-by-two, me and Cissa, Andy and Reg… can you even imagine? I know you’ve only grown up knowing your mother, but trust me, that would’ve been…” He shuddered. “I don’t know what Mum was thinking, really. She could barely stand me on a good day, and Cissa and I fought like hyenas whenever we had to spend a holiday together. That marriage would’ve killed one of us, and it probably would’ve been me.”

Draco couldn’t imagine his mother married to Sirius. He struggled to think of two people who would make each other more miserable.

Suddenly suspicious, Sirius angled a finger at Draco. “You don’t have any cousins on your father’s side, do you?”

“My father was an only child.”

“Good,” he said passionately. “Saves you the trouble. Course, I didn’t think Cissa would be the type to force a match, after the fiasco with me and her… Lucius might have done, though. That’s a bullet dodged.”

“I don’t know what a bullet is,” said Draco icily, “but I’m sure I would rather take it, or whatever you’re using it to represent, and have a father in the bargain.”

Sirius blanched. “Course you would,” he said, after a moment. “Course you would. Right. Sorry, lad, that was — that was out of line, for me. I always… you know, I made this mistake with Moony, all the time, when we were growing up? I’d make these remarks about — you know, being *lucky* that his parents didn’t care, or that they weren’t too involved in his problems… because I always thought, what a lucky bugger, I wish my parents would keel over and leave me alone. But that doesn’t mean it’s alright, does it.”

“No,” said Draco coldly. Then, after a moment, he said, “It’s fine. I don’t really care.”

“Nah, don’t cover for me. It was unsporting, as James would’ve said,” said Sirius casually. He held out the cigarette, and Draco shook his head. “He would’ve said… ha. Well, he would’ve said that it doesn’t matter if Lucius was a toerag or not, because I was a toerag all the time, and he’d still kick the piss out of anyone who wished I was dead.”

“How do you know?” said Draco dully.

“Because he was my best friend, and I knew him,” said Sirius, a touch defensively. Then, relenting: “And because he did say it. More than once. Said it a couple of times about Snape, come to think of it, after he started dating Lily. Boy, did the bird ever clean him up.”

“Potter’s mum?”

“Yeah. Lily Evans.” Sirius closed his eyes. “He was in love with her since the minute she set foot on that stinking train. Didn’t admit it for a year or two, but you could still tell. He once said—” He laughed, a humorless sound. “He was thirteen, and I said — I said, mate, why don’t you cool off a bit, see some other people, maybe she’s not the one, hey? Lots of birds in the world. And he looks at me like *I’m* the idiot, and he goes: ‘There’s not going to be other people.’ Like he already knew that was it, he was done for. Like he was doomed to it.”

“That’s silly,” said Draco, who considered all such romantic falderal to be the province of ninnies and girls.

Sirius snorted. “Rich,” he said. “Your dad bought your mum a rock the size of the Ritz and she wore it to Transfiguration all seventh year. Transfiguration! Waving it around like she wanted to put someone’s eye out. Silliest thing you ever saw.”

“My mother’s ring is *tasteful,* thank you very much.”

“It’s a rich man’s knuckleduster, is what it is,” said Sirius, enjoying himself. “As well as a formal license to shag. Which she very well knew. She had herself a twenty-four karat billboard that said ‘I LET LUCIUS MALFOY GET A LEG OVER,’ and she wore it with pride every day of her life. Don’t look at me like that, it’s true, isn’t it?”

“It’s my *mother!”*

“Aye, and that just proves my point, doesn’t it?”

Draco spun on his heel, deciding that the conversation was over. Sirius Black was, true to his reputation, a thorough scoundrel, and Draco had not the slightest interest in listening to his gossipy prattle malign the reputation of better wizards and witches than him.

“No, I’m sorry,” laughed Sirius, as Draco made to leave. “I’m only ribbing you. Tell me you didn’t get your dad’s sense of humor — Narcissa would have laughed at that.”

“I very much doubt that.”

“No, she would have,” he repeated, strangely certain. “Maybe not in front of you, or in front of Lucius, but she would have. Bella would’ve thought that was hilarious.”

Draco paused, his hand midway to the doorknob. “Would she?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Sirius, softly. “Bella was the bawdiest thing you ever saw. She drove her mother just about insane with it, but you couldn’t stop her with an army. She’d rock up to a party with your mum in tow, and they’d start riots.”

Draco closed his hand. His nails bit gently against his palm. “You don’t know what happened, I suppose.”

“I do, actually.” Sirius put out the cigarette on the railing. It issued a stream of smoke. “Word in Azkaban gets around.”

He waited for Sirius to say he was sorry, or make some such facetious gesture at sympathy. Sirius flicked the butt of the cigarette out into the snow, and did no such thing.

“I’ll say this,” said Sirius, when it became clear that Draco would not be the first one to breach the silence. “Based on an admittedly small sample, I think you’re very much a Malfoy. And that’s not… I mean, I’ll not pretend to stand here and say I’m thrilled to have another Lucius running around, but if you had to be one or the other, I think it’s probably better to have another Malfoy than another Black.”

“You’re a Black,” Draco reminded him.

“Not technically,” said Sirius, and grinned, flashing a row of yellow teeth. His canines were slightly elongated, like fangs, and Draco wondered if that had been the case before he became an Animagus, or if it was a residual effect. “The old woman burned me off years ago. I’m free.”

Free, thought Draco. What an odd way to say *alone.*

Something occurred to him. “Regulus,” he said suddenly, startling Sirius. “He was your brother.”

“Yeah. Prissy little git. Hogged the bathroom like you wouldn’t believe. Used every drop of hot water in the house, on what I don’t know, took ages to do his stupid hair—”

“He was the heir, wasn’t he?” said Draco. “After you were disinherited?”

Sirius paused. “Obviously, yes,” he said.

“And after he died, it passed to Bellatrix? Through Cygnus?”

Sirius shrugged. “S’pose.”

“Is there a chance he would’ve bequeathed it to somebody else?” asked Draco, thinking of Jugson in the Hogsmeade alley.

“What do you mean, somebody else? He died without kids.” Sirius leaned against the railing and exhaled steam into the night air. “You know the laws. Bet your mum drilled you on ’em soon as you could write.”

“But you’re certain Witherfell went to Bellatrix, that is. He didn’t have a… a will, or something like that.”

“Frankly, if he did, I’d be the last person you’d want to ask,” said Sirius indulgently. “Disinherited means *disinherited,* kiddie. Andy’s the only Black I’ve spoken to since I was sixteen years old.” He paused. “Except for you, come to think of it.”

“I see,” said Draco, frowning. “But do you think he would’ve — knowing him, would he have *wanted* Witherfell to pass to his cousins? Did he… like Bellatrix, much?”

“I don’t know if he *liked* anybody all the time he was alive,” said Sirius, amused. “He was a cold little bastard. Once offered me a quarter of a million galleons to abdicate my title and let him inherit. Said the best I could hope to do for myself was take the money and run. Of course, he was right, but that’s a cold comfort to a thirteen-year-old…”

The door opened, and Lupin poked his head out, wrinkling his nose against the cold. “What are you two doing out here?” he said. He lifted his nose and sniffed. Sirius shifted to cover the cigarette butt with his heel. “You’re not smoking, are you?”

“No,” said Draco and Sirius at once.

Lupin raised an eyebrow. “Right,” he said. “Anyway, Padfoot, you’d better get inside. Someone could see you.”

“For Merlin’s sake, it’s dark as pitch and snowing besides. Nobody’s spying at this time of night.”

“Then come in anyway, because we’ve got a present for you,” said Hermione, appearing under Lupin’s arm. She was bright-eyed and bright-cheeked from the combination of firelight and windchill, and it turned her whole affect pleasantly pink. She was wearing the coat that Draco had given her, and it suited her. “I told Harry he should be the one to give it to you. It was his idea.”

“Well, if Harry wants,” Sirius agreed immediately, and he followed Lupin inside.

When they came in, Harry presented them awkwardly with a folded white square of paper. Ron stood off to the side, arms folded, looking distinctly grumpy. “So, er, I did some thinking,” said Harry, “and I think you should have this. Ron and I talked it over, and I know he and I disagree, but I thought — well, it’s not really mine, is it? I got it from Fred and George, and they only got it by nicking it from Filch. So really, by rights, it already belongs to you.” He held it out, and

Lupin accepted it with belated wonder, staring at it as though it were a lost treasure, paved in gold. “It’s, er, your map.”

Lupin and Sirius exchanged an unreadable look.

“Harry,” began Lupin, “this is really — you shouldn’t feel the need to give it to us, just because—”

“Moony,” said Sirius excitedly, “look at it. Look. The handwriting—”

“What?”

They bent their heads over it. As the curlicues of script unfurled, their faces opened up with identical glows of childish glee.

“It’s him! That’s his handwriting, innit, Moony? The tosser did his sevens with the little thing on them—”

“Did I *really* sign my name like that? Whatever for?”

“Oh, look how we did the passage between the dungeons, with that little asterisk there? Do you remember the argument we had about that? James insisted it was real, even though none of us could find it a second time…”

Harry grinned. He stepped to the side and nudged Draco. “We should give them some space,” he murmured. “I think they’d appreciate it if they got some time alone with… you know.”

“I still can’t believe you did that,” moaned Ron, as they absconded to the kitchen. “All the possibilities… the safety, the security… Harry, the *blackmail* we could’ve had…”

“It was the right thing to do,” Hermione said firmly, hoisting herself onto a kitchen stool, and Draco wondered whether it had been Harry’s idea or hers. She had wanted to get rid of it anyway, and he didn’t doubt that she would have jumped on the idea of returning it to its original owners. It didn’t irritate him nearly as much as he thought

it would, even though he thought Ron was right, and it was a terrible waste.

“They’re professors!” said Ron, which was still a good point. “They can go anywhere they like! What do they even need it for?”

“It’s got my dad’s handwriting in it,” Harry said softly, glancing over his shoulder. Now and then a highly unprofessional giggle would float back to them from the living room, and Draco felt a twinge of embarrassment as well as curiosity. He couldn’t imagine what it could be like to hear your friend’s voice after thirteen years. He’d only been *alive* for thirteen years. To live in deprivation for that long, without anyone — not his mother, not his friends — he didn’t want to even think about it.

“Well, I hope they enjoy it,” Ron said firmly. “Because I’m never letting you live it down.”

“I’m quite content to let them have it,” said Hermione. “Professor Lupin won’t let it be used for anything scurrilous, like spying. And honestly, don’t you think it was the teensiest bit unethical — getting to see who goes in and out of the girls’ dorms, for example?”

“It wasn’t unethical, it was bloody cool,” said Ron, but before they could belabor the point any further, Lupin reappeared in the kitchen, his face glowing with laughter.

“Hello, you three,” he said, in such a deliriously happy tone that Draco thought someone might have dosed him with something. “Thank you. Thank you so — so *very* much, from both of us, for — for the most wonderful Christmas we’ve had in so very long.”

Harry blushed; Hermione turned bright pink with pleasure, and Ron sheepishly ducked his head. Draco lifted his eyes to the ceiling. This was all terribly middle-class.

“I told Remus you ought to stay over,” added Sirius, “but he won’t hear of it—”

“They’ve got to get back to the castle before tomorrow, or their prefects will notice they’re gone.”

Ron snorted. “Percy?” he said. “He hasn’t the time. That would require him dragging his nose out of Penelope Clearwater’s—”

“Ron!” hissed Hermione.

“Of course, you’re free to stay a while longer,” said Lupin, with an amused glance at Ron, “but I merely meant to offer that whenever you feel like going back, I’ll see you back to the castle.”

Draco opened his mouth to ask why, and then he remembered the dementors. It had been oddly easy to forget them. He was so used to being able to roam freely about the Hogwarts grounds, with only Filch to fear and worry about, that his memory had slipped over the nearby presence of a genuinely dangerous Dark creature. It just didn’t feel like something that could be true of Hogwarts. It was a fiction, a made-up thing. So long as he was in this warm living room, full of firelight and firewhiskey and laughter, it didn’t feel possible that a creature like a Dementor could be anywhere nearby.

They stayed a while longer, helping to clean up their plates, and set out when the snow started falling in earnest. Harry hung back for a quiet conversation with Sirius that ended with a deep, tight embrace, and perhaps a few tears, which Draco was man enough to turn away before witnessing. Then Lupin led them up the long tunnel beneath the Whomping Willow and cleared up the snow at the tunnel entrance with a sweep of his wand, escorting them out through the small passageway in the roots.

Aboveground, the snow had grown so thick that Draco could no longer see the castle through the flurry. Lupin carved a path in the snowbanks to the door with his wand, and Hermione lit hers with *Lumos,* and following the little pinprick of light, they hiked the hill up to the castle. As they passed the hippogriff paddock, Draco made out the vast dark bulk of Hagrid, swaddled in a fur coat the size of a small circus tent, leading the hippogriffs into a sheltered part of the

enclosure. The trees shook and groaned under the volumes of snow descending on their limbs.

When they came at last into the light outside the Great Hall, Lupin deposited them and cast a quick Warming Charm, which dislodged most of the snow and frost that had gathered on their hair and faces.

“Thank you for coming,” he said, looking each of them in the eye in turn. His voice was hoarse with gratitude. “Really. You were under no obligation to do any of that, and it was… frankly, I think Sirius needed that, and so did I.”

“It was nothing,” said Harry. “Seriously. Don’t mention it.”

“You could mention it a little,” said Draco modestly. When Harry glared at him, he raised his hands. “What? I’m just saying, if my D.A.D.A. essay comes back next week and it’s not an O—”

“You prat,” Harry said fondly. He turned back to Lupin. “Don’t mind him, he’s joking.”

“Says *you,* Potter.”

“I’m afraid that I’m more exacting with my favorites, not less,” said Lupin, with a twinkle in his eye. “So I suppose I’ll let Draco wonder where that leaves him. The rest of you — all of you, really — get back to bed safely. If you run into any trouble, you just say you were doing some after-hours work for me. I’ll back you up.”

“Gosh, Professor,” said Ron, grinning. “Lying to Filch is against the rules.”

Lupin laughed freely. “Good,” he said. “Tonight, I’m a Marauder, not a professor. And it’s not Christmas unless we’ve had a little fun… Ron, Hermione, good night. Draco, good night. Harry: thank you, again, so very much. Merry Christmas to you all.”

And with a beam and a wave, he turned back, and disappeared into the blizzard, heading back in the direction of the Whomping Willow.

“He’s the best professor we’ve ever had,” said Ron faintly, almost wondrous. “I don’t care if he’s a werewolf. I think Dumbledore should hire him to teach everything.”

“You know, with the wolfsbane potion, the werewolf bit almost doesn’t matter,” Hermione added, as they filed back into the castle. Harry had draped the Cloak over their shoulders for good measure, and as they crept up the stairs, Draco almost felt like it was first year all over again — creeping back to the common room after hours, lurking in shadows, wary of Filch, fearing nothing scarier than a detention. “I mean, I’ve been doing some research, and there are some people who think that lycanthropy will be cured within the decade. Or, if it’s not cured, it’ll become one of those old diseases like smallpox, where it’s not nearly so serious as it used to be.”

“That’s a long way off, Granger.”

“Oh, sure,” she agreed, “but don’t you think it’s promising? I mean, the idea that someday — eventually — he won’t have to hide anything?”

“You’re an optimist,” he said, carefully, instead of what he really thought: which was that, considering the company Remus Lupin liked to keep, it was very unlikely that he would ever have the kind of life where he would not have to hide.

But then again, he thought, as they trundled through the portrait hole and into the warmth of the Gryffindor common room, who could say? It was Christmas, after all; the snow was coming down like the pitter-patter of little cat feet on the rooftop, and the smell of roast chestnuts and chocolate chip cookies wafted promisingly from the fireplace, and a warm, soft bed was waiting for him at the top of Gryffindor Tower. Nobody was dead, nobody was missing, and for once, they didn’t have to worry about Death Eaters chasing them around the school. It was their first good year at Hogwarts, their first peaceful

year. He allowed himself to indulge in a healthy measure of optimism. Why couldn’t it be possible? On a night like that, even men like Sirius Black and Remus Lupin could look to the future, and dream of a world where they did not have to hide.

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items for consideration:

-this is one of the longest chapters so far, i know, I KNOW, it is actually shamefully long. it looked so short in the outline. I am trying to release more chapters of a reasonable length so I am not putting out actual novellas as updates by the time we get into the longer books, which is a significant worry of mine.

-welcome, blaise zabini! man, writing blaise is a throwback. I remember a time when you could NOT read draco/hermione fanfiction without running into this dude. he was everywhere. nowadays theodore has come much more into vogue (I tend to blame The Cursed Child for that, although it's kind of hilarious, because like... theodore nott has NOTHING in the original books. nothing. TCC comes along and is like "he was draco's best friend" and it's like, EXCUSE ME he was WHAT now)

-"draco malfoy had a secret best friend who hung out with him all the time it just wasn't relevant to harry's (who literally watched draco like a hawk for 6 years and spent one year following him around everywhere) story" ok. surejan.gif

-makes me feel very confident about shipping non-canon pairings, though, because it's like yeah, to be honest, draco and hermione COULD have been having the Greatest Love Story of All Time behind harry's back, it's not like he noticed ANY OF THE OTHER insane stuff that was apparently all happening off-page

-but blaise! he was THE pick for draco's best friend/narrative foil/Good Slytherin role. there was a whole subculture shipping him with ginny (also, anyone out there remember THAT? the two-by-two gryffindor girls and slytherin boys thing? it wasn't my cuppa but now

I'm remembering it I'm realizing how many fanfiction trends have come and gone since I started reading. [cue blade runner "like tears in rain" monologue])

-much like its chapter, this A/N has gone on far long enough. Will be back on Monday or Tuesday, if not before; I'd really like to get an update out on Christmas. And boys, this one has it all: quidditch! politics! more fred and george! the Ministry of Magic! and an introduction to my very favorite Ravenclaw.

Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw

Chapter 23: Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Classes started again, and the weather did not improve. In Care of Magical Creatures, Hagrid gave them bonfires full of salamanders to keep them warm, and while this pleased Harry and Ron, who never seemed to have much trouble dealing with creatures, Draco and Hermione spent the lesson hiking back their robes and hastily batting rogue salamanders away from each others' ankles, where a mere sneeze from the creature could set their wool clothing up in flames.

"It's a nice idea to keep warm," tried Hermione, valiantly.

Draco was in no mood to be charitable. He sent a sneer at Hagrid — hunched and red-cheeked from the cold, chains of frost in his great beard, cheerfully showing Lavender how to feed more kindling into the fire — and then crushed one of the tiny white creatures under his heel before it could latch onto his shoe. It was impossible to get scorch marks out of good leather.

"A nice idea to keep warm," he mimicked her. "And the Great Fire of London was a nice toasty afternoon."

"It's only until the end of the year," she said. "Anyway, it doesn't do any good to complain about it now. He's trying, isn't he?"

Hagrid had indeed made leaps and bounds. They had descended from hippogriffs to a suite of only moderately dangerous creatures after a certain number of students — mostly Slytherins — spread word to their parents over the holidays, many of whom sat the Board of Directors.

"Trying won't help him," he said darkly. *"Hippogriffs* … salamanders... I heard the fourth years were out digging holes for dugbogs… If my

father was alive…”

“You won’t report Hagrid, would you?” said Hermione worriedly. “He’s been so kind to us. Just because you don’t enjoy a class—”

“He’s been nice to *you,”* said Draco, though he privately acknowledged the point. It wasn’t particularly clever or ambitious to go around prosecuting people who did you favors and showed you kindness; the whole point of doing favors was to stop people from going after you later. Anyway, he didn’t really want Hagrid fired. Certainly it would make Draco’s life easier, but that could just as well be accomplished by transferring into Muggle Studies, and without the collateral damage, to say nothing of all the whinging and tears from his friends.

In Potions, Neville completed quite the coup by brewing a grade-appropriate potion for the first time in three years. True, he hadn’t done int *in* class, where it would count towards his grade, but in one of their tutoring sessions, wherein Draco had sat with his boots on the table and read Granger’s dog-eared copy of *Emma* until Neville gave him a quivering call to come look. He’d been positively electrified by the success, though he had hidden it with a thin: “That’s sufficient, Longbottom. Now bottle it without spilling, and then I’ll be impressed.”

“But what’s wrong with it?” said Neville, almost alarmed.

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean, nothing?”

“Believe me, I’m just as surprised as you are.” When he was met with silence, he glanced up from his book. “Problem, Longbottom?”

The dark-haired boy was staring into his cauldron, transfixed. “I’ve never done nothing wrong before,” said Neville, mystified. “I — I don’t know how to feel about it.”

“Me neither,” said Draco. “In fact, if it were anyone else, I’d suspect you’d dosed me with something, but I suppose that would still require you to brew something right. Clean it up, now, before one or both of us passes out.”

But he was pleased, and in good spirits about it. When they got back to the common room, he didn’t even scare off the first year sitting in his armchair. It was a season of generosity, after all.

Ravenclaw played Slytherin a week after the start of term. Slytherin won narrowly, which was good news for Gryffindor, since they only needed to beat Ravenclaw to take second place in the Cup. Wood, sensing this opportunity, ramped up the number of practices and pushed them onto the field an hour earlier every morning. Within a week, Draco regretted having his cast taken off. It had been a lovely time when he could show up late to practices with a cup of cider and watch the others fly suicides across the field.

He had never had to learn how to fly in sleet before. In this, for once, he did not envy Harry, who now had to do everything Draco did on a rental Cleansweep Four. Not that he heard Harry complaining of it much, or indeed, heard of Harry much at all; between classes, quidditch practices, and homework, the Boy Who Lived had also begun staying in after Defense Against the Dark Arts class, and sneaking out to the Whomping Willow on weekends for dinners with Lupin and Sirius at the Shrieking Shack. Sometimes he extended these invitations to his friends, but it was clear that this was a move from politeness, and it never felt appropriate to accept.

Draco didn’t care. He didn’t understand Harry’s attachment to their professor and Black, but then again, Draco had never been particularly close to any of his family except his mother. He supposed that if one grew up without parents, it would be an unanticipated windfall to get two godfather-types in one inning, but thinking about that sort of thing depressed him, so he didn’t dwell on it.

Hermione didn’t even notice he was gone. As the new term progressed, her workload appeared to balloon. Every night, he found her in a corner of the common room, poring over a miserable spread of Arithmancy charts, runic dictionaries, and dozens of pages of handwritten notes. When she found a rhythm it was bad form to disturb her, and so he would often finish his own homework in a nearby armchair and read until she was prepared to be sociable and normal again. In this way, he and Crookshanks made a sort of praetorial guard. Ron, who under normal circumstances would withdraw from their company to spend time with Harry, found himself bereft and miserable under the combined weight of his friends’ preoccupation.

Indeed, the great Christmas thaw of relations between Ron and Hermione had plummeted back into a cold war. Crookshanks had caught and killed one of the mice they were supposed to be practicing Transfiguration on over the break, which Ron had taken as yet another outrageous reminder of Crookshanks’ guilt. Hermione had denied it up to the very hilt, produced a number of creative revisionist accounts of how the blood and fur could have ended up in Ron’s dorm, and refused to apologize. They had another row about it and did not speak directly to each other through the end of February, which was hard, because their usual translator — Harry — was largely absent, and Draco had no inclination to fulfill the role.

“He’s being an absolute boor,” Hermione complained, dotting an *i* with such force it speared the table beneath the parchment. Draco eyed their tea set warily; Hermione, like all young witches and wizards, had a touch of rogue magic about her, so in fits of anger nearby beverages were prone to boiling over or erupting in volcanic style. “He doesn’t like Crookshanks, he never has, and that’s why he’s decided to blame it on him. I do understand that he’s a cat, and cats are carnivores, honestly I do, but it’s not like he’s the only cat in the castle — I mean, Ron hasn’t said a *word* about Mrs. Norris! Poor Crookshanks has taken all the blame… and honestly, and *don’t* tell him I said this—”

“The danger of that,” said Draco, turning a page in his book, “was zero.”

“—but frankly, the animal was thirteen years old, and if he weren’t already cross with me, I’d be asking why nobody’s talking about the possibility of—”

“Natural causes?”

Her teacup trembled. “Yes! For Merlin’s sake, it’s a rat, Draco. I don’t mean to be cruel, but its average lifespan is *two years,* so— Occam’s Razor— isn’t it *obvious* that the poor thing just crawled off and died somewhere with nobody to notice?”

“You’re a sensitive soul, Granger,” he said, squinting at the small lettering. “How old is this Knightley fellow, again?”

Other residents of Gryffindor Tower, namely Fred and George, took no stake in the conflict except that it was very funny.

“Ron, you nitwit, you hated Scabbers more than any of us,” said Fred good-naturedly. “A scrawny little lump of hair and teeth, you called him. Honestly, you should be grateful if Crooks put him out of his misery. Better that than finding him dead in your bedsheets one day.”

“Fred!” cried Ginny. She smacked his arm.

“’Sides, now you can get a real pet,” said George. “One you actually like. When’s the last time you took him out to play with, anyway?”

“That’s besides the point!” said Ron furiously. “He was *my* rat! It’s easy for *you* to say when Mum and Dad will buy you two new things, but I’ve got to make do…”

Draco considered offering once more to replace Scabbers, if only to purchase a modicum of peace and quiet for the Common Room — he would consider it a sound investment — but something about the set of Ron’s jaw told him that the gift would not be accepted. Ron

was odd about money in ways that Draco could not understand and frankly did not wish to.

In a vain attempt to cheer up Ron, Harry took him down to the quidditch pitch to try out his Cleansweep Four. So it was that Draco and Hermione went down to dinner alone one Saturday in early February. At the end of an unimpressive meal — Hermione worked through it, her eyes glued to the History of Magic textbook, shoveling the occasional spoonful of potatoes into her mouth when reminded — Dumbledore surprised them all by standing and clinking a spoon against his glass. The sound, amplified by magic, echoed powerfully through the hall, and conversation stilled as the four tables turned to listen.

“Your attention, please!” he called. He was wearing his habitual elderly smile, though perhaps Draco was overly suspicious, but he judged it a bit thin. “I must announce that classes will end early on Friday afternoon.” A hesitant order of cheers sprang up, mostly from the Gryffindor table; Hermione gave a small wail of horror. “Hogwarts will be hosting the Minister of Magic.”

Now there were more cheers, but not from the Gryffindor table. Draco frowned at Hermione, who shook her head in equal confusion: what was the Minister of Magic coming to Hogwarts for? And why would Dumbledore announce his visit?

“The Minister will be joining us for an annual meeting of the Board,” said Dumbledore, ignoring the announcement’s lukewarm reception. “We entreat you, as ever, to be on your best behavior — a duty,” he added, with a twinkling glance at the Gryffindor table, “which we do not doubt you will perform. Classes will resume as usual on Monday morning. Please do not be alarmed; this is a routine visit by the new Minister to acquaint himself with Hogwarts, and not an evaluation, or production, of any kind.”

But no matter what Dumbledore had said, it was clear to Draco that the old man was lying.

“For one thing, it’s *not* routine, and he knows it,” he said under his breath to Hermione, as they packed their things amidst an uproar of chatter. Nobody could believe that the Minister was coming, and Fred and George were already in ecstasies trying to plan what mischief they would visit on the Board. “The Minister doesn’t just *pop in* every term to say hello. He only came last year when something was wrong.”

“It is a new Minister,” she said doubtfully. “I suppose it’s a bit of pageantry, isn’t it? To show how important he is?”

“To whom? Children? Two dozen wizards on the faculty?” Draco shook his head. “If you want my opinion, it’s something between him and Dumbledore.”

“That wouldn’t explain why they’ve canceled classes.”

“Yes, and I know you’re in a mourning period, but please pretend to be happy for the rest of us. You’re spoiling the mood.”

For the mood as they left the Great Hall was indeed jovial. For one thing, not many students knew who Runcorn was, and so his visit letting them out of classes set off the acquaintance on a very good foot. For another, among those who knew who he was, it was cause for celebration and not dismay — in particular, Draco had rarely seen the Slytherins in such animated good cheer. Theo and Blaise lingered in the Great Hall, having a boisterous chat with a group of Slytherin fourth years, and Theo called out to Draco as he passed by.

“Oi! Malfoy! Good show, isn’t it?” He cracked a grin. “Fancy a friendly? Gryffindor and Slytherin, Friday afternoon? Schedule just opened up.”

It occurred to Draco that Theo might have insight into what was going on. “You go ahead,” he told Hermione, though she hardly needed the invitation; she muttered a bleary goodbye, lost in her

notes for Transfiguration. He joined Theo in his circle of friends. “Did you know something about this, Nott?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Theo said modestly, examining his fingernails. “I can’t claim all the credit — obviously the Minister had to be involved somewhere—”

Draco folded his arms and made an expression that Ron had once called ‘death by eyebrow.’

Theo sighed. “You’re no fun. My Dad told me he was coming a week ago. He asked if there was a class I oughtn’t skip, and I told him to take Friday afternoons. Nobody’s paying attention anyway, and that’s when I’ve got the bloody brute.”

“We’ve this one to thank for saving our skins,” said Blaise coolly, leaning on Theo’s shoulder. “Another afternoon with those salamanders and I would’ve been short a toe.”

“You mean Hagrid?” said Draco, slightly queasy.

“Who else?” said Theo archly. “It’s bad enough having to tromp around in the mud with those animals for an O.W.L. — it adds insult to injury, being taught by one. Anyway, why did you care? Our Potions block is in the morning, so you’ve nothing to complain about.”

Draco cleared his throat and made his voice as cool and scathing as he could. “Don’t tell me your father’s staging the visit to get you out of Care of Magical Creatures,” he drawled.

Theo smirked. “No. That’s a convenient byproduct. Dad’s bringing him because he wants to speak to some people here, and the Board’s due for an inspection of the grounds — years *over* due, in fact. After I told him what happened last year, with Yaxley, he couldn’t believe it — asked how nobody noticed him slinking around the Forest, and I told him, if you think *that’s* bad, let me just tell you what else Dumbledore’s been cooking up while the Ministry was sitting on

its thumbs: have you ever heard of a little thing called ‘Muggle Studies’?”

“That’s been around for decades,” said Draco boredly, hearing Hermione’s voice in his ear. “It would’ve existed when he was at Hogwarts.”

“Well, even so, he agreed with me,” added Theo, blithely, “and we both agreed the school’s security was in tatters. The dementors are a good step forward, and supposedly Runcorn is thinking of putting an Auror guard on the castle grounds, but before they do anything else a preliminary inspection is in order. I’m thrilled, personally, I think it’s about time the Ministry gets involved at Hogwarts.”

“You would,” said Draco. He felt subtly ill at ease. The other Slytherins were smiling and nodding as though Theo was the very voice of reason, and he realized they probably didn’t care one way or another what Theo was actually saying; his father was a prize deputy to the Minister of Magic. “I suppose Lord Runcorn will be signing a law naming you Head Boy, next.”

“I wish,” said Theo, amused. “No such luck, chum. Dad says that Runcorn’s very interested in new grading policies — real merit-based standards, all about performance and objective criteria, none of this wishy-washy House points stuff. If we want to stop falling behind Durmstrang and Beauxbatons, we’ve got to actually set our students to *work.* It’s students like me, like you — like Granger, even! — who will do best under reformed standards. It’s quite modern and fair.”

Draco snorted. “Bully for him. You think Dumbledore’s going to go for that, do you?”

“But it doesn’t matter, does it?” interrupted Blaise. “It’s the Board who decides, ultimately, and the Board isn’t made of faculty. Dumbledore can’t menace *them* into doing what he wants.”

This made Draco pause. He wanted to ask Blaise who he thought Dumbledore was ‘menacing’ now, but Theo interrupted him before he

could. “Ah, that reminds me,” he said, snapping his fingers. “Runcorn is hosting a little reception for students on Friday night. Eight o’clock in the fourth floor lecture hall, near the east wing. Select invitations, you know, just for certain people and their families, but I thought I’d invite you. Spare you another evening in that dismal tower.”

“How kind. Is it only for the board?”

Theo shrugged. “Something like that.” He clapped Draco on the shoulder. “Got to run. Our next period is Charms, and Flitwick’s going to jinx my nose into a pocket watch if I’m late again, he really will.”

“Sure. Say — suppose I’d like to bring someone to your little party,” said Draco, keeping his tone light. “Fair game?”

Theo paused. “Well,” he said, trading a look with Blaise. “Certainly you can. I don’t suppose anyone would stop you.”

Draco smiled without teeth. “Only someone suitable, of course.”

“Oh, then sure,” said Theo, flapping his hand vaguely, as if the question didn’t even bear asking. “Course you can. You know how these things work, Malfoy. Anyway, I’m off. See you at the match; do try and give Ravenclaw a thrashing, by the way. I’ll not root for Gryffindor against a wet sack of murtlap dung, but if we let those sanctimonious swots get close to the Cup, we’ll have failed as gentlemen. Ta.”

With that, the gaggle of Slytherins drifted away into the crowd, disappearing in a melange of dark robes and sneers. Draco lingered in the Great Hall, frowning, as the crowd streamed around him like a river around a rock, gripped by the rising suspicion that something important and invisible was happening about ten inches over his head.

The Gryffindor match against Ravenclaw took place on a drizzly morning in late February. The Gryffindor table was in good spirits, having just reacquired its chaser and its seeker, though Harry's lack of a decent broom was worrying Draco. Oliver called a last-minute prep session over breakfast, so the team huddled at the end of the table, scarfing down truncheons of bacon, while their captain modeled quidditch plays with salt shakers. Various classmates drifted past to wish them good luck, including several from Hufflepuff, whose informal house alliance with Gryffindor was well-established. Percy and his girlfriend, Penelope Clearwater, came by the table to wish them good luck, though at the sight of Penelope, Oliver fell silent and gave her a frosty look.

"Come now, Oliver, there's no sabotage," said Percy heartily, as Penelope flushed and averted her face — as if, Draco thought, anything of note could possibly be gleaned from the positions of the pepper relative to the mash. "Penny and I have got a bet on; ten Galleons on the outcome of the match."

"Sports betting is against school rules," added Penelope (a round girl, freckled, rather cute if in a decidedly swotty way, with chunky black glasses and a heavy sheaf of fringe) "but I thought, well, we can make an exception, just the once — if it's between prefects."

"Right, if it's between prefects," said Fred seriously. "George and I recently learned there are lots of rules that don't apply if you're prefects. For instance, being out of dorms after curfew—"

"Boys being in the girls' bathrooms," said George idly, stirring his tea, "girls being in the boys' dorms…"

"Really, the list is endless. Apparently I should have tried harder to make prefect, I had no idea how useful it could be—"

"Anyway," said Percy, loudly. "Penelope and I came over to wish you good luck, because she's a *good sport.* Unlike some." He turned to escort her away, giving an imperious sweep of his cloak, but paused

to whisper something in Harry's ear as he went. Harry's eyebrows lifted, and he smiled to himself.

"What did he say?" asked Draco.

"To try and win," said Harry. "Because he hasn't got ten Galleons."

Draco blanched and buried his nose in his tea. How Percy had managed to get a girl with his finances in that kind of shape lay entirely outside of Draco's understanding. She couldn't possibly fancy him for his looks.

At a quarter to eleven, they marched down to the locker rooms. Compared to the first match of the season, the weather was downright temperate, though Harry still cast a precautionary waterproofing charm on his glasses. Draco added a warming charm to his broomstick and tucked his wand into the inside pocket of his robes. Footsteps rattled the beams over their heads as the stadium filled with spectators.

"...that new seeker, that Chang girl, you've got to keep an eye on," Oliver was saying to Harry. "She's faster than you think. She gave Diggory a run for his money in the match last Friday, and she's only a third year… but remember you've got a year of experience on her, so don't get too wiggy about it, either…"

They emerged onto the field and the stands erupted with applause. The Ravenclaw team stood waiting for them on the field, and Draco gave them a cursory scan, looking for the seeker Oliver was so worried about. It wasn't hard to find her; she was the only girl on the team, and even shorter than Harry, clocking in at five feet if she was an inch. Her long black ponytail fluttered in the wind like a snapping eel. When she saw Harry she straightened up and smiled at him, which was a bit off-putting; Draco, in contrast, got an ugly glower from his counterpart Ravenclaw chaser.

Madam Hooch gave a sharp pipe on the whistle. "Wood, Davies, shake hands… mount your brooms…"

Chang was still smiling while they mounted their brooms. She flew one of the new Comet models, still shiny with factory wax, and the bristles tightly bound. Draco figured he could outpace her with his Nimbus, but he felt uneasy about Harry's chances on the Cleansweep.

"Go!"

The whistle blasted. Draco shot into the air.

He was one of the first up, and his initial burst of speed put him well above most of the others. The only people to keep pace with him were Wood, who could probably break Mach 5 on a bespelled teaspoon, and Chang, who had erupted from the initial tussle for the quaffle with surprising speed, and cut a neat arc around the stadium, her head turning this way and that for the snitch. She was very fast, and very skilled. Harry lagged just a moment behind her, bent low and straining the upper limits of his broomstick. His frustration was evident on his face.

"AND THEY'RE OFF… Gryffindor playing its full roster for the first time since the beginning of the season, welcoming back players Potter and Malfoy, seeker and chaser, from their stint in the hospital wing — Potter's now riding a Cleansweep Four, stark contrast with the Firebolt he was sporting in the first game, unfairly taken in the line of duty; that leaves Malfoy with the best broom on the Gryffindor team— now, he's flying a Nimbus 2001, which means you can't beat it for quality or handling, although the model's about a year old now, and supposedly loses in a head-to-head with the new Thunderbolt—"

"Jordan, where is the quaffle?" interrupted Professor McGonagall impatiently.

"Oh, right you are, Professor, just giving a bit of context. I was going to get around to the Ravenclaws, too— Davies has a Starsweeper this season, fast as murder, terribly sexy—"

"Jordan!"

“AND IT’S GRYFFINDOR in possession, KATIE BELL of Gryffindor, heading for the goal…”

Draco already knew this, having traded the quaffle in a pair of crosses with Katie over the Ravenclaw chaser’s head. As they approached the goals, Harry shot past them in the opposite direction, followed by Chang. He fought the temptation to turn and look to see if Harry had seen something. The snitch wouldn’t show this early in the game; Harry was probably trying to tire her out, to grind down the advantage she had in pure speed. He and Oliver had spent the better part of yesterday’s practice talking it over.

Katie made a shot on goal. It slipped cleanly through the Ravenclaw keeper’s outstretched arms and fell through the goalpost. Draco whooped and hauled his broom around, holding out his arm, and she slapped it as she flew by. The numbers on the scoreboard flipped down of their own accord: GRYFFINDOR 10 - 0.

“That’s Katie Bell, Katie Bell for Gryffindor, ten-nil to Gryffindor, and a beautiful shot it was, too — pretty cross there by Draco Malfoy, did I happen to mention his broomstick — only joking, Professor McGonagall! Anyway, possession to Ravenclaw, and that’s Davies to Burrow, Burrow to Stretton, Stretton to Burrow — *oooh!* ”

Jordan audibly hissed through his teeth. One of the Ravenclaw beaters had nailed a bludger straight at Harry, and forced him into a swan-dive that narrowly avoided collision with the stands. Draco swore he could see the place where it nicked the back of Harry’s robes. George intercepted the dodged bludger with his bat and sent it hurtling at Davies, who did a barrel-roll to avoid it.

“Bad form!” shouted Angelina. “Who aims for the seeker before the snitch is even out? Fred, teach him some manners!”

“Took the words out of my mouth, gorgeous!” Fred sped past, chasing the second bludger into position. With a *crack,* he punted it at the other beater’s head.

But Harry was undeterred. His jaw set, he pulled out of the dive and zipped back into the air over the stadium, circling with an eye out for the snitch.

In the confusion, Angelina repossessed the quaffle and was steadily flying back towards the Ravenclaw goals. She and Angelina scored the second and third Gryffindor goals of the game while Draco hovered at midfield, ready to play defense, but they never let the quaffle get that far. Oliver's assessment had been right; Gryffindor had a clear advantage over Ravenclaw in terms of chaser quality, and their new keeper lacked confidence. Katie and Angelina were running a train through him. If Ravenclaw was going to pull a win at all, it would do so on the back of its seeker.

Harry shot past Draco, ruffling his robes. Draco veered to the side and opened his mouth to snap at him, but the objection died on his tongue when he saw how Harry was flying: belly to the broomstick, head down, as if he were trying to wring every last ounce of speed from his subpar broomstick. Chang followed him a heartbeat later.

"And it's Gryffindor, Gryffindor in the lead, eighty-twenty, with Ravenclaw milking two goals out of that confusion with the bludger! But Potter is putting on a lot of speed, and Chang's right behind him, making good time for a Comet, honestly, especially considering the season they just had in the leagues. Never saw a Comet that couldn't blow a lead of fifty paces if you tried to turn it—"

"JORDAN!"

"And Potter *accelerates more,* he's definitely seeing something we don't, and maybe Chang sees it too — we'll have to wait and see — *oh!*"

Chang had swept in front of Harry and executed a complicated swivel on her broomstick, blocking him. Harry swerved to avoid a collision, breaking his line, and both the crowd and Oliver roared with disapproval. The captain actually drifted forward a few feet away from the goalposts to shout at him.

“HARRY, THIS IS NO TIME TO BE A GENTLEMAN! YOU’VE GOT TWO STONE ON HER! IF SHE WANTS TO WRESTLE, PUT HER ON THE GROUND!”

Draco, blinking, realized that Oliver was right. Harry, possibly for the first time in his quidditch career, was no longer the lightest player on the field. But he wasn’t used to throwing his weight around like the bigger players, and he hadn’t thought to try and foul Chang to get her off his tail. It wasn’t Harry’s style of play. Draco wondered if Chang had made the same observation before she cut him off.

The quaffle had returned to Gryffindor. Katie passed it back to Draco, who vaulted it over Burrow’s head to Angelina and then cut underneath him in a stomach-turning dive to get past the defender. They wove a braid of passes over the field, scored again, and wrestled the quaffle back from Ravenclaw possession before it got out of the end zone. Draco kept having to resist the impulse to watch Harry and Chang, who were chasing each other all over the upper quadrant of the field, doing a number of theatrical dives that reminded him of what Theo had once called a typical “seeker’s move.”

Rain drizzled across the pitch, thickening as the game went on. Dim clouds drifted across the sky, spotted with the occasional swell of ominous black. The light continually changed as clouds of different density passed over the sun. This sent waves of alternating light and shadow sweeping over the field, like a passing searchlight. With such inconstant visibility, Draco had to concentrate just to see the quaffle. He couldn’t imagine how hard it was for Harry to see the snitch.

“He’s onto something!” said Jordan sharply. “Potter is in a dead heat with Chang — they’re not chasing each other anymore, they’re neck and neck — I think they’ve seen the snitch—”

Draco couldn’t help it. He was a seeker at heart. He punted the quaffle to Katie and turned to watch as Harry and Chang shot overhead, their shoulders locked, chasing a tiny glint of gold.

“He’s got it!” shouted George. “Go on, Harry — it’s all speed, at this point— oh, no you *don’t!* ” He smacked away a bludger that would have tagged Harry’s broom, and then rounded back in, intent on landing another hit on the Ravenclaw beater.

Draco’s heart skipped. As Harry extended his arm in front of him, a wave of darkness passed over the pitch. The clouds above turned thick and knotty, like a long spread of wet black cloth, and the light plunged. The only sources of visibility were the glowing exit lines in the stands and the moon-like glow of the scoreboard. Draco squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force his eyes to adjust, and when he opened them he could make out the shapes of the other players hovering in the air: they had all stopped moving because of the impaired visibility. It was too dangerous, with the possibility of running into someone — even the beaters had gone still.

“What’s going on? This wasn’t in the forecast!” shouted Oliver. “The almanac said light rain today! *Light! Rain!”*

“It’s not clouds,” said Draco. He felt very cold.

“What? Malfoy, what was that?”

“It’s not clouds,” he said, lifting his voice. “It’s dementors.”

For it was: not swarming, like they had at the first game of the season, but floating overhead in a huge bank, like a roll of fog. Their ragged cloaks blotted out the full quilt of the clouds. None of them dipped down to enter the pitch, but moved as one over it, like a flock. In the distance, Draco could hear the hoarse howl of their breath, echoing like a roll of faraway thunder.

“Not again,” moaned Oliver. And echoing him, Draco felt a cold pit of fear in his gut, and thought: *Not again.*

He spun, looking for Harry. But Harry was already prepared. He held his wand in his hand, his expression fierce, and shouted, *“Expecto patronum!”*

Something silver-white and enormous sprouted from the end of Harry's wand and galloped over the pitch. It wasn't like the Patronuses Black and Lupin had produced; its edges were fuzzier, the shape less discrete, more like an animated hand of mist than a living creature. But it worked just the same. As the ball of white danced past Draco, the cold of the dementors receded, cast off like a coat of frost under the touch of firelight, and his heart started to beat calmly again.

The light started to change. The dementor cloud passed over the stadium and the sun returned. The Patronus, hovering around Oliver's goalpost, dissipated into white mist as the dementors disappeared. With visibility newly restored, Madam Hooch's whistle sounded, and the players sank to the ground, many of them on shaky footing.

"Quaffle to Ravenclaw!" shouted one of the Ravenclaw chasers.

"To Ravenclaw? To *Ravenclaw?"* Oliver roared. "That was the most obvious interference I've ever seen! The bloody *sun* went out! Madam Hooch, please be reasonable—"

"Mr. Wood—"

"A *blind* man could see that counts as extenuating circumstances, and if they get the quaffle then we should get a ten point penalty, because Katie was about to make a shot on goal when the visibility dropped, and everyone on this field knows damn well she could have made that shot in the dark, so if you want to penalize us for playing fair—"

"Mr. Wood, it doesn't matter who has the quaffle!" said Madam Hooch shrilly. "You've won the match!"

Oliver's jaw dropped. Harry, who had just landed in the mud next to them, grinned and held up his fist — in which thrashed the tiny wings of the snitch.

“That’s my boy!” he shouted. He and the other chasers dropped their broomsticks and threw themselves on top of Harry, who went down without a stitch of resistance under a pile of muddy red robes. The Gryffindor stands erupted in cheers. Percy gave a single, deliberate *whoop.* Ron led a chant of Harry’s theme song, which made Harry blush bright red but which did nothing at all to quell the grin on his face.

Draco, however, could not shake a sense of queasiness. Instead of dropping down to share in the riot of Gryffindor celebrations, he turned right and flew across the field, to the faculty box, where McGonagall and Lee Jordan sat in the commentator’s mic. Behind that was Dumbledore’s seat — now empty — and the seat of the man he was actually looking for.

“Professor Snape!”

Snape carried a wide black umbrella, the type that posed an unapologetic inconvenience to everyone sitting behind him, and tipped it back to regard Draco with an expressionless face. “Congratulations, Draco,” he said coolly. “A well-played match. Endeavor not to drip.”

Draco ignored him. “What was that?” he demanded, pointing at the eastern sky. “Why were they here? They’re not supposed to come to quidditch games, Dumbledore said—”

“And they did not.” Snape’s eyes slid past Draco, to the gaggle of Gryffindors now jumping and hugging each other on the pitch. “On a related note, where on earth did your friend Potter learn to produce a Patronus Charm? He is not famous for his grasp of magic above grade-level.”

Draco knew very well, but he wasn’t about to shout the answer over the full faculty box. Lupin was sitting just a few rows back. “I don’t know,” he lied. “Professor, if the dementors weren’t coming to the game, why did they do that?”

“On ceremony,” said Snape. He rose and cast the water from his robes with a flick of his wand, sending droplets scattering onto Draco. Draco shielded his face irritably. “They were going to greet their master.”

“Their master?” Draco said, chilled. “Who’s he?”

Snape gave him a very strange look. “I should think you would have deduced it,” he said. “They serve the Bureau of Corrections. Their master is the Minister of Magic.”

Oh, Theodore.

-Merry chismus!!

-fred and george. kings of my heart. quite possibly the most fun characters to write except for draco himself

-lee JORDAN king of my HEART. his dynamic with mcgonagall is so funny. like the fact that she invites him BACK to commentate game after game, when he is always getting on her last nerve, proves that either (1) no one, and seriously NO ONE, else is willing to take the commentator job, or, more likely: (2) she secretly likes it. minerva "give that first year a broomstick, i can't believe i finally get to kick severus's ass" mcgonagall is a gryffindor first and a professor second

-here for penelope clearwater rights. WHO is this girl who is willing to date percy weasley. i could write a seven-volume introspective Proustian series of novels about whatever's going on in her head

-okay my true TRUE forever darling favorite ravenclaw is, in fact, luna. obviously. but cho chang is such a lovely character and she's so real and she is done so dirty in the books. she's smart! and she's brave! and she's an athlete! i do think she is the proto-ginny in many ways and she gets such a bad rap because of her book storyline

-SNEAK PEEK: Next chapter's title is "The League of Promising Youth." Ciao!!

The League of Promising Youth

Chapter 24: The League of Promising Youth

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Plastered against the windows of Gryffindor Tower, dripping wet and still festooned with spirit wear in red and gold, the house watched from afar as the Minister of Magic entered the grounds. His early arrival had driven the school hastily back into the castle, shepherded by the loud direction of Professor McGonagall, and now their only glimpses of the man were stolen from a distance through the tower window. Draco felt rather sorry for the Slytherins, who from the basement common room would get to see a plum load of nothing at all.

Dementors rose in a dark column against the checkered sky. Dumbledore and a small attache of professors, including McGonagall, Flitwick, and Snape, headed down across the rain-splattered lawns to form a welcoming party.

Hermione, who was short, huffed and craned her neck trying to see over the cluster of heads in the window. Draco stepped aside to let her look, but there was no longer anything to see: the professors had shrunk to a dark watery blot in a sea of green, and disappeared among the trees. “I wonder why he’s come early,” she said intently. “Did he mean to surprise Dumbledore? Catch him off his guard, before he’s had time to prepare?”

“Maybe he got a meeting moved up,” said Draco boredly. “I wouldn’t bother yourself over it, bureaucrats’ schedules are rarely the stuff of reason. Say, Granger — don’t get too distracted by all this Minister rot, would you? It’s not hardly what the rumors make it out to be. He’s not here to talk to students, and only the really slimy ones will try, so for most people it’ll be like he’s not come at all. You’re better off holing up in the library and waiting for it all to blow over.”

“Distracted?” she repeated. He suspected he’d offended her; in his defense, it didn’t take much. *“I* shouldn’t get distracted? Nobody in this tower’s done homework in three days!”

“Don’t be offended. I’m only telling you that there’s no reason to bother yourself.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “And yet I don’t see you warning off anybody else.”

He put his hands in his pockets to keep them from fidgeting. She had a way of sniffing out when he was lying — and he was lying through his teeth, to be certain — but he didn’t feel at ease telling her his real concerns: that she, in particular, should endeavor to steer as clear of the new Minister of Magic as was possible.

Draco didn’t have a good reason to feel this way. He just had a strong and irrational urge to put as much distance as possible between Hermione and the Ministry. Perhaps she was right, and it wasn’t fair that he hadn’t warned off Harry or Ron in the same way — but that was different. Ron’s father worked in the Ministry, and Harry was the bloody Chosen One. They had people, good people, *wizards,* most importantly, who would look after them. Hermione had no one looking out for her at all. Someone ought to do it.

Anyway, the thing with him and Hermione was different than the thing with him and Harry, or him and Ron. Everyone knew that, it was obvious. He didn’t go looking for Harry or Ron when he was bored, and they didn’t save plates of toast for him at breakfast. They couldn’t sit together and read for hours without saying anything, couldn’t talk about loud music and novels and tell him things that actually made the muggle world sound decently interesting. —It wasn’t as if he didn’t get on with Harry and Ron. But there was more to him and Hermione, more layers to it, like fathoms of a seabed. And one of the layers, he suspected, involved not letting each other get embarrassed or insulted or hurt, if it could possibly be avoided. The idea of anything like that happening to her displeased him. It was sour and unpleasant and he tried not to think about it.

Besides, he was fairly certain she would do the same for him. If he was in danger of putting his foot somewhere he shouldn't, he knew she would come running from the other side of the castle to shrill at him.

Exhausting business. How Harry and Ron went about watching each other's backs, he had absolutely no idea; it was like a pair of beagle puppies being appointed each other's keeper.

"Quite, because I don't care if the rest of them waste their time," he said blithely, and he dropped his eyes to adjust the button on his cuff. "I wouldn't care if you did, either, but it felt unsporting not to tell you, since you're playing at a handicap in the world of wizarding politics. Don't get offended at that, it's not an insult. It's not your fault your parents — lovely as I'm sure they are — couldn't teach you."

She wrestled with the decision of whether or not to be cross with him for this. With tangible reluctance, she decided not to.

"I've read loads about it," she said, sourly. "Loads and loads."

"And to my great resignation, I expect you're about to endeavor to prove it," he said. "But do you fancy something hot to drink, first? I still can't feel my toes." He shook his sleeve, and water coursed from his quidditch robes with a polite and emphatic *plop.*

On their way out of the Tower, he listened to her chatter with a familiar combination of irritation and relief: she showed little interest in the Minister, the Ministry, or any of the subjects likely to land her in trouble. She was far more interested in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, which he duly informed her was such an underfunded shoebox of a department that nobody in the upper circles even remembered it half the time. Her outrage on this issue carried them all the way down to the kitchens. Then he lobbed her a theoretical question about Transfiguration, and she launched breathlessly into an exposition on a conversation she'd had with Professor McGonagall that appeared to entirely drive the Ministry out of her mind.

In fact, the only other thing she said about it, as they were waiting for their hot cocoas, was: “Ron says he’s a dreadful politician, anyway. His voting record on elvish welfare is purely horrendous. I wouldn’t like to meet a man like that.”

“You mean to tell me elvish welfare isn’t a priority for the Cavalier Party? I’m distraught.”

“Who are the Cavaliers supposed to be, again? Tories or Labour?”

“How should *I* know? It doesn’t map exactly, our politics are *infinitely* more complex than muggles’, and there’s years of history between them… Are Tories the ones against taxes?”

“Among other things,” she said passionately, “like human dignity, and distributive justice, and public health—”

“That’s the one,” he said, yawning. “Oh, Granger, look, they’ve still got peppermint wands leftover from Christmas. Don’t tell me you’ve never had a peppermint wand…? Who raised y— Merlin, *don’t* give me that look, I heard it as soon as I said it.”

On Friday evening, Draco left the common room early. It pained him to do this, because it was just the sort of rare night in Gryffindor Tower that he could tolerate: Ron and Hermione had ceased bickering, if only out of mutual exhaustion, and arranged for an armistice over tea and biscuits, which they nibbled by the fireplace while they occupied themselves with various diversions — she, a book, and he, a chess problem from the *Prophet .* Harry, exhilarated from the victory of his Patronus, had taken his pocket snitch down to the common room and offered Draco a game of keep-away to keep his seeker’s skills tight. Fred had stolen some trifle tart from the kitchens and George had put one of his muggle records on. So it was with no little measure of self-sacrifice that he turned Harry down, made an excuse about forgetting his Transfiguration notebook, and descended the stairs to the fourth floor lecture hall.

The door to the hall sat slightly ajar, and through it came a slice of golden light as thick and yellow as rich butter cake. Laughter floated from inside, and the clink of glasses against each other, the casual burble of a social occasion. Draco adjusted his tie and twisted his cuffs straight around his wrists. He shook his arms out and breathed deeply and then pushed inside with the confidence of someone who had never hesitated in the first place.

When he had gone to the Yule Hunt at Knotscliff he had been startled and satisfied to see the number of pureblood families concentrated in the same room. Now it slightly alarmed him: he had understood what Theo had meant when he extended the invitation, but it was another thing to see the composition of the party, and to see how many of them wore Ministry uniforms. Witches and wizards in high-collared robes of royal purple drifted back and forth from a drinks table, where towering sculptures of champagne glasses foamed white, and house-elves shepherded around platters of appetizers balanced on their large flat heads. Occasionally a witch or wizard would take one from the tray without looking down or even realizing there was a creature beneath it.

It reminded him of the Samhain bonfire, over a year ago, with its sense of informal camaraderie under veneers of ceremony. It didn't matter whether anyone in the room actually knew each other. Everyone knew why they were there, and that was enough.

"Mister Draco?" squeaked a voice by his knees. He looked down and saw a house-elf with a pair of women's hair ties wound around his wrists, holding a clipboard.

"Dobby?" he said, bewildered.

"Yes, sir, Mister Draco, sir!" chirped Dobby delightedly. "It is so good to be seeing you! You are looking so tall! Goodness, Dobby is having to hurt his neck to look at you! Dobby is sorry for not visiting over the winter, he feels very badly about it, and he is hoping that Miss Narcissa is not angry with him either, but Dobby has made so many friends in the kitchens, you see, and last summer his friends said to

Dobby, have you seen the tallfolk city of Lunn Donn, if not then you must see the tallfolk city of Lunn Donn, and so Dobby went, and saw so many tallfolk, and some tallfolk who were not wizards also — is Mister Draco knowing about this? Tallfolk who are not wizards! Like elves without ears! — and Dobby tried to ask one about it, but then Dobby's friend Pippy says no no *no* Dobby Freed-Elf, you must not talk to them, for they are very scared of us. A tallfolk, scared of an elf! Dobby is astonished still. But he is still sorry he could not be with Miss Narcissa during the holidays."

"Dobby," Draco broke in, a bit pleased, and a bit bemused. "That's fine. We found help."

Dobby paused. "But the help is not as good as Dobby," he said confidently. He shot a furtive look at Draco.

"...Absolutely not, it isn't. In fact, it's dreadful. The house has gone to pieces."

Dobby nodded sagely, as if he expected this. "Dobby is truly sorry, sir. But he is worried also, for his friends are now saying: have you seen the big wizard city of Barleesoona? And Dobby is saying, what do you mean, there is another tallfolk city? How many cities do the tallfolk need? And why so many, when smallfolk and horsefolk and merfolk have none? His friends are telling him, we too have been asking these questions, and we simply do not know. But it is great fun to go to the tallfolk cities, and so Dobby is not complaining."

"Right," said Draco, furrowing his brow. "Of course. Dobby, what are you doing here? It's a private event."

"Well, the Minister is needing to use the Hogwarts facilities for his reception, sir," the house-elf explained, "and this is including the kitchens. Now, Dumbledore has come and said to us — all private-like and secret, when the Minister is gone — you will not be needing to do this as part of your job at Hogwarts, this will be an extra job for volunteering only, and he will pay everyone who is volunteering a double wage for the hours they are working. And many elves are

saying, we will not, because many elves are not liking the Minister. But double wages is a lot of money, and Dobby is a hard worker, so he volunteers!" He beamed and brandished the clipboard. "And then Spratt says to Dobby: you will have a very special job! Because Dobby is one of not many elves in the kitchens who knows his letters, you see, Mister Draco! So he is in charge of writing the guest names on a list." He showed Draco the list on the clipboard, which, sure enough, contained a long list in Dobby's tiny chicken-scratch.

"But he is not having to ask you for your name, sir," he added, winking. "You, Dobby is recognizing immediately, always! Even if you is getting terribly tall."

"My mother has voiced the same objection," said Draco. With a sincerity that surprised him, he said: "It's good to hear you're well. You should, er— take care of yourself."

"And you also, Mister Draco!" Dobby glanced around skittishly. He crept closer to Draco's knees and whispered: "Mister Draco, we is not supposed to be touching or speaking to the wizards. So Dobby is going to pretend he has not said anything now. But he is happy to see Mister Draco, and hopes we will be seeing him in the kitchens soon."

And delivering a fond pat to Draco's knee, he hurried away to intercept the next passel of guests.

Draco slipped along the back wall, avoiding eye contact with anyone who could recognize him. He looked for Theo, and found his father instead, holding a goblet of wine and talking animatedly with a group of wizards near the dais. In his company was a tall and square-faced wizard with a black beard and a long, well-kempt mane of hair, dressed in a gray suit and a handsome purple cloak with gold trim. As Draco watched, he smiled at something Sibelius said and sipped from a fingerbowl of champagne. A pair of Aurors hovered only a footstep behind him, their hands resting on their wandsheaths. They weren't drinking.

It had to be Runcorn. Draco recognized his face from the *Prophet* editorials, and distantly recalled it glowering out from a campaign poster in Knockturn Alley. He was taller in person, and projected a different kind of man than the *Prophet* made him out to be. He looked calmer than he sounded in the newsprint. Unlike the one in the *Prophet,* this Runcorn wasn't shouting or glowering or beating his fist on a desk; when he broke into laughter, it put warm crow's feet around his eyes. Really, he could have been a professor. He certainly wasn't half as scary-looking as Lupin.

Beside him stood Sibelius Nott, Prescott Parkinson, Orpheus Greengrass, and Garrett Goyle. Orpheus and Garrett were having a heated debate of some sort. Prescott said something under his breath to Sibelius, who snorted into his glass. Runcorn observed it all, speaking rarely, except to answer a question someone put to him.

Sandwiched between Sibelius and Prescott, looking more uncomfortable than an egg at an omelet station, was Theodore. He wore a cream-colored ascot that clashed horribly with his complexion and held his mouth pursed in a lemon-sour twist of loudly broadcasted displeasure. His expression was a strong argument for euthanasia.

When he noticed Draco, he perked up a little bit, which was not saying much. He lifted his drink slightly, as if to toast him, and gave a horrible twitch of the mouth that looked like a smile with palsy.

"It is considered rude to stare," said a deep, silken voice.

Draco turned on his heel. "Professor," he drawled, masking any startlement he felt. "I didn't know faculty were invited to this kind of soirée."

Snape materialized from a shadowy corner of the room, dressed in a high-necked set of black dress robes that were only slightly more formal than his usual teacher's gear. "I have acquaintances here," he

said, in a tone that revealed nothing. “I make a point of maintaining connections that may serve me in the future.”

“So you’re here to brownnose, like the rest of us.”

Snape’s eyes glittered. But he only said: “Careful,” and placed a hand on Draco’s shoulder. With a grip like an iron claw, he steered him out of the Minister’s sight. “Have you come to reacquaint yourself with your father’s old friends? Rarely does one find so many of them concentrated in the same place. Excepting, I suppose, a meeting of the Wizengamot.”

“Theodore invited me.”

“Nott?” said Snape. His expression was unreadable. “Interesting. Are you close to the boy?”

“I suppose. Most of the time he’s a shady little git. Decent gentleman, though, when he puts in the effort. I’d vouch for him, but don’t tell him that.”

Snape’s fingers bit into Draco’s shoulder, hard enough to make him wince — a succinct warning that they were not speaking privately. “He does his father’s bidding.”

“Theodore? No.” Draco scoffed. “He loathes his father. Can’t stand him. He came to France with Mother and I, and his father didn’t write him once.”

“And yet he puts enough faith in his son to introduce him to the Minister of Magic. Don’t you think that indicates a measure of affection for the boy? Men of his position tend to feel… proprietary about their sons.”

The word *proprietary* sparked something in Draco’s chest. He wondered if his father would have felt that way about him; whether Lucius would have grown more protective or proud of him with age. Then he resolved not to think about such things. It wasn’t as if he

needed protecting, anyway. Considering how Theodore spoke about his own father, perhaps he wouldn't have even liked him — and that thought was so profoundly unsettling that he gave a little shudder to be free of it.

"I don't know what his father thinks. To be honest with you, professor, I've not spent a great wealth of time contemplating Theodore Nott's family melodrama."

"True. I imagine you remain plenty occupied with your own," said Snape coolly, which made Draco scowl, not so much at the insult but at being robbed of the last word. He opened his mouth to snip back at him but found that they had moved on, through an archway lined with gold foil and white lilies, up to a cocktail table that glowed white like a pregnant moon. With Snape's hand still fast on his shoulder he found himself herded into the crowd around the table, which included a scattering of spotty-looking wizards in or approaching old age, none of them in Ministry wear. Snape lifted a lavender cocktail from an orbiting golden tray, thrust it unceremoniously into Draco's hand, offered the table a curt utterance of: "Draco Malfoy." Then he retreated, leaving Draco with a full glass, a row of blinking faces, and the welling suspicion that he had just been parked at the kiddie table.

"Was that 'Malfoy,' I heard?" inquired one of the wizards, a bowl-faced old man with a round belly and a rich tweed suit under his traveling cloak. "Not Malfoy as in Lucius, surely?"

Draco twisted his mouth in the thin, vaguely aggressive smirk of the pureblood. "The same," he said. "If we've met before, I don't remember you. Are you with the Ministry?"

It was a courtesy question; obviously the wizard was not, for he wore nothing of the sort. But he pinked with pride and stood up straighter.

"No, m'boy, not I. Never a Ministry man, no matter how hard they begged me, and they have begged me. But I said no, for I was young and full of folly, and I wanted to be an academic… I took my Boards young, you see, for a moment I was something of an

ingénue. When you're young and exceptional, truly exceptional, all anyone tells you to do is academia — I'm sorry, I've buried the lede fathomless deep, haven't I? Professor Horace Slughorn, at your service."

Draco nodded to him. "Sir."

"A round of introductions may be in order, since our dear comrade Severus so faithlessly underwhelmed us in that department. This is Professor Ezekiel Ezzazz, Potions Master at Ilvermorny, best hand at a Pepper-Up I've ever seen; Master Spinoza Springbok, research fellow at the Potions Institute of Oxford, dear comrade, like to think I've taught her half as much as she taught me; Professor Pityr Petrovsky, Professor of Alchemy at Durmstrang, I'm *sure* I don't need to introduce him; and my dear little teacher's pet, Bertha Jorkins, the *sweetest* Gryffindor I ever taught. She works for the Department of International Magical Cooperation — remind me where, exactly, Bertha?"

"Magical Games and Sports," said Bertha, without much enthusiasm. She was a plump, slightly sour-faced woman around his mother's age, and she wore a rather drab gown of black velvet that even McGonagall might have dismissed as frumpy.

The professors gave him a series of small nods and waves. Draco returned them, and turned to Slughorn. "And where do you teach, sir?"

"I beg your pardon, dear boy?"

"You said you were a professor. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I don't know where you teach."

"Ah," said Slughorn, as cherries bloomed in the milky swells of his cheeks. "Well, teach — I put that aside some years ago, to do research. I've an emeritus position at Cambridge, so I spend some time there, but really, I so rarely have the time to come in and supervise—"

“Supervise!” crowed Professor Ezzazz, who spoke with the brash, flat drawl of an American. “Supervise? You ain’t supervised anything besides your wine cellar since 1981. If you’ve touched a cauldron in the past five years, I’ll eat my darn wand.”

“Oh, be nice,” said Professor Springbok. “When’s the last time *you* published, Ezekiel?”

“More lately than him! And the difference is, I got kids I got to teach. It’s not like I’m sittin’ around and gettin’ paid to think about stuff.”

“Secondary school,” simpered Springbok, in tones of delicate scorn. “How taxing.”

“High school,” corrected Ezzazz.

“Oh, yes. *High* school. Pardon me.”

“My research demands constant attention!” insisted Slughorn. “It is most important work!”

“You’re all potioneers?” said Draco, this time with an interest he did not have to feign.

“Nyet,” said Professor Petrovsky, surprising everybody by breaking his silence. “I am an alchemist.”

Slughorn blew a raspberry and flapped his hand. “Potato, po-tah-to,” he cooed. “Whatever the Soviets call it, these days. Honestly, you’d think that the Slovaki Minister would put some effort into reintegration, especially after everything that’s happened…”

“Is different discipline,” said Petrovsky stubbornly. “Is not the same. You sit over cauldron and stir with little stick. Alchemists tamper with laws of cosmos.”

“Gonna start a swear jar for you saying ‘laws of cosmos,’” muttered Ezzazz.

“Is different! Severus agrees.”

“Severus is a purist,” said Slughorn jovially. “Of course he’d agree with you. He probably thinks we should be doing all our brews in cauldrons of sterling silver, with rods of tempered gold…”

“But that’s better, isn’t it?” interrupted Draco, his curiosity overwhelming his graces. “The purer the metal, the less interference there is with the magic?”

Only Petrovsky nodded at him approvingly; the others shot him a few odd looks. Slughorn said, with a touch of discomfort, “Well, certainly, in terms of theory, that would be right… but in practice, of course, it just doesn’t do. It’s far too expensive, and the quality tradeoff with pewter or cast-iron isn’t nearly enough to justify it. Putting aside the problems with manufacture, silver is notoriously finicky…”

“I see,” said Draco, though all he heard was that Snape had been correct.

“Actually, don’t be so sure,” piped up Ezzazz. “There’s this fella in New York who says he can do things with silver you wouldn’t believe. Guy by the name of Gallahad. He thinks he can stabilize the tempering process enough for mass-production.”

“You can’t possibly mass-produce silver, it’s too expensive,” objected Springbok.

“It is *now.* But that’s what I’m saying, if you could transmute it from cadmium or palladium, you could have much more of it.”

“Oh, if *that’s* all.”

Everyone laughed.

“Permanent elemental transmutation is highly theoretical magic,” said Draco. He leaned over his drink, fascinated. He wished

Hermione could hear what the professors were saying; she'd be thrilled out of her mind. "Has someone figured it out?"

"Only in laboratory settings," admitted Springbok. "My team recently converted two moles of mercury into gold and maintained it for three hours without interfering with the stasis chamber."

" *How?* Where did you get that much energy?"

"Read my paper," she said, a bit smugly. "Forthcoming in the *Potions Review,* March 1994."

"But you're serious? At your laboratory, you're actually doing that kind of work?"

"I see Severus has already converted you," Slughorn said grandly, cuffing Draco on the shoulder. "That sly old lizard! Isn't it just like him to have a protege hiding under his cloak. Isn't that just like him, Pityr? And he never said a word about it."

Something in Draco's face must have been crestfallen — Snape had *never* mentioned him, at all? — because Slughorn blanched and hurried to correct himself. "Not that I'd hear of it, if he had," he babbled. "Severus and I don't speak more than once a year… he's a lovely man, I'm sure, but we're not exactly chums, are we? I'm sure he couldn't name any one of my past *three* apprentices, and if you know me, you know I don't make any secret of it…"

"Peace, Horace," said Petrovsky suddenly, and Slughorn cut himself off with palpable relief. "I know of this child, Malfoy."

Slughorn brandished a hand. "And there you go!" he bellowed. "I'm sure you know Severus better than any of us! Certainly you're the only one he ever talks to at conferences; I can't remember how many times I've turned around to find the two of you holed up in a corner, muttering about formulas."

Draco perked up. “Snape told you about me?” he asked Petrovsky, trying helplessly not to sound pathetic.

Petrovsky fixed his eyes on Draco. They were small, ice-blue, and set in a face of hard planes and deep hollows, like the side of a Nordic glacier. “He asks me for consult on potion,” said the professor. “Requires special ingredient most plentiful where I live. Is difficult to get. I say to him, if you do this thing for me, I fetch. He says, okay. He does favor. I give him ingredient. We meet, and I say to him, why do you need this? This is hard potion. Can achieve similar effect with spells. He says: similar not enough. Must be potion. I say: okay, Severus. But for what do you need mooncalf blood so much?”

A ripple of interest passed through the crowd at the table.

Petrovsky continued to stare at Draco, unperturbed. “Then he says to me: what is point of doing favor for you if you insist on being nosy shit?” (Draco bit his tongue to suppress a grin. He could all but hear his godfather’s voice.) “And again I say: okay, Severus. Your business. Not mine. But perhaps he thinks to himself, I should not make Pityr mad, in case I need ingredient again. Perhaps he thinks, Pityr is good friend to have, he makes things easier for me. So he says: I will tell you little bit, and then you take your nose out of my *zadok,* yes? And I say deal. And he says, there is boy in England, young boy, big house. Someone breaks into big house and steal shit. I say, ah, so you want potion to find out who? He says no. Need potion for this woman, boy’s mother.”

Draco startled. “My mother?” he said. “What did she want with—”

“So,” continued Petrovsky, without seeming to hear him, “I say, who is boy? And he says, you remember Lucius Malfoy. I say: show me the man who has forgotten Lucius Malfoy, I show you a dead man. And he says yes. This is his child. My godson.”

Slughorn gave a small exclamation. “Godson!” he said. He peered at Draco over his spectacles, as if seeing him for the first time. “He

never said anything about a *god*- son! My goodness! He was that close to Lucius? Stars, I never knew!”

Springbok made a noise of delighted surprise. So did the other professors. They all turned and looked at Draco. It was a testament to the thick mantle of secrecy that Snape wore tightly around his person that the revelation of a godson seemed to shock and please a crowd of people for whom the most arcane complexities of magic itself had long since ceased to be any amazement.

Draco, meanwhile, was vibrating with a queer sort of filial pleasure. It was a pathetically small victory, really, to be simply acknowledged, but it was such an unexpected concession from Snape that he could not help but be pleased.

There was dancing now in the center of the room, in a ring carved out by a line of glowing runes in the floor; white-haired wizards steering their youthful wives in lurching spirals, glossy couples in matching robes holding each other with a fashionable, otherworldly disdain; and in between them, a few students, cherubic and ill-suited to their fine dress robes, still wearing Hogwarts ties of green and silver. A full-bodied witch with hoop earrings so large they sat on her shoulders opened her mouth and poured out a deep jazz contralto, while small fireworks of laughter went off in rotation around the room. More trays of cocktails floated out of the aether, the glasses deeper and wider than the first round, and somehow a wizard’s hat had ended up hooked on the chandelier. A pair of house-elves were fencing with martini skewers for the amusement of some upper-ranking Ministry officials. Unbidden, Draco thought of Dobby, and quickly turned away.

He excused himself from the potion masters and slipped out to the men’s. While searching for somewhere to put down his cocktail near the door, he quite accidentally bumped into Pansy, who had stumbled in after a group of loud Wizengamot members and had yet to remove her fur coat. Her pigtails were braided and studded with emeralds, and she wore a pink dress of shade and cut horrendous.

“You!” she gasped, with a hostility he was sure he hadn’t earned. “What are *you* doing here?”

“And good evening to you, too. I was about to say it had been too long, but apparently you’d prefer it was longer.”

To her credit, she recovered quickly. “Don’t snip at me, I’ve just spent a simply desolate forty-five minutes with Madam Pomfrey. Dumbledore’s making me take this stupid extra class called ‘therapy.’ I told him it was utterly unfair to make *me* do extra work, since it’s not *my* fault he let some murderous creep sneak into his school, and he was lucky I hadn’t told my parents — you should have seen his face, you would’ve loved it — anyway, come here, then,” she grumbled, and hauled him down by the collar to plant an ungracious kiss on his cheek. He gave her a light one on the cheekbone and withdrew.

“I was invited, if that’s so terribly difficult for you to believe,” he added.

Her mouth puckered with distaste. “Of course you were,” she sighed. “Trust Teddy to blab all over the castle about it. Even when we were *told* to keep our mouths shut! You haven’t told any of the Gryffindors, have you? Say you haven’t, or I’ll have to go put an awl through his head.”

“Tell them what?” he said, frowning. “What are you afraid of? You think some Weasleys might float in by accident?”

She leveled a manicured fingernail at him. “For one, they very well would,” she said darkly, and he had to admit she was right. “This is just the kind of occasion your ragamuffin housemates would love to spoil with some sort of mischief. For two, even *you* being here is a breach of secrecy.”

He stared at her for a moment, speechless. “Pansy, I’m a pureblood,” he said incredulously. A beat passed, and he added: “My family’s older than yours.”

This touting of the pedigree impressed her not at all. Instead, she smacked his chest, which was the highest part of him she could reach. “For heaven’s sake, don’t you think I know that? Yes, Draco, you’re pureblood. Look around! So’s all of Slytherin house, and most of them aren’t here, either.”

It was true: of the not-insignificant number of Slytherin students (though Slytherin was the smallest house) less than a quarter were in attendance. It hadn’t occurred to him how few were there until Pansy pointed it out.

“So it’s a Ministry party,” he drawled. “All right. That’s no big secret, either, everyone here knows who my father was—”

This drove her even deeper into the throes of frustrated aggression, which she vented by pinching him. “A Ministry party? Draco, *think!* You know how many Ravenclaws have parents in the Ministry? How many Hufflepuffs? Even your friend Weaselbee’s father works in the — I don’t know — Department of Muggle Crap, or what-have-you.”

“Misuse of Muggle Artifacts,” he said distantly, distracted by the observation that she was right. “Fair enough. Theo didn’t tell me what the occasion was. It’s for the Cavalier party, I suppose, is that it? That’s why Weasley and his lot didn’t get invitations?”

“No,” she said, her irritation patent. “There are lots of Ravenclaws with parents in the Cavaliers, too. No. It’s just Slytherins and *you.* Why do you think that is?”

He stopped scanning the crowds and looked down at her. She was clasping her winter coat to her chest like a child’s stuffed animal, strangely rigid, as if she were afraid of something. Him?

“Theo invited me.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “He did. Because Theodore, the spectacular dolt, thinks you’re his friend.”

“I am his friend,” he said, stung.

“Sure you are. Yes. But — oh, I can’t say this without offending you, so you’re just going to have to get over it — but here’s the truth. Teddy doesn’t know you’re not a Slytherin.”

He blinked. “Parkinson,” he began slowly, half convinced that this ‘therapy’ had put her off her rocker. *“Everyone* knows I’m not in Slytherin. Nott especially. He was there, actually, at our Sorting. I wear a tie, I board in the Tower, I fly chaser for the Gryffindor team —”

“Yes, yes, all that rubbish, it doesn’t mean anything and you know it,” she said impatiently. “If I had a galleon for every student who’s ever been Sorted wrong, I could buy your Manor and the next three over! Did you know Cordelia Newcastle has been sleeping in the Hufflepuff common room for three months because she can’t stand being in Slytherin? It’s true. There’s been a spare bed in the dungeons since November. Theo, sweet stupid boy that he is, thinks you’re a Cordelia. And he won’t see reason when I tell him he’s wrong.”

Draco had no idea what to say. For some reason, the first thing that came out of his mouth was: “Why do you think he’s wrong?”

“Because you’re *not,”* she sighed. “I mean, bless you, and everything, I do think you’re a decent chap, and you’re the only Gryffindor that I don’t want to put my own ears out after talking to, but you’re not one of *ours.* If it came down to it—”

“If it came down to it, I’m still his friend,” he said coldly, straightening his back. It reasserted several inches of height between himself and Pansy, and he looked down on her from an even greater vantage. “I don’t like your implication, Parkinson, and I recommend that you withdraw it if you’d like to remain on civil terms.”

Unfazed, the second year folded her arms and thrust her chin up to meet his eye. “I won’t,” she said steadily. “You’ll only prove my point

if you get upset about this. You don’t look out for him like I do.”

“Of course not,” he sneered, “seeing as I don’t live up his arse—”

“Oh, now who’s being uncivil?”

“I’ll say you have a lot of nerve claiming to look out for him, seeing as he’s had a full plate cleaning up your messes ever since you came to school.”

“My messes? *Mine?* If you mean the time with the She-Weasel, she attacked me, and *you* did a fat load of nothing about it until Teddy forced you, which pretty much proves my point!”

“Attacked you? Don’t make me laugh. You called Granger a slur, what did you expect—”

“A slur?” she said softly. “A slur? So the truth is a slur, is it, now, Draco?”

He flinched away. The impassive set of her face made his skin crawl. “All I’m saying,” he said, in tones of cold disapproval, “is that you had no business being surprised when she jumped you. You know very well what that word means, and what kind of reaction it would get when you said it in front of those people.”

The disapproval in his voice made her duck her head and squirm. “Maybe,” she said stubbornly, yielding nothing. “Maybe I wanted to see how *you* would react. You ever think of that?”

He laughed unkindly. “Don’t let’s pretend that you cared about me until Theo told you to.”

Her head snapped up, expression blazing. “That’s not fair,” she said, with surprising vigor. “He never told me to care about you. I was the one who asked him to introduce me. And I was *hurt* when you didn’t say anything, you ignominious moron. I wanted to be your friend.”

He gaped at her.

“Are you mad? You wanted to be my friend, so you decided to try insulting my others?”

“What else was I supposed to do? I was eleven!”

“You might have tried an owl, first!”

They stared at each other, bristling with aggression.

“Merlin,” she said suddenly. “This is exhausting. I don’t know how you all live like this in the Tower, I think I’d die. Can’t we just lie and say we’ve made up? I swear not to care if you won’t.”

“Smashing idea,” he said immediately. “Let’s.”

“Good,” she said, and held out her hand. They shook firmly, and the argument was over.

There was a crescendo of silver on glass, and spoons tinkled against a flotilla of champagne bowls. Runcorn had mounted the podium at the fore of the room, and his voice rang out in artificially magnified peals of deep, sonorous bass.

“Witches and wizards, gentlefolk, friends,” he began. “I thank you all very sincerely for joining me here. I know you have taken time away from your jobs — which I *know* to be very strenuous—”

Giggles of the artificial and obliging variety susurrated.

He smiled with fatherly condescension. “And I apologize for that. The work of saving the world has never been easy. I thank, also, those of you whom I have taken away from your studies; for you, too, the work of saving the world has begun, though as I recall, it never seemed quite so glamorous as the work your parents now perform.”

Claps and laughter rose from the students in the crowd, who raised their voices even higher than their elders, perhaps to compensate for their smaller number.

As Runcorn continued to speak, Draco leaned over to speak in Pansy's ear.

"You never said what the party was."

She kept her eyes locked on Runcorn. One would suspect she had some deep fascination with Ministry smalltalk, so steadily did she refuse to look at anything else. "It's not a party. It's a recruitment event."

"...For what?"

"It's called the League of Promising Youth," she muttered. "It's a civic association for students."

"Pedigreed students," he said.

"Yes."

"Pedigreed Slytherins. With Ministry connections."

"I'm sure they'd let a Ravenclaw join, if one wanted to."

"How much would you bet on it?"

He'd put too much acid in it; she pressed her lips together and arched her nose even higher, as if allowing the remark to drift underneath her notice.

"And the point of this 'civic association,'" he said, in a low voice, "is to do what, exactly?"

"Well, I don't know, Draco, I've only just got here," she snapped. "I assumed they were going to tell us once we'd been properly initiated. I'm not even technically invited to join, it's for third years and up, but my father said I could use his connections to get in if I wanted to."

"And will you?"

“I don’t know! That’s why I came, isn’t it, to see if it’s my shout? I mean, I don’t care a fig for politics, and my father disgusts me utterly, but if all of my friends are going to be doing something, I’m not going to be the only one who’s not in the club.”

“You wouldn’t be the only one.”

“In fact I would. They came around the Slytherin commons and delivered little invitations, wax-sealed with the Minister’s crest and everything. Everyone who’s anyone got one. Theo’s been punched, and Daphne, and Blaise…”

“You wouldn’t be the only one,” he said, “because I wasn’t invited.”

She glanced at him, half-exasperation, half-guilt. “But you’ll get in if you want it, though,” she said. “You know that, don’t you? With your money, and your pedigree? You could walk right up to the Minister and ask.”

Draco’s mouth felt dry. He could hear Runcorn speaking, but he couldn’t focus on what he was saying. A prickle ran up the base of his spine, cool and sharp, like the thrill of fear that afflicted him when he was flying into a steep dive.

“I have to go,” he said abruptly, and turned.

“What? No! What did I say?” Pansy clutched his arm, following him to the door. “Draco. Don’t be dramatic. No one cares if you’re a Gryffindor. It’s just a stupid tie.”

She was lying, or at the very least she was wrong, but he couldn’t concentrate enough to tell the difference. It didn’t matter, anyways. “It’s not that,” he said.

“What, then?” she demanded.

“I don’t know,” he said, taut with frustration, and he was telling the truth. “I should go.”

“What? No. Don’t *leave* me here,” she said at once. “Don’t be such a girl about it. I need you to protect me against my parents. They want to introduce me to some boy from Scandinavia — I expect they’ll want me to marry him — you owe it to me as a friend to pretend to be in love with me for an hour, at least.”

He tore his arm from her grasp. She let go and stumbled back, eyes wide and wounded, like a spanked cat.

“What *is* the matter with you?” she demanded. “That was a joke.”

“I’m sick,” he said, and after a moment he realized he wasn’t lying: his stomach had been seizing ever since Runcorn took the podium. “I have to see Madam Pomfrey. I’m sorry, Parkinson. I’ll make it up to you some other time.”

Runcorn’s speech had reached a crescendo. He turned away from Pansy and ducked out of the warm room into the cool, welcoming air of the hallway beyond, where, for some reason unknown to his conscious mind, he broke into a run.

On Sunday morning, after spending the better part of Saturday in bed, Draco went down with Hermione for the first Hogsmeade visit of the term. Ron, who was still not speaking to Hermione on behalf of Scabbers, stayed behind, and Harry gave some half-hearted excuse of wanting to stay in and do homework. Draco could have laughed. If it didn’t hurt Hermione’s feelings, he wouldn’t have cared.

Partly to distract her, he told her what had happened at the party.

“But that’s vile,” she exclaimed. “Absolutely vile. It’s obvious what they’re doing — rounding up all the students who’ll regurgitate their ideas back to them, all the same backwards traditionalist doggerel. It’s nepotism, pure and simple. I’m shocked that Dumbledore’s allowing it.”

“I’m not sure Dumbledore’s allowing much of anything,” he said flatly. “It’s the Minister of Magic. What’s Dumbledore going to do, kick him off the grounds?”

“He could,” she said hotly. “Hogwarts might be a public institution, but that doesn’t give the Minister leave to swan in and do as he likes, especially when it comes to threatening the welfare of children.”

“I hate to break it to you, Granger, but I don’t think Runcorn’s a threat to anyone in that room.”

“And I didn’t say it was their welfare at risk, did I?” she countered evenly, with a subtle lift of her chin. “Nothing you’ve said about these people’s politics makes me feel terribly good about them rallying their children into — what is it, anyway? Some sort of secret society?”

“The League of Promising Youth, Pansy called it.”

“The ‘League of Promising Youth,’” she repeated, curling her lip. “God, it even sounds sinister. I’m glad you had the sense to get out of there, Draco. Those people sound haughty and insensitive and downright bigoted. I’d think less of you if you’d stayed, honestly.”

Her fury warmed him. Talking to Hermione about the party had a way of soothing his nerves, somehow, and dispelling the dismal sense of malaise that had settled over him for the past twenty-four hours. When she spoke, everything seemed so orderly and clear. Of course it was wrong, for the Minister to be cherry-picking his favorite students; of course Draco had been right to leave. Framed this way, the decision made him sound heroic and principled. It was much better than thinking he’d fled because he was too nauseous and cowardly to sit through a harmless speech.

“It wasn’t even a good party,” he said dismissively, as if he hadn’t been having a perfectly good time before Pansy showed up. “I didn’t get to talk to anyone important. I got stuck at a table with a bunch of academics.”

“No! Did you really? Tell me everything you heard.”

He hid a smirk by turning his face towards the lake. “I can’t remember it all,” he said vaguely. “I suppose someone mentioned a bit about pure elemental transmutation; supposedly she converted a mole of mercury, in her laboratory—”

“A *mole?* That’s not possible!” Hermione whirled on him, mouth agape, transfixed. “You’re joking! You misremembered.”

“Mm, you’re right. It was two.”

“Two!”

He grinned at the lake. It was a very pretty lake, today: the sun was iridescing off the chipped surface of the waves, and refracting pieces of the egg-blue sky. “Yes, two,” he said. “Mercury into — actually, guess.”

“Well, it’s not gold, obviously,” she said. When he remained silent, she gasped: “No. It isn’t! It isn’t. You’re playing with me.”

His cheek twitched. He ironed it out, sternly.

“You ought to pick up the June edition of *Potions Review.* That’s all.”

“Draco Malfoy, you know I can’t get wizarding magazines!” She was practically wailing. “I’ll be out of school by June, and they don’t deliver to muggle addresses! You’re lying.”

“Then you’ll just have to be very nice to me.”

“Be serious. You’ll get one for me, won’t you? I’d pay you back. I figured out how to exchange currency at Gringotts, you know.”

He wrinkled his nose, disgusted. “When have I ever let you pay me back for anything?” he said, horrified. “It was a joke. I could *buy* that magazine. I’m not going to shake you down for ten galleons.”

She ignored him. She was talking fast, and walking faster. Hermione always did this: her body ran on words the same way a steam engine did on coal. “It’s just not possible. I don’t think you would lie to me about it. You know how important it is! You and I have talked about it before, this very thing, and we decided it was impossible. Didn’t we say it was impossible? No, you wouldn’t lie…”

“Granger, I’m not lying,” he said amusedly, breaking into a jog to keep up with her. “Stop fussing. I’ll get you the magazine.”

“After you read it first,” she muttered.

“Naturally. The day I let you win is the day you get bored of me.”

“I would never get bored of you,” she said indignantly.

“Because I never let you win. Exactly. We agree.”

“No, because you’re far too interesting,” she said. “You’re like a maladapted bird of paradise. I shouldn’t expect I’ll ever find someone who’s so fully self-contradictory in so many ways.”

He made a scandalized noise. “If that’s not the richest thing I’ve ever — pot, meet the blackest, grimiest, filthiest kettle—”

“Hush,” she said, falling still. He stumbled a few steps and doubled back, following her gaze. They had crested a hill and came upon a row of old stones overlooking a ridge that led down to the gamekeeper's hut. Below, among the orange valleys of the pumpkin patch, stood a trio of Ministry officials in high-collared purple uniforms with silver studs.

“Aurors,” said Draco, frowning deeper. “Why are the aurors here?”

“Shh!”

The door swung open. Hermione made a small chirp, like a startled bird, and then shoved them both behind one of the larger stones. His back hit the rock and he made a noise less of pain than of surprise.

When he opened his mouth to object, she shoved her finger against his lips. Her arm made a brace across his collarbones, surprisingly firm, for all her lack of natural size and strength. He could feel her driving against him with all her might, which was not much — he could have easily shoved her into the dirt with a flick of his arm — but it was more than he expected.

He didn't quite know what to do. If Harry or Ron had taken liberties like this, Draco could have body-checked them into the mud and been cheerfully on his way. He sort of stared at her for a moment, waiting for her to realize the extent of her indiscretion, but the daft girl wasn't even looking at him. She was peering around the rock, holding him in place with one hand, apparently expecting him to simply remain where he was put.

He narrowed his eyes and carefully pried her finger away from his mouth. "Granger," he hissed.

She ignored him, peering around the rock to see what was happening below. "Look!" she whispered.

"Granger, what the hell—?"

"Shut up! I'm trying to hear!"

He rolled his eyes and turned around. The door to Hagrid's hut creaked open, and a trio of aurors stepped out. Two of them carried between them a large steel box with handles welded out of metal, and sealed with a glowing red padlock the size of Draco's head. Both wore gloves.

"...call the Romanians, and have them on standby," said a voice. Draco leaned closer, struggling to hear, and his chest bumped Hermione's shoulder; she made an absent, irked noise, and shouldered him back. He glared at her.

"Yes, sir."

“And notify the Minister, of course, once you’ve done all that. He’ll be invigorated by the progress we’ve made here today. If you can get him personally on the Floo, tell him that the search will be extended by… oh, three weeks should be sufficient, don’t you think? For the grounds?”

“Yes, Lord Nott.”

“Until the end of March, then. With apologies.”

Draco sucked in a breath. Sibelius Nott emerged from Hagrid’s hut, a sight so strange it sent a pang of cognitive dissonance ringing through his skull. Descending from the stairs with a prim and characteristic distaste, Theodore’s father paused in the pumpkin patch and brushed a patch of something pale and crumbling from his sleeve. It looked like ash.

He glanced down at his robes, and his expression darkened. Draco noticed that there was a long, jagged tear in the silk near his knee. “And call Magical Creatures,” ordered Nott, after a moment. “Have someone out to put down that dog.”

“Yes, sir.”

With a last sneering flick of his sleeve, he swept after the aurors, following them down the wooded path to Hogsmeade.

Hermione waited until they were just out of sight. Her expression was dark and unreadable. Draco let out a slow exhale and murmured, “Well, that’s interesting, isn’t it? Do you think that Hagrid —”

But Hermione was gone: she was hurtling down the hill, so fast that even Draco had to sprint to catch up with her.

She flung herself against the door, hammering. “Hagrid!” she shrieked. “Hagrid, open the door! Are you in there? Are you alright?”

The door cracked open, and Hagrid shambled out. Draco balked. The half-giant was in a bad way: red hemispheres rimmed his eyes, and tear tracks ran down in gobbets the size of small rivers through his great uncombed beard. He was even more shabbily dressed than usual, and scorch-marks peppered his shirt.

“They took ’im,” he croaked, kneading a giant and phlegm-clogged handkerchief. “They took ’im away from me. From his daddy that loves ’im, they took ’im, an’ they’re fixin’ ter ship ’im off, Merlin knows where…”

“Took who?” said Hermione breathlessly. “Hagrid, took *who?”*

“You’re a father?” Draco said, flabbergasted.

“’E was jus’ a little bloke,” moaned Hagrid, “and now ee’s gone! Gone… they took Norbert away…” And he slumped down on the stoop, his head drooping so low that his great shag of hair swept his knees.

Hermione immediately dropped to her knees and cradled his hand between her own. “Who’s Norbert?” she demanded. Her tone was hard and, in Draco’s opinion, not at all comforting, unless you happened to know Hermione. Then it was still not very comforting, but it didn’t give the initial impression, which was that you were about to be horsewhipped for information. “Who did they take away?”

“Or what,” added Draco. Hermione shot him an aggrieved look, but he shrugged: with Hagrid, it was a fair question.

“Ee’s on’y a baby,” sobbed Hagrid.

“A *baby?”* Draco exclaimed. Hermione scowled and drew her finger across her neck, but he refused to be sorry for it. The idea of anyone entrusting Hagrid with a human child was almost as unfathomable as Hagrid actually siring one.

“Yes,” Hagrid agreed tearfully. “A baby. Jus’ a little baby dragon.”

Draco let out a high-pitched bark of laughter. He couldn't help it. He really couldn't.

Hermione put her hands over her face. "A dragon," she mumbled. "A baby… a baby dragon. So: a dragon."

Draco did not trust himself to speak. Or, rather, he did not trust himself to say anything that wouldn't make Hermione look at him in the way he hated, so instead, he stepped down from the stoop and stalked restlessly over to the nearest pumpkin, where he stood, his hands on his hips, putting every ounce of willpower he possessed into not saying what he wanted to.

He was very proud of himself when he didn't. He walked back to where Hagrid sat and found Hermione still attempting to comfort him.

"It's okay, Hagrid, really," she was saying. "It'll be alright. They're taking him to a sanctuary, probably, where he'll be taken care of, and he'll be with his own kind… lots of other dragons for him to play with, and, and… goats to chase, and everything…"

Draco arched his eyebrow at her and mouthed: *Goats?*

She threw up her hands furiously. He hid a snicker under a cough.

"But 'ee won' be with his daddy," sobbed Hagrid. "'Ee won' be with me. They don' know how ee likes his milk, and they didn' take his favorite blanket…"

"I'm sure he's distraught," said Draco dryly, and Hagrid — apparently in concurrence — broke into a great wail. Fang broke into a pang of sad howls, too, apparently sensing his master's distress. It took several minutes for Hermione, with scant help from Draco, to calm them down.

"How did you even keep a baby dragon?" Draco said, mostly rhetorically, since Hagrid was in no state to answer. "You live in a

wooden hut. Next to a forest. That's remarkable. It's actually remarkable that you haven't died."

"You," hissed Hermione, "are not helping."

Luckily, Hagrid seemed not to hear them. "An' now I can' teach, either," he managed, between gulps for breath. "Because they've suspended me license. An' I'm on temporary probation fer unlicensed possession of a Class Five creature. An', an' when they come back, they said, they were comin' with a warrant ter search the rest of the paddock… all of me stables an' warrens…"

Hermione sat up very straight. "They're coming back," she said, in a strangely calm voice. "You're sure?"

Hagrid nodded shakily. "They said they're lookin' for signs o' Sirius Black," he sniffled. "Tha's how they got a warrant fer Norbert, was someone gave 'em a tipoff about me hut… I dunno what ter do. I really don'. If tha's what they do with Norbert, I dunno wha' they'll say when they find Buckbeak…"

Draco said, "You're right, they'll probably take him," and realized too late that he sounded altogether too chipper. Too late, for Hagrid roared with dismay. He cringed, and hastened to add: "But, you know… he can fly, so I don't think their odds are very good of keeping him. He's a wild animal. I'm sure he'll get out if he wants to."

"He won', though," moaned Hagrid. "Tha's the rub of it. I've trained 'im to fly back here every time he takes off, because he's expectin' treats and food and the like. They'll know jus' where to find 'im, if he gets out. An' if they think they can't release 'im into the wild, they'll — they'll—"

Based on the way Hagrid exploded into an even more violent profusion of tears, Draco had a pretty good idea of what they would do.

Hermione, however, had gone quiet and still. She had ceased to comfort Hagrid at all; she had even dropped his hand, and now was lacing her fingers in front of her mouth, deep in thought.

“The *whole* grounds?” she said. “All of it? Including Hogsmeade.”

Hagrid bobbed his head. “Tha’s what ee’ said.”

“Right,” she said calmly. “Right. Of course. They’d want to be thorough.”

She stood up and brushed off her hands. “Hagrid,” she said, with all the warmth of a staff sergeant, “you’ve got to reapply for your creature handling license. A special license, this time. Draco’s right, the general one really isn’t appropriate for someone in your position, and you’ve more than enough experience to pass the written exam. I’ll help you. There’s books on it at the library, you can take them out on my account. I’ll come down with some materials tomorrow, and we can start working on the appeal.”

Hagrid lifted his head and blinked at her, his craggy face bright with hope. “Ye will?” he said. “Tha’s — tha’s plum kind of you, Hermione, but — no, yer a student, yeh shouldn’ take time out of yer studies for tha’.”

“Nonsense,” she said crisply. “This is what my studies are *for.* What’s the point of knowing everything if you aren’t going to help people? We’ll have tea after classes. By the way, you really *must* keep Fang inside. Don’t let anyone from the Ministry see him.”

With that, she gave Hagrid a brief but mighty hug, and then bid him goodbye. “Come on,” she whispered to Draco, taking his arm and pulling him away from the cottage. “There’s no time to waste. We’ve got to find Professor Lupin.”

“What now?” he said, irritated at being yet again denied access to the memorandum on where, exactly, they were going. It didn’t stop

him from following her, though. “Why Lupin? Has he got a hippogriff stashed in his closet?”

She paused and stared at him, wide-eyed, as if she couldn’t believe that he didn’t see what she saw.

“No,” she said. “They’re doing a full sweep of the grounds. That includes the Shrieking Shack.”

-pansy and draco's approach to friendship is like. i will pretend to dislike you SO MUCH that you have no choice but to like me in return. and then the other person does it back to them and they are like >:0!!!!

-it is canon in my heart that snape hates every one of the people at that table, save two. you can guess which two

-poor hagrid. I did say buckbeak would be coming back!

-next chapter going up in a week! its drafting title (not final, has since been changed) was "the beginning of hermione granger's promising career as a delinquent genius."

Plots, Plans, and Potions

Chapter 25: Plots, Plans, and Potions

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Whatever wisdom Lupin might have had to offer about the situation, they never heard it, because after almost an hour of all but ransacking the castle, Draco and Hermione were informed by an unamused Professor McGonagall that Lupin was not there.

“What do you mean, he’s not here?” Draco demanded. “It’s a Sunday afternoon. Where else would he be?”

“What Professor Lupin does with his weekend is quite his affair,” replied McGonagall, “and I fail to see how it should concern either of you. If you require something to occupy yourselves with, the silver in the armory needs polishing, though it may not for long, if you continue to take that tone.”

Draco apologized, and steered them quickly back to the common room; the clipped tones of McGonagall’s disapproval made Hermione look so wretched he worried she might try to kill herself.

Harry and Ron were stationed at a table under a wide hemisphere of unfinished homework.

“Look who it is,” Ron said sulkily, as soon as her head cleared the portrait-hole. “Quick, Harry, check on Hedwig. She might ‘run away’ any minute now.”

“Any other time, Ron, but we’ve much more important things to do,” said Hermione breathlessly. “Both of you, put that away and come with us.”

The boys gaped at her with twin expressions of pure horror. Harry took off his glasses, looked at them, and then put them back on.

Only a catastrophe of life-altering proportions could impel Hermione, of all people, to admit of an activity more important than homework.

Hermione windmilled her arm towards the portrait hole. “Well? Come on!” she exclaimed. “Up! Up! We haven’t a country age!”

With a shriek of jostling chairs, the boys scrambled to their feet and hurried out. Draco, who was enjoying their panic far more than Hermione could ever be allowed to know, said, “Hup, hup,” and swung the portrait-door closed behind them.

Hermione sped through the labyrinthine corridors of the castle at a breakneck pace, almost bowling over an unfortunate gaggle of fifth years who paused to stare as she careened by, heedless of Draco’s trail of hapless apologies, neglectful of fellow student and staircase alike. She cruised right under the leering visage of Peeves, who launched into a rude limerick as she passed, and without turning around, she aimed her wand over her shoulder and said: *“Langlock!”* with such crisp efficiency that she might have been locking a door; with a gulp, Peeves’ jaw snapped shut, and he fumbled at his throat with panic that was slightly comical.

“Ruthless, Granger,” said Draco admiringly.

“Percy taught me that one,” she panted, without pausing for breath. She hiked up her robes and dashed down a flight of stairs, hair bouncing wildly in her wake. He hopped on the banister and slid down on his hips, landing lightly on the balls of his feet.

They rounded the second-floor landing, and she breezed into the second door on the right without knocking. Draco was about to follow when he finally got an eyeful of the door itself, and jumped back with such scandalized vigor that Ron plowed straight into his shoulder blades.

“Granger!” he hissed.

She hauled the door open. “What?”

“This is the *girls’!”*

“Oh, please. Like it would be your first time.”

Harry snickered. Draco used his eyes and fingers to communicate what he thought of this manly betrayal.

“That was two years ago,” he whispered, shooting a furtive glance down the hallway, and finding it thankfully free of any potential witnesses in need of Obliviating. “And do you remember what happened when I did? It rhymes with *fountain roll.* ”

“It’s a loo, not a dungeon, you baby,” she said. “You’re just skittish because you don’t want to get caught in the girls’! But you needn’t worry. This is Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom; it’s the first place I could think of where nobody will be able to overhear us.” She paused. “Well, except Myrtle. But she doesn’t really count.”

“Who’s Myrtle?” said Ron.

Hermione grimaced. “You’ll see,” she said. She held the door ajar and pointed her chin meaningfully inside. Sending another pained glance up and down the hallway, Draco ducked in.

“A whole magical castle at your fingertips, and your first thought was a privy?” he hissed at her as he passed. She made a face at him, and he stuck his tongue out at her, which made him feel much better, all things considered.

In a moment, the door shut, and enclosed them in a disarmingly clean marble bathroom, octagonal in shape, with high deep windows that strained afternoon sunshine through whorls of dust. Their footsteps echoed on the pale stone, and when he scraped his heel on the tile, the sound went skittering into the high vault over their heads. It smelled of rock and damp and other old-castle things, which was none too pleasant a thing to smell, but as one of Merlin’s few small mercies, it did not smell particularly like a bathroom that was often used.

“Who’s there?” cried a queer, watery voice from above. Draco’s wand was out and pointed warily at the ceiling before he had time to look, and saw a dark-haired specter in the rafters. The ghost was a girl, and a young one, with long black pigtails that triggered an unpleasant flare of familiarity in the back of his mind. That was where the resemblance to Pansy ended, though: the ghost girl had a long nose and a small, woeful mouth, with thick glasses which had been inflicted, rather unfairly, he thought, on a face of very little beauty to begin with.

“Hello, Myrtle,” Hermione said tentatively, locking the door behind them. “It’s me. You remember me, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes,” said Myrtle, sinking closer. The sunlight through the windows passed through her body and bleached it out, rendering her almost wholly transparent. *“You’re* the one who was always crying.”

Draco frowned at Hermione. She rolled her eyes and said, with a touch of color in her cheeks, “Yes, but that was years ago. I’m quite recovered now, thank you.”

“That’s nice,” said Myrtle sadly. “Must be really nice, to be able to get over things… to go out there and make a lot of nice friends… it’s much harder for me, of course, I never get to go anywhere…”

“Yes, that’s very sad, Myrtle,” Hermione said briskly, setting down her bookbag. “I’m sure that’s terribly rough for you. Maybe you should have thought of that, before you became a ghost, though.” She caught Draco’s astonished eye, and whispered: “You can’t give her any sympathy, or she’ll really work herself into a fit. She likes feeling sorry for herself, and she especially likes when other people feel sorry for her. If she gets going, we’ll be here for hours.” Raising her voice again, she called: “Now, do you mind giving us some privacy? We’ve something important to discuss.”

“Some-thing im-por-tant!” Myrtle mimicked her. “Oh, very important, yes, I’m sure. Much more important than anything I have to say. After all, who cares about Myrtle? It’s just stupid old Myrtle — dumb old

Myrtle — I'm not someone *im-por-tant,* like little Miss Hermione Granger!"

"Yes, that's the long and short of it. Could you go in your toilet, please? We only need a few minutes."

"Oh!" At this indignity, Myrtle was too overwhelmed to speak. She gave a howl of misery, and swept through the doors to one of the stalls. The toilet inside gave a riotous, rageful flush, and water began to lap out from under the stall door, trickling into the drains in the floor.

Ron balked and gave the water a wide berth, twitching back his robes. "She's not really inside the toilet, is she?"

"In fact she is," said Hermione. She sat down on the floor near the window, settling herself in a nice pool of sunlight, and drew her wand. *"Muffliato.* There, she shouldn't be able to hear us now."

"But why?"

"Why what? Oh, that's annoying, isn't it. *Silencio,"* she said, aiming her wand severely at the still-gurgling stall. It fell silent with a pitiful squelch.

"Why a toilet?" said Ron, a question Draco had dearly wanted to ask, but considered it beneath himself to give voice to. Ron often did this for Draco.

Hermione shrugged, as if she couldn't possibly be bothered to entertain the logic of a creature so deeply beneath her own powers of reason. "Ask her, I suppose. Ghosts are bound to the place they died, or places that were particularly significant to them while they were alive. Either way, it's rather depressing, isn't it? Really not worth thinking about."

"Poor thing," said Harry, staring at the stall.

Hermione said, “You’d feel a lot less sorry for her if she started bellowing every time you were trying to relieve yourself. Now sit down, please, Draco and I have just heard something terribly important and I don’t know how long that *Muffliato* will hold.”

They gathered in a circle on the bathroom floor. Draco, for whom this was easily the worst thing to happen to him all week, and possibly all month, cast a Cushioning Charm, and sent a rueful mutter about choosing better meeting locations in Hermione’s direction.

Quickly, in brisk, unornamented language, Hermione related to Harry and Ron what had been revealed at Hagrid’s hut.

“So we have to save him,” said Harry immediately. His tone was edged with panic. “We can’t let them take him. They can’t take Sirius back to Azkaban. He won’t do it. And Lupin! What will he do? Sirius won’t go, he’ll go down fighting, they both will, they’ll die.”

Ron was nodding glumly, as if he, too, saw this as a foregone conclusion. Draco, overall nonplussed at the dour mood of the congregation, decided to give them both a dose of medicine.

“Potter. Weasley. Shape up. Nobody wants to see my cousin dead,” he began. Then he considered. “Except, of course, the Ministry of Magic. And the dementors, though they don’t count. They want everything dead, it seems, so Black isn’t so much an exception as the rule. And most of the Wizarding World, of course, they’re against you. But of the people you’re talking to, zero of three.”

In return for this endorsement, he received a trio of bleak stares. He cleared his throat and added, “A very good start, one thinks.”

“Thanks for that,” said Ron incredulously.

Harry drove the heels of his palms into his rumpled hairline, clearly saddling up for a nervous breakdown. Draco was privately impressed that he had held out this long.

“Harry, calm down. Draco, stop trying to calm Harry down,” Hermione pleaded. “There’s still time. The man from the Ministry said they were extending the search for a month, and they’ll most likely start at the castle and move out, so they won’t reach the Shack for a few weeks, at least. The Forest will give them plenty to deal with in the meantime. All we’ve got to do is figure out how to move Sirius out of the Shack before then.”

“Trivial, really,” drawled Draco. “That’s all? Move a wanted criminal across a grounds packed to the gunwhales with dementors, smuggle him across the border — which we can’t cross, mind you — and move him to an as-yet undiscovered safehouse? While the top dogs in the Ministry sniff around?”

She glowered. “If you don’t want to help,” she began, heatedly, but he scowled and batted the suggestion away with his hand.

“Come off it, of course I’m going to help. He’s my cousin, not yours.” He pretended to inspect the soles of his shoes for bathroom-floor-grime.

This was not the reason he cared in the slightest what happened to Sirius Black. The reason he cared was five foot two and currently polishing his glasses like he could somehow scrub his abandonment issues out with a ratty sleeve. But Draco would rather end up haunting a toilet than bequeath *that* piece of information to anyone living.

And so Hermione could give him as many knowing smirks as she wanted. She could simper and wink and pretend to understand as much as she liked. Didn’t mean she knew anything. Didn’t mean it made him feel better, her looking at him like he’d just handed her a signed first edition of Bathilda Bagshot or lassoed the moon or something. Didn’t mean he *liked* feeling like he’d bested a basilisk with his bare hands.

Really, she might at least give him the dignity of feigning self-interest.

“Right. Er— anyway.” Hermione turned away from him, and her hair fell to cover her face, but her voice betrayed that she was still smiling. “There are three problems to solve, I think. One: we need to get Sirius out of the Shack and down into Hogsmeade, at least, where he can Apparate or use the Floo. Two: we need to make sure the dementors don’t get him — or us, frankly. Three: we need to make sure no one from the Ministry, or anyone else for that matter, sees us moving him.”

Ron rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Well, last one’s easiest, isn’t it,” he said. “We’ve got to do it at night.”

“Night makes it harder because of curfew,” Hermione reminded him.

“Yeah, but c’mon. Filch? Mrs. Norris? We’ve been sneaking past them since first year. Nothing compared to the number of eyeballs about during the day.” He grimaced. “Believe me, I’m not too keen about skulking around the Forbidden Forest at night, either, but I don’t see how any of this works, otherwise.”

“We can use the Cloak,” Harry suggested.

Ron pursed his lips. “Sure,” he said, “but even if we use the Cloak, there’s no way we can fit five, especially if one’s a full-grown bloke. We can fit two of us, maybe three.”

“No. Just Sirius,” said Harry. He looked like he was gearing up to take a kick from a hippogriff, with all the grim seriousness of someone for whom this would not be the first hippogriff-kicking. “He uses the Cloak. The rest of us just risk it.”

Draco raised a finger. “Objection,” he said. “Can we come up with something better than ‘just risk it’? For preference? It’s just that I get so much more pleasure from having my soul here, inside me, rather than having it sucked out through my mouth like a fine soup.”

“Maybe we could try a Disillusionment Charm,” mused Hermione. “Flitwick says Professor Dumbledore can produce a Disillusionment

Charm so powerful he's almost invisible."

"Great, maybe he'll do one for us," said Draco. "Because surely none of us will. It's sixth-year spellwork."

"I know, but we could learn!"

"In three weeks? Enough to fool a dementor? Even you and I have limits, Granger."

"What about a disguise?" suggested Ron. "There's lots of magical ways to disguise yourself, aren't there? Charlie said most of seventh year with McGonagall is just human transfiguration."

Draco blanched. "It's N.E.W.T.-level for a reason," he replied, stricken. "With respect, I'm not letting any of you numpties point a wand at my face unless you have a maxillofacial Healer's license and a cert from St. Mungo's. Not even Granger there, and *she's* the second coming of Merlin, if you believe McGonagall."

"Oh, stop it," said Hermione, who quite obviously did not want him to stop in the slightest, and she hid a beam behind her hair. "But Draco's right, we haven't a chance at managing human transfiguration, not at our level… I wonder if there's something we could brew…?"

She gasped. She turned to Draco, who abruptly sat up straight, cursing himself for not beating her to it.

They said at the same time: "Polyjuice Potion."

She smacked her forehead. "I'm an idiot!" she said. "Of course! A bit of Polyjuice—"

"Nick some hairs off of a Ministry official—"

"See if we can't get our hands on a uniform—"

“No one would stop us, all we’d have to do is grab him and walk him out. It’d be trivial.”

“Anyone who saw us would assume—”

“—it was just Ministry business,” he said. She nodded fervently.

The thrill of finding the answer was so all-consuming that it took him a whole three seconds to remember there was a world outside of their conversation.

“We’d be breaking about fifty school rules,” she added.

“If they catch us.”

“And we’d have to actually make the potion. Which would be difficult.”

He snorted.

“No, it *would* be, even for us. Even for you! For one thing, we’d need to find the ingredients somehow. And it takes almost a month.”

“Lucky us, then, we’ve got almost a month to figure it out.”

“And it’d be a lot of work.”

“I don’t know who you think you’re talking to, because I’m certain it isn’t the only person in this castle who’s ever beat you in Potions.”

“Because Snape *likes* you better, not because you actually *do*—”

“Oi,” said Ron loudly.

Draco and Hermione turned in unison.

“Whenever you two feel so inclined,” he said, aggrieved, “there are, not to shock you or anything, two other people here. Get back to us before we graduate, would you?”

“But you know what Polyjuice Potion is,” said Hermione instantly. “Snape mentioned it last year.”

“D’you think I’ve got nothing better to do in Potions than listen to Snape?”

“Truthfully?” said Draco. Hermione pinched him.

“It transforms you into somebody else,” she said.

“What — forever?” Ron was alarmed.

“It wears off after a while,” she muttered, digging through her book bag. “But getting hold of the recipe will be very difficult. They don’t teach it in Potions, we’ll need the recipe from a really old book… *The Darkest Arte,* maybe? Or we could try *Most Potente Potions,* it’d definitely be in there…”

“Is this Dark magic?” said Harry, frowning.

She scoffed. “Hardly!” she said. “It’s forbidden because it can be abused easily, that’s all. But it’s not hardly as dangerous as lots of the magic they teach here at Hogwarts, and that’s all perfectly legal.”

Draco caught Harry’s eye and rocked his hand to-and-fro: equivocating. Harry’s frown deepened and grew its own miniature set of frowns. His face was a frown breeding pit.

Hermione blazed on, heedless. “But *Most Potente Potions* is bound to be in the Restricted Section of the library. We’d just need a note from a teacher, which would be impossible to get without explaining what we wanted it for… I suppose we could say we were interested in the theory, but I don’t think McGonagall will fall for it, knowing us… we might ask Lupin…”

“Come to think of it, why haven’t we asked Lupin?” suggested Ron. “He’s sure to have some say in all this, hasn’t he?”

“And would do, if we could find the bugger,” Draco replied. “He’s gone off the map. Whatever he’s doing, he isn’t making himself available for consultation.” Harry gave a sharp intake of breath, and Draco felt badly. But there was no sugarcoating the matter.

“Perhaps he’ll be back tomorrow,” said Hermione doubtfully. “If not, we could try McGonagall, I suppose… or, Draco, you could always ask Snape.”

Draco tipped his head back and let the idea roll around in it. Unlike McGonagall, Snape wouldn’t dismiss the request out of hand, and he might even indulge him; but the problem was, he could read Draco like a book, and he didn’t have a good reason for wanting it that didn’t involve breaking school rules. He wasn’t sure how much he was willing to bet on being able to fool his godfather. “Alright. Fair enough. And what do I say when he asks me what I want it for?”

“Tell him the truth: you’re interested in potion-making, and you want to study it outside of a classroom context. It’s true, isn’t it?”

“It’s true, but that book—” He cut himself off. “Did you say *Most Potente Potions?”*

“Yes. I mean, I’m sure it’s in other books, but that’s the first one off the top of my head.”

“We don’t need to use the library,” he said excitedly. “I have that book. Snape gave it to me for Christmas last year.”

“But that’s perfect!”

“I know! All I have to do is write home to Mother asking for it — she’ll wrap it up and ship it for me, we’ll have it by the week’s end!”

“Marvelous!” breathed Hermione, radiating the warmth of a solved problem. “Marvelous. In the meantime, we can work on our Patronus Charms.”

The air went out of Draco like a skewered zeppelin. “Our what?”

“Patronuses,” she said, scrawling something in her notebook. “We’ll be outside after dark, with no chaperone, and the dementors will be about. Sirius can cast one, but that’s only one, and it’ll be better if we all can… Harry, you said Lupin taught you to cast a Patronus, didn’t he? You did a solid-looking one at the Ravenclaw game.”

“I can do it alright, I guess,” said Harry sheepishly. “It’s not as good as his.”

“Well, it’ll have to be good enough,” said Hermione. “We can ask Lupin to help us, once he comes back, but there’s no sense in waiting. You can teach the rest of us, and we’ll practice that while the potion is brewing. I’ll make a list of all the things we have to do. Draco, you’ll write to your mother for the book this afternoon… we should start stealing the things we’ll need, it’ll look more suspicious if we try to smuggle it all in at once… we’ll have to get a spare kit from the Potions classroom, and a burner, don’t know how we’ll set that up in here…”

“What do you mean, in here?” demanded Draco. “We’re not doing it in the bathroom, are we?”

She blinked at him owlishly. “Where else?” she said. “There’s nowhere I can think of that’s as private, or as sterile. We certainly can’t do it in the Tower, someone would knock it over or try to drink it before the day was out.”

“But it’s a *bathroom!”*

“Yes, so?”

“For starters, it’s unhygienic, it’s humid, and it’s haunted, for Merlin’s sake.”

“You,” she said knowingly, “just don’t want to be seen coming and going from the girls’ bathroom.”

“Frankly not!”

“Tosh,” she said. “You’ll be fine. Use the Cloak. Harry, Ron, you’ll have to help us get the ingredients. The base for the brew is a standard Cosmetic Potion, so there’s some things I know we’ll need right off the bat. Lacewing flies, leeches, fluxweed, and knotgrass… I’ll make copies of the list.”

Harry said, “I don’t think I’ve been sold on the ‘not using Dark magic’ bit of all this, really,” but Hermione ignored him. She was writing with a haste fit to leave skid marks behind her the quill-tip, and her hair had started to drift out of its elastic in a static halo, a quirk of her excitement that was probably unconscious magic.

“It’s not Dark magic,” Draco told Harry. “If anything, it’s… gray magic. Silver magic, if you will.”

“But—”

“And,” he added, “if I’m lying, Potter, do you really want to know?”

“No,” said Harry frankly. “But the fact that the book’s coming from Snape doesn’t make me feel a lot better, either.”

“Yeah, but look at it this way. At least we’re doing it for a good cause,” said Ron easily, brushing off his knees as he stood up. “If it’s between this and a bloke getting the Dementor’s Kiss, I’m not bothered. Anyway, don’t worry, Harry. When the aurors come, we can always say these two told us it was a Pepper-Up Potion.”

They decided to wait until dinner to stage their first theft, hoping that anybody lingering in the classrooms would have been driven out by hunger or boredom. Harry and Hermione went to nick a Potions kit from the student cupboard in the Potions classroom — “Stuff it under your cloak, like you’re preggers,” suggested Ron — while Draco went to the owlery to write his mother, and Ron took up a watch outside Lupin’s door, in the hope of making contact with the

professor who (they reasoned) might well have just been out for an afternoon stroll. Agreeing to rendezvous at dinner, the four of them went their separate ways, and with all the enthusiasm Sisyphus felt for his rock, Draco hauled himself up the long, dismal stairs to the owlery.

Since the Ministry was screening his mail, he didn't fancy using Ulysses to carry the letter, but he didn't see any other choice. He couldn't explain to Snape the urgency of getting a missive to his mother on such short notice. So he scrawled out a letter that was as simple as possible: *Jasmines are having a good season this year. May I have my copy of Most Potente Potions? Extra credit project. Don't tell Uncle S, I want to surprise him.* He strapped it to Ulysses' leg and cast him out into the gloomy February fog.

His stomach noisily asserted its rights, and he made his way back down the stairs to the Great Hall. Near the foot of the great spiral staircase, the doors hung open, and a cluster of students had swept in from the cold, dusted with snow and whisking little snowdrifts into the hall around their ankles. Draco drew his cloak tighter around himself and curled his lip at the unwelcome intrusion of chill.

One of the students was Neville. He was trapped between Marcus Flint and Terrence Higgs, a pair of sixth-year Slytherins, who were amusing themselves with a game of murtlap-in-the-middle. Their toy was something small and mottled brown. Each time one of them tossed it, Neville gave a shrill squeal and went running after it, unaware or perhaps unwilling to admit that there was no possibility of him stealing it back. Despite the chill, his round face was splotched red and glossed with sweat. The Slytherins found this endlessly entertaining.

Draco had as much appreciation for a mean-spirited game of mockery as the next man, but watching them, he discovered that he had a significantly higher threshold for novelty. In first year, bullying Neville had been something of a school sport. By third year, he was astonished that none of the older students had found anything more important to do.

Fed up with waiting, and hungry besides, he drew his wand.

He threw a lazy slash of his wrist at Higgs, and the Body-Bind Jinx nailed him in the sternum. The boy's joints snapped into rigid formation, his expression locked in a comical gasp of surprise, and with a muted groan he tipped forward like a felled oak tree.

"Oi!" Flint fumbled out his wand and aimed it up the stairs. "What'd you do to Terrence?"

Draco gave him the sort of look that begged to know whether it was a sincere question.

Without warning, Flint threw a Stinging Charm up the stairs. Draco sidestepped it — it was really laughably easy, he didn't even think about a Shield Charm, it went so wide — and thought about trying the Banishing Charm Flitwick had introduced last week, but he recalled that Flitwick had been quite somber about the potential consequences of Banishing a living creature. He countered with a neat partial Body-Bind to Flint's ankles, and the boy, whose shot had already drawn him off his balance, tumbled onto his rear in a puddle of melted snow.

"Draco?" said Neville, a bit wondrously.

Draco sheathed his wand and stalked down the last stairs to the entrance hall. "Longbottom."

Neville had darted over and pried whatever it was they had been tossing from Higgs' rigid fist: coming closer, Draco saw that it was a toad. The poor creature was shivering violently in Neville's cupped hands. "Thank you," he mumbled. "I c-c-can't tell you how g-g-glad I am you s-stepped in. I didn't think Trevor could handle much m-m-more of that."

"Don't bleat. I wanted dinner, and you were in my way. You ought to do a better job of holding onto your pets."

“I t-t-try, honest.” He followed Draco into the Great Hall, cradling Trevor happily to his chest. “I was c-c-coming back from the greenhouses when they found me. They t-tried to take my Herbology notebook, but I t-t-told them they w-w-wouldn’t make any sense of it, and then Trevor got sc-c-ared by the shouting, and he jumped out of my b-b-bag.”

“And why the devil did you have your toad in your book bag?”

“He likes the humidity in the g-g-greenhouses.”

“He said so, did he?”

“Hagrid says it’s g-g-good for his skin.”

The mention of Hagrid did nothing for Draco’s mood. He snapped, “Then put him in a jar or something. I don’t know. After three years, you should have figured out—” He stopped. “Longbottom.”

“Yes?”

“You have access to the greenhouses?”

“All the teachers assistants’ do,” said Neville, blinking. “So we can check on the mandrakes. Why?”

Ten minutes later, he was whinging bitterly about the cold while Draco tapped his foot, waiting for him to unlock Greenhouse Three. The sun sank so early in February that it was already dark as midnight, and the snow fell in light flurries, crowning their dark robes with mantles of white.

“We’re really not sup-p-posed to be here after dark!”

“Don’t be such a ninny.”

A creak of glass-and-metal hinges announced Neville’s success. They hurried into the warm box of the greenhouse, whisking the door hastily closed behind them. Inside it was just as profoundly dark as

the outside, merely mustier, and full of the sticky-sweet smell of earth and chlorophyll and pollen. During the winter the greenhouses pumped heat magically through the flagstones, so the soles of Draco's feet marinated in warmth wherever he set them on the tile.

Within seconds, the snow on their shoulders had melted and soaked through their cloaks, dampening their hair. It made Neville's bowl cut, which Draco already considered the nadir of men's grooming, somehow even worse.

There was a snap, and a row of lightbulbs blazed along the line of the planters, filling the room with a red glow. Neville shucked his robe and tossed it over a chair near the doorway. He looped a weathered brown apron around his neck and fastened it behind the thick swell of his waist. "What are you l-l-looking for, again?" he said.

Draco fished the list out of his pocket and held it out between two fingers. Neville took it and drew a pair of reading spectacles out of his breast pocket, holding them at a distance from his face, like an opera spectator. It was a very pureblood gesture, in a way Draco couldn't quite explain; it was the same invisible print of class that shone through how one folded a pocket square, or carried their wand-holster. Draco remembered, with a bit of surprise, that the Longbottoms were one of the finest wizarding families around. Neville simply didn't make a production of it, because it wasn't his way.

"Lacewing flies, leeches," read Neville, squinting, "well we don't have those, they're not p-p-plants… fluxweed, knotgrass… oh, that's easy. I know where those are." He dropped the glasses to hang by a chain on his neck and bumbled cheerfully down the aisle, strapping on a thin blue glove of some strange rubbery material.

"So it's common, then?"

"Ooh, yes. *Descurainia pinnata* — though only potioneers call it 'fluxweed,' most people just say tansy mustard — grows like w-w-weeds. It's stubborn as an erumpet, practically won't die unless you

rip it up by the r-r-roots! And knotgrass is a perennial, so it's around all the t-t-time. How much do you need?"

"How much can you spare?"

"Not all of it," said Neville doubtfully, wiping his nose on his sleeve. "Sprout will nn-notice if there's some missing."

"Well, just say that you were trying to—"

He clapped his hands excitedly. "Never mind, I know! I'll say I used the fluxweed to make *khakshir.* It's this drink Romilda made for us the other d-d-day." He bent and examined the fluxweed plant, twisting one branch this way and that. "She gave us her d-d-dad's recipe, she says they make it all the time d-d-during the summer, it's actually quite refreshing. Did you know Romilda is great at Herbology? I hope she joins the TA group next year, Sprout likes her, too. I'm going to put in a good word… she's really clever, Rom-m-milda, b-but she doesn't think the other girls like her v-very much…"

Neville was talking more to himself now than to Draco, in the tone of someone used to muttering to themselves. While he talked, he carefully clipped a few sprigs of fluxweed from the small feathery plant. He tweezed them into a bit of cheesecloth in his other hand, and then stroked the plant he'd cut from, as if comforting it. In all this had the precision of a surgeon and the tenderness of someone changing a nappy.

Meanwhile, Draco was locked in a standoff with a wandering tendril of Venomous Tentacula. It was getting far too amorous with his ankles. He put a hand on his wand and glared it down, fully prepared to reassert his evolutionary prerogative.

"Longbottom."

"...fair to her, because Parvati really does try to include everyb-b-body — hm?"

“How on earth do you remember all that?”

“Remember what?” said Neville, folding up the clippings in cheesecloth.

“Which plant is which. And what it does, and what it’s called, and where it grows, and everything.”

“How do you remember all that stuff about p-p-potions?” said Neville philosophically. “I dunno. I’m not very smart, but I can take care of things. And I’m g-g-good at it, which means it must be pretty easy.” He patted the knotgrass plant and smiled.

Draco could not dwell on Neville’s wistful tone; he was locked in combat. He stamped hard on the flagstone, and the Tentacula whipped its tendril away just in time to avoid amputation by bootheel. “It’s *not* easy,” he said hotly. “It’s wretchedly hard. How should I know if a plant wants watering? Or fertilizing? Am I to ask it? It’s worse than Care of Magical Creatures, if you ask me.”

“B-b-but it tells you,” Neville said. “See, here? This droopy bit? That’s it telling you it needs some water. And when it gets these little spots on its leaves, it’s telling you it needs medicine. It’s d-d-dreadfully easy, once you know what you’re l-l-looking for.” He tied the cheesecloth with a bit of twine, handed it to Draco, and drifted further down the aisle of planters, speaking absent-mindedly over his shoulder. “Easier than p-people, anyway. With people you can *never* tell how to make them happy,” he said. “There are all these little rules that nobody tells you what they are, and if you don’t follow the rules then they don’t like you. A-and it doesn’t matter how n-n-nice you are or how hard you try to follow them… but plants are easy.”

The Venomous Tentacula flopped a tendril around Neville’s neck as he passed, apparently to attempt an affectionate strangulation, and he brushed it off with a fond pat.

“One supposes,” Draco said nervously. He had not come prepared for emotional disclosure, and now found there was no way of

extricating himself without coming across as uncouth or driving, alas, still deeper into the morass of Neville's feelings.

Neville, seeming to understand Draco's dilemma, shot a wry glance over his shoulder. "It's okay," he said. "We d-don't have to talk about it."

"Good," said Draco, relieved. "Decent of you."

"But I am glad that I g-g-get to help you, now," he added, plunging Draco back into discomfort. Gratitude was even worse than self-pity. He wished Neville would go back to moping. "After all the t-tutoring you've done for me. I don't really understand why you d-d-do that, when I'm s-such a t-t-t-terrible student."

Gruffly, Draco said: "Come off it, you're not terrible," but this was a bald lie. Neville giggled.

"It's okay. You've s-said so often enough, and I do listen, even if you think I d-d-don't. All I want is to get by an Acceptable on my O.W.L., and then I can drop it… My Gran s-s-says I shouldn't even bother to sit the O.W.L. in Potions. But they won't l-let you become an herbologist without at least an A."

"Why?" said Draco, intrigued.

"B-b-because herbologists and potioneers work together all the t-t-time," Neville said slowly, as though Draco were testing him. "Half the work herbologists d-d-do is for potion-making. It's even harder for potioneers, though; they have to take the Herbology O.W.L. *and* the N.E.W.T."

"They *do?"*

"Yes, of course," said Neville warily, as if he still thought he were being quizzed. "That's why it surprised me when you said you didn't like Herbology. I assumed you wanted to be a p-p-potioneer, since you're so good at Potions."

“I… I’ve certainly considered it.” He briefly imagined taking four more years of Herbology, and shuddered. “But what a stupid requirement. What’s the point of having herbologists, if you’re going to force your potioneers to do all their work for them? Utter waste of time.”

“I don’t know. I’m sure you’ll be good at it, though,” Neville said reassuringly. “Everybody knows you and Herm-m-ione will get top ranks in everything.” He folded up another sack of cheesecloth and gave it to Draco. “Besides, if you r-really hate it, maybe I can t-t-tutor you. As p-p-payback.” He grinned.

There was a long beat of silence. Neville, his smile fading, said timidly: “Only joking, Malfoy. Sorry.”

“That,” said Draco, “is — no. It’s fine, Longbottom.” He looked down at the bundles of cheesecloth. “I suppose I ought to thank you.”

Neville shrugged. “S’nothing,” he said. He began to polish his spectacles on his apron. “Really, I’m just g-glad to be helpful.”

“I,” said Draco, and paused. A heavy bolt of something sour was curdling in the bottom of his stomach. He tried again: “I think I may owe you… a concession.”

“A concession?”

“I’m *not* apologizing.”

“Okay,” said Neville, wide-eyed with alarm.

“But I think… that is, I believe it is possible, at times, over the past few years… before I had access to all the available information… I may have indeliberately — and, of course, non-maliciously — said things that implied you were unintelligent.”

“You called me a thick-skulled moron with pudding for brains.”

“You know, it’s perfectly tactless of you to see a man trying and throw it right back in his face—”

“But you were right. I am stupid,” said Neville, staring.

“No,” said Draco resignedly. “In fact not. What you are is uniquely and fatefully dreadful at Potions.”

There was a pause.

“Okay, I knew that, thanks.”

“But you are not,” he added, *“utterly,* all the time, a moron. No more than anyone else at this school, anyway. Which is not saying much.”

Neville’s face screwed up like he’d tried a staring contest with the sun.

“Well, thanks,” he said, sort of pleased, but mostly confused. “That’s awfully nice of you to say. Er — you’re not a moron, either.”

“Of course I’m not! Do you think I didn’t know that? Did someone say I was? Don’t answer that. And don’t look so cheerful. All this means is you haven’t got an excuse for switching the burner to the wrong setting, and before you say anything, *yes,* you very well did, and if you hadn’t then you wouldn’t have ended up with a cauldron full of muck, and Longbottom I swear to *Merlin* if you don’t wipe that smug look off your face I’m going to turn that toad into ribbons.”

By Tuesday morning, most people had noticed the Ministry officials lingering on the grounds long after the Minister had taken his leave.

“I thought they were supposed to leave days ago,” said Ginny impatiently. “What are they lurking around for?” She had been apprehended by an auror on her way to the Great Lake and ordered to explain her business outside the castle so close to curfew; she had thereafter received a harsh reprimand from Professor McGonagall for giving the answer of ‘streaking with Sirius Black.’

“They’re here for our safety,” said Percy severely. He flipped open his newspaper and gave it a significant-sounding rustle. “You ought to be grateful they’ve stayed as long as they have. Black has been on the lam for almost six months now; I shudder to think how Fudge would have handled the situation.”

Draco narrowed his eyes at Percy. The elder Weasley was spending an awful lot of spare time hanging around the Ministry workers, with whom he could occasionally be seen escorting around the grounds, or leading down various passageways in the castle. He always seemed to be in the middle of a long, pontificating speech about the castle history, interspersed with exclamations of: “And of *course,* as Head Boy, I could *also* show you…” and in general showed a humiliating level of ignorance as to his own obsequiousness. Whatever his game was, it appeared to be working, however: last week, Draco had spotted him sharing butterbeers with some of the aurors in Hogsmeade. He didn’t know if Percy knew he’d been seen, or if he cared.

“Isn’t Fudge in your party?” he said.

Percy rolled his eyes. He lathered his scone with blackberry jam in thick, brisk strokes. “Really, Draco. You of all people should know it’s perfectly reasonable to want to criticize members of your own party.”

“‘Of all people’?”

“Dad says it’s illegal,” fumed Ginny, massaging her wrist. She had spent three hours last night writing ‘I WILL RESPECT MY ELDERS’ for McGonagall, and a hand cramp had done nothing to improve her mood. “He says you can’t search a magical domicile without a warrant, and Hogwarts qualifies as a domicile for everyone in residence.”

“Yes, but you see, Ginevra, it’s also government property,” said Percy, in a tone so snide and simpering it made even Draco want to see him smacked. From Ginny’s glower, she was clearly willing and able. “The Ministry funds Hogwarts. Do you know people like you

and me wouldn't be able to attend Hogwarts at all, unless the Ministry stepped in? It'd only be people like—" And he nodded, less than subtly, at Draco. Draco saluted, ironically, and sipped his tea.

"That doesn't mean they get to barge in and ruin it!"

"Don't be so hysterical. They're not ruining it, merely keeping it safe. And besides, the Magical Security Act changed all of that rot about warrants last year, anyway. Or don't you remember? What am I saying, of course you don't. The Magical Security Act gives the Department of Magical Law Enforcement the ability to search, scour, or Trace any suspects charged with a crime. Now that Hagrid's been caught out in one — and really, what a shameful day for the school, to have a teacher hoarding contraband, in all my years at Hogwarts I've never been so embarrassed—"

"Quirrell had the Dark Lord *in his head,"* said Draco, but Percy ignored him.

"—naturally, the Ministry's entitled to be concerned. I mean, who knows what else he could be hiding in those woods?" Percy said, rhetorically, though Draco in fact knew the answer. He hoped Nott would stumble into a spider or two on his way in. "As the Minister says, if someone is willing to break one law, he'll break another…"

Dean Thomas lifted his head from his book. "Come off it, now," he said to Percy, in tones of gentle chastisement. "You don't really think Hagrid's done anything dangerous."

Draco, who was of the mind that 'something dangerous' happened every Care of Magical Creatures lesson, could list half a dozen things for Percy to mention. But Percy flushed and said, "I beg to differ. He's absolutely done something dangerous. He's threatened the rule of law."

"Yeah, and it was bloody cool," said Seamus sulkily. A box of his firecrackers had been confiscated the previous day. "They should go

on and leave him alone. He's my favorite teacher." Dean patted his leg in comfort.

"That's your own folly," said Percy peevishly. He had spent too much time scrubbing firework residue off the Gryffindor walls to have much sympathy for Seamus. "Frankly, I think Dumbledore should seriously consider replacing him. Let him stay as gamekeeper, if you must, but he's got no business being a professor. Did you know that Hagrid didn't even graduate from Hogwarts? He hasn't a N.E.W.T to his name. Everyone at the Ministry thinks he's a joke."

Ginny — who, between a sore hand, a sore pride, and a sore spot for condescension, had very obviously spent her last reserves of patience on Percy long ago — jumped to her feet. "Why do you care what they think? Everyone here thinks *you're* a joke," she snapped. "You're making a fool of yourself." She stood up, tossed her fiery hair over her shoulder, and stormed off to sit with Lavender instead.

Percy blinked. Briefly, he looked very hurt.

Then he glanced at Draco. "Children," he sighed.

Draco said merely "Hmm," and stirred his tea. He had no stake in Weasley family politics, and did not want one. He remained silent when Percy, after several minutes of no one talking to him, threw down his newspaper and stalked over to the Ravenclaw table to sit with Penelope.

News of the Ministry's snooping had evidently taken its toll on the teachers, too, for the following day they had their first lesson with Lupin since the Minister's visit. It was the first of Lupin's lessons to disappoint them. Instead of a field trip or a live demonstration, they filed into the classroom to find their desks arranged neatly in rows, with a small booklet atop each desk. Lupin leaned heavily on his desk, sallow-faced and almost blanketed by his traveling cloak, as tired as Draco had ever seen him.

Everyone understood at once what was happening, and several gave cries of disappointment or betrayal, for it had come to feel as though Lupin were not a teacher but a peer and friend.

“Yes, I’m sorry,” said Lupin good-naturedly, through the groaning. His voice was quiet and gravelly, and Draco mentally checked the calendar: the full moon had been several nights ago. “I’m afraid I let time get away with me, this weekend, and I haven’t got anything good planned. We’ll have a quiz today, and I’ll make up for it with something rather more interesting next time, I hope.”

Hermione, who ordinarily would have greeted this with cries of jubilation, did not even have the heart to celebrate. She finished her quiz in breakneck time, scribbling so quickly that the nib twice snapped off her quill, and then hurried to the front of the room. Draco, sensing that she had secondary motivations, scrawled out the last few answers and hastened to meet her.

“...didn’t know where you were, this weekend,” she whispered to Lupin in a low voice. “We tried to find you — to tell you — they’re searching the grounds, we think they’re going to find S—”

“Padfoot,” interrupted Draco, sotto voce. Hermione paled at her near-mistake, and flashed him a grateful look. “The Ministry’s going to find Padfoot. In a month, if not less. We’ve got to move him.”

“I understand.”

“...What do you mean, you understand?”

“Children,” said Lupin tiredly, “I appreciate your efforts and your worry. However, we are both aware of the problem.”

“You are?” said Draco. He paused. Then, more loudly: “Why didn’t you tell us, then?”

“Shh!”

He turned and saw Lavender Brown mashing her finger to her lips. He threw her a rude gesture behind his back, and she gasped.

Lupin murmured, “Find your seats. We will discuss this after class.”

“But Professor—”

“Professor Lupin?” Hannah Abbott approached his desk timidly, cradling her paper to her chest. “Can I ask you something about Question Three?”

“Certainly,” said Lupin warmly, turning to Hannah. “What’s the problem? …Ah, I see… With these kinds of questions, Hannah, there’s no one right answer; personally, I would take the vampire first, but as long as you demonstrate you’re thinking strategically…”

When the class was over, Hermione and Harry were the first out of their chairs. Unfortunately, they had to wait for the rest of the students to shuffle out entirely before they could speak to Lupin, who sagged visibly as soon as the last student went out the door.

“Professor Lupin, are you alright?” demanded Harry. He had spent the last half-hour of class tapping his foot frantically to vent all the anxious energy about him. “Where have you been? And when’s the last you heard from Sirius? He’s safe, isn’t he?”

In response, Lupin pointed his wand at the door, which closed, locked, and bolted itself. “Please keep your voice down,” he added, and Harry shrunk into himself, chastened. “I’m sorry to worry you. Sirius is quite well, or as well as he can be, under the circumstances; I visited him just last night.”

“So the Ministry hasn’t found him yet,” Hermione said, relieved.

“No.”

“Why haven’t you been around the castle?” Harry said pointedly.

Lupin rolled his wand between his fingers, an absent gesture. “I have made myself scarce,” he admitted. “I thought it was… a prudent move, given the circumstances. Dumbledore agreed.”

“Prudent how?” said Ron.

“Prudent insofar as I have no desire to subject myself to Ministry inspection.”

“Inspection?” said Hermione quickly. “What do you mean, inspection? You haven’t got anything illegal, have you?”

Lupin paused. “Hermione,” he said gently. “My existence is a crime.”

“No, it’s not!” she said hotly. “Nobody is a criminal for *existing,* that’s silly! And they haven’t got anything on you; you can’t tell when someone has lycan—”

“Lice,” Draco hissed. “You can’t tell when someone has *lice* by looking at them.”

Hermione grimaced, nodding. Lupin chuckled to himself softly.

“You can’t tell when someone has lice,” she continued, “no matter how much you search them. You’d need a blood test. Which they can’t take without a warrant.”

“Unless I’m charged with a crime,” he said calmly. “Like harboring a Death Eater, for instance.”

“Padfoot isn’t a Death Eater,” Harry gasped.

“Certainly not,” he agreed. “But the aurors will charge him as such, if they find him. Or if they find evidence of association.”

“Which they don’t have,” Hermione argued.

Lupin said, “Yet.” He rolled his wand out on his fingers, spun it, and caught it, all absent-mindedly. “The kind of secret that one cannot

keep from four thirteen-year-olds — albeit rather perspicacious thirteen-year-olds — does not strike me as particularly secure information."

"But that was only because we had the map," exclaimed Hermione. "Draco never would have seen you with Sirius, otherwise. If you just hide the map—"

"A good idea. However, I have found the map rather useful in my efforts to avoid crossing paths with the Ministry," said Lupin. "Particularly at certain times of the month… regardless, it doesn't matter. I appreciate your concern, you four, but really this is none of your business."

"None of our business?" Harry said incredulously. "None of our business? Sirius is my godfather!"

"Yeah, and my cousin," snapped Draco, who thought Lupin made a good point, but he wasn't about to leave Harry out to dry.

"And a thirty-four year old man," said Lupin calmly. "Who is more than capable of looking out for himself. Harry, your concern is noted and appreciated. Draco, so is yours. But it is not your lookout to fear for the fates of two men who have had more than enough experience taking care of ourselves."

"Yeah, right," said Ron sarcastically. "Mate's been in prison for thirteen years, I'm not sure 'looking out for himself' is his shout."

Lupin said stiffly, "We'll manage."

"But we have a plan!" said Hermione. "A good one! We figured out how to sneak Padfoot out of the Shack—"

"No," said Lupin sharply. "Absolutely not. You will finish out the year and attend to your studies. Padfoot and I have drawn more than enough of your attention away from what matters."

Her jaw dropped. “But—”

“What matters is *you,”* Harry said. His voice was strangled. “You and Sirius. I don’t give a damn about school. What do I care if I get an E or an A in stupid Divination, if you two aren’t — if you don’t—”

“Harry, we’ll be fine,” said Lupin. He rose to his feet, and in kinder tones, he said: “Padfoot and I will make arrangements as we must. Do us the favor of not underestimating us. In any case, if I allowed you to put your life at risk for mine, I do believe that the ghost of James Potter would rise up and trample me to death.”

They retreated, in various stages of resignation; Harry was not disappointed so much as angry, stomping and muttering down the long stairs to lunch. Meanwhile, Hermione had vaulted right over any emotional reaction whatsoever and into the planning phase, which was one of the things Draco cherished about her.

“We’ll just have to do it without him,” she said grimly. “If he’s not willing to help… damn. I wanted him to let us use the map. It would’ve made things so much easier.”

“That’s ironic, seeing as you wanted it confiscated,” said Ron pleasantly.

“That was ages ago! And this is much more important, can’t you see that?” She sniffed. “I don’t like breaking the rules,” she said. “And I’m not inclined to break them for no reason. But if there’s no way around it… and if there’s something more important at stake… well, just imagine what would’ve happened last year, if you hadn’t gone into the Forbidden Forest, for example! I might still be in the hospital wing. Or worse!”

Draco shivered. “Don’t go saying that, ‘or worse,’” he said irritably. “You make it sound like you might have died.”

“Paralysis often has complications,” she said matter-of-factly. “I was lucky to escape without nerve damage. Anyway, Harry, did you get

the boomslang skin? You did? That's excellent. We'll set up in Myrtle's bathroom later today during free period, but before that, I want to have a word with you about Patronus Charms…"

As they rounded the great staircase, they intercepted Theodore and Pansy, who were coming up from the dungeons. Theo greeted them with a broad wave.

"Afternoon, lions," he called. "Potter, Weasley, Granger... Draco. *Lovely* seeing you at the reception. Shame you couldn't stay for the discussion."

"I didn't know there was one," Draco lied. "I had a bad stomach. Had to run."

He and Pansy exchanged a glance. She lifted her eyebrow at him and looked away. He felt a pang of gratitude to her.

"Shame," repeated Theo blandly. If he could spot the lie, he didn't show it. "There's another one happening this Friday, you know. In the Slytherin lounge. Same invitation stands."

Draco's stomach flipped, hard. "Sorry, chap," he said coolly. "I've a prior obligation."

"Oh?" Theo yawned. Dark circles bracketed his eyes. "Ah, well. I'll give the Minister your regrets."

Ron snorted. "As if you're friends with the Minister."

"Closer to it than you are, Weasley. Or has your father made inroads in the Department of Whatsits and Doodads?"

"No," said Hermione suddenly. She turned to Draco and gripped his arm. Her fingernails left divots in his sleeve. "You don't. Remember? I had to cancel that study group, because of Lavender's birthday party."

Draco blinked at her. His mind pinwheeled like a cliff-diver in freefall. It was: (1) nowhere near Lavender's birthday, they (2) did not have a study group on Friday nights, and (3) if they did, Hermione certainly would not have canceled it for a birthday party, let alone (4) Lavender's.

"So you should go," she whispered.

"...You want me to—"

"You were just saying," she said loudly, "how much you liked the first one. It was the best party all year, you said."

Theo tilted his head, obviously pleased. "Did he really?" he said. "You old scrooge, you might have said so."

"So you really shouldn't let me stop you from going again." She squeezed his arm so tightly he gave a small hiss. "Don't. Let. Me. Stop you."

In her great brown eyes there was an appeal, as naked and earnest as he had ever seen, for him to trust her. He resisted it for several harrowing seconds.

"Alright. Fine. If you're… sure… you don't want to study."

"No. It's really alright."

He turned to Theo. "It appears my mind's been changed for me," he drawled. "I'll see you on Friday. Ta, Nott."

"Ta, Malfoy," Theo said cheerfully, and escorting Pansy by the arm, he went into the Great Hall. As they passed, Pansy twisted her head over her shoulder and sent Draco a querulous stare, as if to say: *And what was that about?* To which he could only shrug, for he honestly didn't know.

"Alright," he said, as soon as they were out of earshot. "That's my Friday evening shot, then. Granger, you'd better have an exceptional

reason—”

“But don’t you see it’s a perfect opportunity?” she said eagerly. “The Polyjuice Potion needs hairs from the people you mean to turn into, and students almost never get near Ministry officials unless they’re being searched. I’ve been wracking my brains for how to get them. And here comes Theodore Nott, handing you the perfect opportunity to get elbow-to-elbow a bunch of drunk Ministry men with their guard down!”

Reluctantly, he admitted she was right. Nevertheless, he sorely resented having his time volunteered so freely, as if he hadn’t anything better to do than whatever Hermione Granger told him to.

He *didn’t,* but she couldn’t be allowed to know that.

“Grand idea. I’ll just sidle up to Sibelius Nott and give his wig a good yanking— you know, most of them are wearing toupees anyway?”

“Hair gets everywhere,” she scoffed. “You can pick it off their robes.”

“Speak for yourself.”

She excavated her notebook from within her book bag and frantically scribbled in it. “You’ll want to take someone to help,” she said. “As backup, of course. Normally I’d go, but I’m right out, they won’t let me through the door. Harry would work, I suppose — Harry, you’re pureblood, aren’t you?”

Draco and Ron both made the same sort of pained equivocating noise.

“I’d go, but I don’t think most of them would be too happy to see me,” said Harry. “What with me being the Chosen One, and all.”

“Allegedly,” muttered Draco.

Hermione rounded on Ron. “Oh, but I’m so stupid! I’d forgotten! *You’re* a pureblood,” she exclaimed. “You could go!”

Draco and Ron exchanged a look of mutual understanding and disease.

“Hermione,” Ron began, “you’re not wrong, but… just because my mum and dad are both wizards doesn’t make me the sort that gets invited to these parties. I’m not a pureblood like Draco is.”

“Of course you are. You haven’t any muggles in your family, have you?”

“Not really, it’s — well, plenty of them, if you go back far enough, but that’s not really the problem.”

The twist of her mouth belied a deep skepticism. “So, to be clear,” she said, “these people aren’t just bigoted against muggle-borns, and half-bloods, and half-humans, *and* non-human sentient creatures, but even *among* purebloods, some of you just aren’t up to snuff?”

“You have to understand the way these things work,” said Ron, surprising Draco, who had assumed he would have to do the explaining. “It’s not about blood, right? I mean, you can’t get in unless you have the right blood, but once you’re there, it’s all about maintaining appearances. Using the right spoon, and the right titles, and bowing and arse-licking and all that rubbish. My family’s not like that, never has been. We like muggles, and muggle-borns, and it’s not as though we make any secret about it. Mum says she’d rather live in a hovel on ten galleons a month than have to put on airs and sneer at good people who never did nothing wrong.” He added, “Plus, we don’t have money.”

Draco said, without any particular pleasure, “That’s why they’re called blood traitors.” He paused, and in the ugly silence that followed, he felt pushed to add: “Obviously it’s not a pleasant thing to say, but it’s — it’s how they see them. People like the Weasleys, the Abbotts, the Lovegoods — the idea, which I don’t necessarily endorse, mind you, is that they’ve committed treason against their own kind.”

“That ‘kind’ being purebloods,” said Hermione shrewdly.

“Yes.”

Hermione chewed on her quilltip for a moment, thinking.

“Ron,” she said, “didn’t your mother say that you came from a pedigree? At one point, a long time ago?”

He scratched his head. “Er, kind of,” he said. “My mum’s descended from a Sacred Twenty-Eight family, but that’s my mum. The Weasleys haven’t been in good graces with the pureblood set for generations.”

“Sacred Twenty-Eight?”

“Wizarding aristocracy,” said Draco. “The top of the top of the pureblood set. The youngest bloodline in the Twenty-Eight is about two hundred years old.”

“The Malfoys are a classic Twenty-Eight family, for example,” said Ron, sticking his thumb at Draco. “And probably the oldest, too, right? Because the oldest family for a long time was the Blacks, but er, well…”

“I suppose we’re probably somewhere near there,” said Draco, trying not to preen.

Hermione drove a brutal line through something in her notebook and snapped it shut. “Well, that has to settle it,” she said, in businesslike tones. “Ron, you’ll go with Draco. You seem to understand all this much better than Harry or I, and you’ve got the best chance of not raising suspicions.”

“No,” said Draco patiently. “That was the whole point, he *isn’t* a proper pureblood. He’ll stick out like a big red thumb.”

“Thanks, mate,” said Ron peevishly.

“What? It’s true. *I* stick out,” he said, thrusting his finger at his own chest, “and that’s only because my tie’s the wrong color. The name ‘Weasley’ won’t get him past the bouncer.”

In fact, it probably would, since the bouncer was a three-foot house-elf that adored Draco with the passion of a hundred suns. Still, it wouldn’t get much farther.

“So you can’t use the name Weasley, of course,” said Hermione, as if it were obvious. “You’ll go under your mum’s name. The Twenty-Eight one. Prewett, wasn’t it?”

This took both Draco and Ron off-guard. “Um,” said Ron, “yeah, but the Prewetts are gone. Caputo. Extinct in the male line, just like the Blacks. Plus, these guys know my dad, they’ll see—” He waved his hand in front of his face, indicating his general Weasleyishness. “And they’ll clock me from a mile.”

“So we’ll dye your hair, and borrow concealer from Lavender,” she said impatiently. “Unless you want Draco to go it alone—”

“Which I could,” added Draco, mostly to defend his honor as a man. It would be hard to get hair from four different Ministry officials without raising suspicions. Having more hands would make the job easier, and besides that, he didn’t like the thought of going back to the League of Promising Youth by himself.

“—you’ll have to make it work. You can say you’re a new cousin they dug up somewhere,” Hermione said. “I’m sure these things happen all the time. And if any of them press you about it, you can say you’re illegitimate. That ought to shake them off your tail.”

Ron turned several shades warmer at the suggestion that he pretend to be a bastard.

“And I can come, under the Cloak,” added Harry. “As extra backup.”

Hermione beamed. “There you go,” she said. “See? It’s all coming together.”

“I want it said, for the record, that I was against this plan,” announced Draco. “And though nobody has asked for my opinion—”

“As if that’s ever stopped you,” said Harry, and was still giggling even after he caught a none-too-gentle chaser’s elbow in the ribs.

“—I will disclose, for posterity, that the chief fault of this plan is its reliance on Weasley pulling off a degree of subterfuge. We are wagering a large share of *my* dignity and *my* reputation on his being able to convince the snobbiest set of wizards Merlin ever made that he, Ronald Weasley, is the scion of a Sacred Twenty-Eight family. Are we holding our breath? I, for one, am not.”

“Nah, this’ll be easy,” said Ron, grinning. “I’ve been hanging out with you for three years. S’not hard. All I have to do is groan and whinge a lot, and I’m halfway there. ‘Eugh, Mummy, I said I wanted *three* castles for Christmas, not two! *Now* where will I put my swimming pool full of galleons?’ Throw on a cane and a monocle, I’ll be properly invisible.”

Harry and Hermione were now both snickering, though one made more of an effort to hide it than her counterpart. “Go on then, and try it, we’ll see how long it takes you to end up jinxed,” said Draco. Then he brightened. “On second thought, never mind. This is an excellent plan.”

-at this point I should just give up and admit that short chapters are not in my nature. i will give you ten thousand words or give you nothing we die like men

-from around book 2 all through book 7 hermione granger's personality becomes the world's most brilliant teenage tryhard fused with this specific clip. artemis fowl ass

-which is great because "or WORSE, EXPELLED" hermione is my number one babygirl forever but hermione "brews a Dark Arts potion in the third floor bathroom, cross me and it'll end up branded on your face, I'll steal a hippogriff and STILL make prefect, eat my ass" granger is my wife

-ron's idea of a "proper" pureblood wizard is scrooge mcduck

-sidebar: thank you for a really lovely reception to the last chapter, and recently in general! it's been very motivating! next chapter will go up next week. its title: "Operation Prewett."

Operation Prewett

Chapter 26: Operation Prewett

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The weekend after Valentine's Day, a package came for Draco in the morning mail. Ulysses dropped it in Draco's lap and alighted primly on a roast ham, giving Colin Creevey such a fright that he toppled back off the bench.

It was wrapped in gold foil, and tied with an emerald ribbon.

Dear Draco,

Hello, my sweet one! Mummy is very sorry she has been so absent these few months, but she has been most preoccupied with her travels. Did you know that Briselda can carry absolutely marvelous amounts of luggage on her back? Rather like a pack animal! Really, we should have started using human help years ago. And she can be quite hilarious, too!

I attached the book you asked for. It did take some doing to find it; the library has grown sulkish and temperamental for lack of use. You know how magical libraries like to hoard their treasures. But be proud of me, dear one: I stood fast and threatened quite meanly to auction it all off to a public charity unless it shaped up and gave me what I wanted, and it snapped to attention (although I think it tossed a volume of my favorite romances into the Biography section, so I doubt I shall see them again). Your father always said the way to deal with a library was like dealing with a dog: you have to hold your ground and remind it that YOU are its master. Otherwise it will run all over you and never give you what you want and you will end up reading Proust for the rest of your days.

A surprising batch of white roses have bloomed under the willow tree. The narcissus are flourishing. They take so well to Briselda's care.

I love you more than tea and champagne and porcelain and silk pillowcases, my little crown jewel of all worldly pleasures.

All my heart,

Mummy

P.S. I was so proud to hear you're already into advanced brewing; Moste Potente is a classic! *Did you know my Aunt Walburga was something of a potions mistress herself, before she wed? Perhaps I can scrounge up some of her old recipes for you, once I have rested from my bout with the library. XOXOX.*

"Is that what I think it is?" said Hermione, peering over Draco's shoulder. "Ooh, it is! Give it here — let me see—"

He slipped it behind his back and caught her groping hand. "Manners, now. It's *my* property, remember. I'll have the first look."

"Fine!" she said impatiently. "But look quickly."

From spite, and also from the desire to see what her face would look like when he did it, he nestled the package into his book bag and went back to his omelet.

Feeling her daggered stare on his cheek, he murmured, "I'm not going to open that thing at the Gryffindor table, are you mad? It's a Dark book. If a teacher sees it, the game's up, and I personally don't feel like making a charitable donation to the Minerva McGonagall Fund for Confiscated Materials today."

Hermione wrestled with the tactical wisdom of his decision, which warred terribly with her own desire to hoover up all information as soon as possible, like a fuzzy-haired Charybdis.

“Hurry, then,” she urged, and perhaps feeling the need to demonstrate what hurrying looked like, she shoved a whole wedge of toast in her mouth at once. She shoved her plate away and leapt up from the bench. “There’s no time.”

“To do what, digest?” he said, appalled. Two seconds and a rather unsporting yank on his collar later, he was scrambling up from the bench, muttering: “Fine! We’re going! Don’t mind me, I’ll just starve, I suppose.”

At which point an apple came winging over her shoulder and nearly whacked him in the eye.

Back in the bathroom, they set up a portable cauldron and some stools. The location of their setup had been the subject of much bickering between the potion-makers of the party. Draco insisted that a windowsill would provide more ventilation, which would become crucial in the not-unlikely event that something went wrong, and they found themselves whiffing lungfuls of toxic fumes; Hermione, who was many parts less concerned with either of their safety than he, countered that the temperature would vary too widely between day and night; they compromised on a sheltered alcove in the corner of the chamber, where the cauldron could sit just out of the sun, and Draco could reach the window with a well-placed *Bombarda* if he needed to.

“Now this has to brew for eighty minutes,” read Hermione. She held *Moste Potente Potions* cracked open between her crossed legs, which, Draco thought idly, would have given Snape an absolute conniption if he’d ever seen it.

They had breezed through the first step of the brewing. The copy of *Moste Potente,* being secondhand, had all sorts of little scrawls and notes in the margins, some of which were illegible or obscure, but

Draco found that many of them were quite helpful. One note about grinding the lacewing flies with some nettle dust had saved them an hour of stewing time; another note, with reference to the best knife work techniques for leeches, had not improved the potion per se but led to greatly reduced mess during prep, which he appreciated, since Hermione still made him do all the butchery. Whoever had been writing the notes had an extraordinary knowledge of potioneering and a willingness to experiment: some of the notes were struck through, a few more violently than others, or given addendums such as: *Didn't work,* or *Not helpful,* or once, simply and alarmingly: *DON'T,* thrice underlined.

He had suspected the notes were Snape's, but the man's name appeared nowhere on the book; the plate on the inside cover said only *H.B.P.,* which gave him little help in the way of identifying the previous owner.

"The lacewing flies we'll have to do after Potions, once Harry and Ron get back from the stores," Hermione said, flipping ahead. "Do you think maybe one of us ought to stay and watch it?"

Draco, who lay sprawled-out and drowsing in the pool of sunlight, rolled up on one elbow to see if she was serious. When he saw she was, he cracked a smirk. "Hermione Granger," he said, "are you suggesting we play *hooky?"*

She turned a shade of pink he had rarely seen outside of rouge advertisements. "Well," she said, with adorable wretchedness, "I don't like it, but yes! Just for the potion's sake. We can do our best to secure the bathroom, but a teacher could still come in, or a prefect, and frankly, I don't trust Myrtle, either."

As if on cue, the toilet gave a sour rattle, and a jet of water spurted from the stall. Draco, who was still acclimating to the sensation of being surveilled by a nosy bit of septic engineering, said sharply: "Mind your own business, would you? *Silencio,"* and the stall fell silent with a lonesome gurgle.

“We’d have to take turns,” Hermione added. “If we don’t want the teachers to suspect.”

“They’ll suspect something if you miss *one* class. I expect some of them will reasonably conclude you’ve been killed. Do you have any idea who you are?”

“Yes, I thought of that! And I don’t want to miss classes, obviously! But *you* can’t stay here all the time,” she objected. “That’s not fair.”

“I appreciate the even-handedness, but in all candor, I had no intention of volunteering myself to remain captive in a bathroom. Such selflessness lies outside even my considerable powers of generosity.”

She snorted at the word “considerable,” which he resented deeply.

“So what’s your suggestion, then?” she asked. “Let it sit here?”

“No,” he said thoughtfully, lacing his hands behind his head. He laid back and wriggled comfortably on the warm stone, closing his eyes. “That won’t do.”

“So why don’t you help me come up with something, instead of lazing about over there?”

“I’m thinking,” he yawned. “It takes effort to perform this sort of profound cognitive activity. Haven’t the strength to do that and sit up at the same time.”

“Sometimes,” she said, more amused than irritated, “it amazes me that we make the same grades.”

“Me, too. Must make all that studying feel like an awful waste of time.”

He could hear her smiling. “It might, if I didn’t know your secret,” she said. “I’ve never understood why you like to pretend you don’t study.

Being apathetic isn’t half as impressive as all the work you actually do.”

It did not please him at all that she thought he was impressive; in fact, he couldn't care less. He repeated this to himself several times, so as to commit it to memory.

“Au contraire, *mon swot.* What are people to envy me for, if I don’t make it look effortless?”

“You think people envy you, do you?”

“Of course they do. I’m wonderful.”

“And you like that? Feeling like people envy you?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

She hesitated. He slitted open one eye and angled it meaningfully at her.

“Being envied doesn’t make people like you very much,” she admitted, giving the potion a whisk to clear some residue at the bottom. “From experience.”

“So? That’s their affair,” he said indifferently. “They want what I have. And why shouldn’t they? *I’d* want it, if I didn’t have it. There’s nothing worth having that someone else doesn’t want to take. Just don’t let him take it, and you’ll be fine.”

Hermione’s brows became a little brown caterpillar that wriggled more suspiciously with every word. “I don’t think Crabbe and Goyle want what you have,” she said carefully. “For example.”

“Are you joking? Of course they do.” He sat up and braced himself on his elbows. “There’s nothing they have that I haven’t got better, plus more. I’ve got a better bloodline, a bigger house, a bigger fortune, I’m better-connected, I’ve got better looks—”

“It’s a wonder they don’t like you,” she muttered.

He went on, counting off on his fingers, in part because he knew it was obnoxious. “More charming, more intelligent, better grades, better friends — see, you’re not denying it — not to mention I’m better at sports, *and* I’ve got better hygiene than a mountain troll. If they don’t envy me, they need to have their heads checked.”

“Really, Draco. One would think you’ve never had a self-conscious thought in your life.”

“That’s easy, I haven’t,” he said cheerfully. “Whenever I feel sorry for myself, I simply remember that I’m marvelous. You ought to try it sometime, it might cheer you right up.”

“Remembering that I’m marvelous?” she said, a bit distracted by adjusting the burner temperature.

“No, that *I’m* marvelous. You know, as a source of inspiration, or something.”

The wad of paper that smacked him in the head was not particularly surprising, though he was rather impressed by the precision of its aim.

“None of this solves the problem of who’s to watch the potion,” she said, chewing her lip. “Maybe we could set up a rotation? I’ll take one class, then you, Harry, Ron…? I could always ask Myrtle nicely, but I really don’t trust her.”

“Nonsense. I know.” He sat all the way up and stretched. “We’ll ask Dobby.”

“Oh! Now *that’s* a good idea,” she said, with frankly insulting levels of relief, “but are you sure he’ll do it? Can you summon him and ask?”

“Can’t, he’s not my elf anymore. He wouldn’t hear me.” He amended, “But I can pop down to the kitchens and ask him, and he’ll do it for

me as a favor, I'm pretty sure. We can always get him a scarf or something as payment."

"He should be paid in galleons—"

"Which he *is,* thank you."

"—but aside from that, it sounds fine," she sniffed. "If he checks in every hour or so, that should be enough. I'll feel much better knowing that nobody will wander in."

Indeed, Dobby was happy to watch over the potion, with or without the promise of knitwear that Hermione offered. It gave him special delight to think that he might be helping Draco perform an important operation for one of his friends; they did not tell him what the potion was for, but assured him that it could very well save somebody's life.

"Saving the life of a wizard!" said Dobby. His eyes had reached sizes previously regarded by magizoologists as theoretical. "Dobby could be a hero? Like Mister Dumbledore?"

"Well," said Hermione doubtfully, "in a manner of speaking, I suppose..."

"Yes," Draco interrupted. "Absolutely the same. They'll probably give you a chocolate frog card."

"You shouldn't lie to him," Hermione complained, after Dobby had fallen into spasms of excitement and then scurried off to perform his duty. "Just because he's not a human doesn't mean he's stupid."

"No, the fact that he's *Dobby* means he's a bit stupid."

"Don't be mean."

"I didn't say it to his face, did I? Anyway, I lived with him for twelve years, I should know. He's a good little creature, and I'm fond of him, but you know full well that he's two sickles short of a galleon."

“He has a big heart,” she said stubbornly.

“Simply tremendous,” he agreed. “It takes up half the space for his brain.”

If Draco had dreamed that the long waiting periods required for the Polyjuice Potion would be spent idly or at rest, he was rudely awoken. When they weren’t in classes, in Myrtle’s bathroom, or asleep, they were in an abandoned Charms classroom on the fourth floor, learning Patronus Charms from Harry. Mealtimes, recesses, and study halls were sacrificed to this dubious goal, which subjected Draco to far more emotional scrutiny than he thought appropriate, necessary, or dignified. At the beginning of each interminable period of torture, his tutor would produce a model Patronus in the vague form of a quadruped, while Draco’s own wand refused (understandably, he thought, in bitter solidarity with it) to produce more than wisps of fog.

“A happy memory, Draco, a happy one,” was the constant exhortation, as if he didn’t damn well know what a happy memory was. “Something from your childhood, something simple and easy, come on…”

On the few days when he managed, stiff-jawed and white-knuckled with effort, to summon a gust of macilent mist, he was immediately shown up by Ron. After hearing Harry describe the spell once, he nodded, screwed up his face in concentration, and let out a wary: “Er. *Expecto patronum,”* and summoned a dense white clump of *something* that pranced boastfully around his ankles until Draco called him a showboat.

As for Hermione, whose idea the whole thing had been in the first place, she was mysteriously absent from Harry’s lessons. Oh, she had come to the first one all right, and listened with breathless fascination to Harry as he described the theory of the charm and its uses. But after several dozen attempts at casting a Patronus ended in harmless white shimmers, she had turned pink in the face,

stomped out of the room, and declined to return even on Harry's invitation. This was a small mercy to Draco, who did not have to try nearly so hard in her absence, and a greater mercy to Ron, whose relative ease in producing a Patronus gave her an obvious and sore temptation to strangle him.

Harry admitted to Draco in confidence that she had asked him to teach her separately.

"She doesn't get it, I reckon," he said. "It doesn't come naturally to her. And she's used to everything coming naturally, so it feels like she's failing in it. That's her problem, really; she focuses too much on doing the spell *right,* and not enough on actually *doing* the spell."

"I'm sure that made sense somewhere in that scar-addled head," mumbled Draco, mopping his brow with a handkerchief. Ron was busy trying to get his fuzzy white creature, whatever it was, to go fetch a rubber ball.

"It's just that there's no right way to be happy," said Harry. He passed Draco a flagon of water, which Draco gratefully drank. "The memory isn't even really the crucial bit, says Lupin. It's the feeling that's important. And that's what's hard about doing it in front of the dementors, too. You've got to feel joy, *really* feel it."

"Yeah," agreed Ron. "It's hard to explain. It's like… this warm thing, coming up from your belly. And then you have to push it through your wand, sort-of. And then you get this white stuff, which I — oi," he said, when Harry and Draco started snickering. "Laugh it up! It's true, though. I thought it might help to hear how it feels from someone else who's actually done it."

"Thanks," said Draco rudely, and Ron, hearing his tone, wisely turned around and went back to practicing.

"You know, I thought about that," said Harry in a lower voice. "I don't know why you're having so much trouble with it. It kind of surprised

me. Hermione I thought might have a problem, but I didn't think you would."

This, from Harry, was rather like a bowtruckle telling you it was disappointed you hadn't memorized the *Grammatica Arcana.* "It's not like you to be a bad sport, Potter," he said indignantly. "And for a third year trying to pick up a fifth year spell from another third year, inside a week, I think my performance has been remarkable. And here's another thing. *I* don't go around asking *you* why you haven't made a better showing in Potions."

"No, no, I'm not trying to rub it in!" he said earnestly. "I really did think you'd get it quickly. You use your wand more than any of us. Even more than Hermione, with all her practicing. And I thought, because you and Ron both grew up around magic, you have this sense for it that Hermione and I don't. So the Patronus would be easy."

"Weasley must simply have a more joyful disposition than the rest of us," Draco said, still unconvinced that Ron had not somehow cheated.

Harry made a thoughtful sound. "Ron is pretty cheerful," he said. "I mean, he's always said he was fairly happy, growing up. I suppose that's probably part of it. He's got a lot of good memories to draw on."

The implication, which appeared to drift freely over his thick skull, was that neither he nor Draco had the same. Which Draco resented, if for no other reason than that it cast a terrible reflection on his mother.

"And you've had such a happy childhood, have you?" snapped Draco. Harry went stiff, and Draco spent the ensuing moment of silence counting the potential uses for magical time travel, e.g., not putting one's foot in one's mouth, ever; not revealing, by accident, a profound lack of tact, kindness, or practical intellect; and also never having to apologize to one's friends.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “Below the belt.”

“It’s okay. You’re right, too, the Dursleys are awful.” Harry gave a flagging half-smile. “When I’m trying, I think about quidditch.”

Draco contemplated this. He had been using the memory of an early Christmas with his mother and father at the Manor, one of the few he could remember. He thought it best to reach as far back as possible, so that there weren’t any complex feelings about Hogwarts mixed-in. And it *was* a happy memory: they had curled up together on the divan by the fireplace, and gone through all their Christmas cards, and laughed at the tacky ones. His father had read to him from Euripedes Gaunt’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Pureblood Dynasties* while his mother played piano. Dobby had brought biscuits and hot cocoa. It had been snowing; he remembered it clearly, years later, as one of the best days of his life.

Of course, that was before Dobby was freed. Which was — distracting, now that he thought about it. Hard to think about the memory of Dobby bending and scraping without wincing, internally, at the needlessness of it. Not that it had been Draco’s fault, of course. He had been a small child. He wasn’t to know that there was anything wrong with having a house-elf. Even so.

He curled his lip. It wasn’t *his* fault that Dobby hadn’t been freed yet. It was still a good memory. He’d been happy. He could *remember* being happy. If it wasn’t good enough, what was he supposed to do about it? Were all his memories before Hogwarts sullied? He might as well give up, then, because after coming to Hogwarts, everything was too complicated to possibly be of use.

“You don’t have to be sorry for me,” said Harry, which was unexpected for Draco, who had mostly been feeling sorry for himself. “It’s not as bad as that. It’s only a few months every summer, and then I get to come here. That’s enough happiness for anyone. And Dudley was jealous as anything when he heard I got to fly.” He rubbed his mouth, as if to scrub away a smile he was not proud of,

but he failed. “I told him that he could use Petunia’s Swiffer, he just had to jump high enough. Milked that one for about a week.”

“Your situation baffles me.” Draco stood and massaged the sore tendon in his wand-arm. “You loathe them whole and entire. Why go back?”

“Because Hogwarts doesn’t run summer school?” Harry said, amused. “Where would I go? They’re the only family I’ve got.”

“Oh, please. You know if you asked Granger, she’d be happy to host you. Or even Weasley, though Merlin knows where they’d put you.”

“I couldn’t do that to them! I couldn’t ask their families to take me in.”

“You think they’d rather you live in misery for three months?”

“It’s not miserable,” lied Harry, who himself had called it miserable too many times to mention. “It’s only three months. And… maybe it won’t be forever. I mean, a lot can change in the next four years.”

Draco paused and lowered his wand. That was oddly prescient, for Harry.

“You’ve considered Lupin,” he guessed.

A streak of guilt crossed Harry’s face.

“You’ve *spoken* to Lupin,” Draco said in surprise. “That’s why you’re so chummy. Has he offered?”

“No,” he said shyly, averting his eyes. “He says he can’t make any promises. I didn’t ask him, really, but I was having dinner with him and Sirius one day, and Sirius just… said it.”

“He suggested taking you in? Sirius Black?”

“Yeah. After his name’s cleared, I mean, he couldn’t do anything until then. So it would probably be a year, maybe more. But he said that

once he was free, and once he found a place to stay, he'd come get me. If that's what I wanted."

He was trying and failing to hide a wondrous smile.

"And what would Dumbledore have to say about that?"

Harry's smile disappeared. "Probably he wouldn't like it," he admitted. "He thinks I should stay with my aunt and uncle. But Sirius said that I could stay with them for a few weeks, days maybe, just so Dumbledore would be happy. There's this blood protection thing, apparently, that's tied to my mum… I don't understand it, but Sirius says he could protect me better than the Dursleys could. And I reckon that's right, isn't it? He's a wizard, after all."

"Sirius Black," said Draco, dry as parchment, "has half of Azkaban's security out hunting for him."

"He won't always, though," said Harry stubbornly.

"Sure. Right. Revised: Sirius Black is a homeless man, and most of the world thinks he killed your parents. At what point does he expect to be gainfully employed?"

Harry dodged these reasonable points like a man on the run from a hail of arrows. "So what?" he insisted. "So what if he hasn't got a — a flat and a corner office? Maybe I'm alright with that. I don't mind having to be on the move, and it'd be pretty exciting, anyway, getting to travel."

"You are not seriously contemplating going on the run with this man."

"Lupin would come with us," said Harry in a small voice. "It'd be safe."

Draco could see, for one horrible moment, the world that Harry was imagining. What's more, he could feel what was alluring about it: two parents, loving and fierce. A place you could come home to.

Unbidden, he envisioned Malfoy Manor in wintertime, a snowy tableau of brick and glowing windows, with his father waiting beside his mother on the steps.

For that reason, and the profoundly uncomfortable volumes of pity that were flooding his endocrine system, he said only: “Your funeral, Potter. Don’t come crying to me when you’re having cigarettes for dinner.”

The last week of work on the potion snuck up behind Draco and caught him like a bludger to the head. He and Hermione worked through every meal period for a week on the Polyjuice, which had turned the color of mud, and the viscosity of pus, and with each day Draco found more and more reasons to dread ingesting it. In order to make the hours of tedium spent simply stirring the damn cauldron bearable, he had brought his wireless speaker into Myrtle’s bathroom, and they played some of the new cassettes he’d gotten for Christmas: bands that she found in muggle stores over the summer, Stone Temple Pilots, Third Eye Blind, Echo and the Bunnymen. He even grew to enjoy some of those afternoons in the bathroom, lying in a pool of sunlight while Hermione took her turn stirring, listening to the strains of muggle strings and synths ricochet through the stone chamber. *Under blue moon I saw you, so soon you’ll take me…*

Hermione had picked over his engineering on the magical wireless and with reluctant astonishment pronounced it sound. She said he had made an utter hash of the wiring, and she hadn’t the foggiest idea how he managed to welt magic with muggle technology without short-circuiting the battery, but it undeniably worked. “Not that it should,” she said, jabbing at the batteries suspiciously with her wand. “I don’t know how you ripped out as much as you did without damaging it, but I suspect it’s being held together by whatever battery of charms you used on it.”

“Tosh. See? Muggle technology’s not so complicated after all.”

“You should show this to Seamus,” she added. “He’d love it. He’s always trying to find a way to make things louder.”

“Are you mad? I like it intact, thank you.”

On Friday afternoon, he left his post by the cauldron to Hermione and went up to the Gryffindor boys’ dorm with Ron, where he spent a baleful half-hour excoriating every article of clothing in the boy’s closet.

“Merlin’s bones, don’t you have a single shirt that isn’t wrinkled? Don’t answer that. I won’t even bother asking about a dinner jacket, I’m not that green. You’ll have to wear your uniform. I’ll loan you a jacket, so you don’t look like some panhandler I picked up from a shelter. Do yourself a favor and don’t spill anything on it, I don’t think your family can afford a second mortgage.”

He turned and gave a squawk of horror. “What are you doing?”

Ron paused, his Gryffindor tie looped in a loose knot around his neck. “My tie?” he said slowly. “For the prissy suit you’ve got? You’re wearing one.”

“You’re not wearing it that way!”

“...No, I am,” said Ron, after a furtive pause in which he appeared to decide it was a trick question.

With a heavily put-upon sigh, Draco tugged out Ron's tie. Ignoring Ron's sound of protest, he began tying it himself. “Welcome to Society, Weasley,” he sniffed. “If you wear a tie, you wear a Windsor. Acceptable alternatives include, but are not limited to: the Balthus, the Eldredge, the Trinity, or, if the occasion permits, a cravat. But under no circumstances should you appear in a half Windsor, Prince Albert, or, God forbid, a four-in-hand.”

“You made some of those up,” accused Ron.

Draco massaged the bridge of his nose. “This is going to work,” he said. “This is going to work, because it has to work, because I refuse to endure the *abhorrent* levels of humiliation I will undergo if it doesn’t. Do you hear me? I refuse.”

“Embarrass *you?”* said Ron indignantly. “My hands are still blue from that box-dye, and I'm wearing more of Lavender’s makeup than she is. ’Sides, my complexion’s not meant for black hair, I look like a ghoul.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” said Draco. “It’s good enough to be getting on with. Come along, then, Prewett.”

This time, the lecture hall had been draped in Transfigured diamonds and was lit by the blaze of two dozen bronze sconces. Purple-and-gold paper lanterns drifted in packs like wild birds, bespelled to give off the scent of lilacs. There were fewer Ministry officials, but more students, and the energy in the room was higher than it had been the previous night. An expectant excitement ran through the crowd like an electric pulse, transmitted by the hardly-concealed whispers of eager children, trading rumors and champagne glasses like candies on Christmas morning.

Draco noticed Snape’s absence. He presumed that Snape had more important things to do than frequent parties meant primarily for children, and in truth, he was relieved not to see his godfather. Keeping Ron’s familiar visage away from Snape’s prying eyes had been his chief fear going into the evening. He was preoccupied with other, more important things, such as: keeping Ron’s familiar visage away from the eyes of anyone else who might recognize him. His vertical aptitude made this a problem. There simply were not many Slytherins as tall as Ron. This was an observation that Draco had made privately, the once, and Ron had made loudly, many times.

“Blimey, this is posh,” mused Harry’s voice. Draco mustered all his powers of cool and impassivity not to jump out of his mortal skin. “Is this what it’s like in Slytherin? You throw big parties and hobnob with prats?”

“How should I know? Half of my house couldn’t spell ‘hobnob’ with two hours and a dictionary.” Draco was trying not to move his lips. “Try not to talk. Someone could hear.”

“So what, I’m invisible,” said Harry, and, as if to prove his point, stole a canapé.

“Try *also* to not do things that make me want to perform arcane violences on your person.”

“That’s everything I do, isn’t it?”

“Yes, you’re starting to get the idea.”

It was admittedly pleasant to see Ron squirm. Every time a group passed by, their eyes did the old seesaw up-and-down of his person that Draco had so dearly come to enjoy, for in his case it was often followed by the classic eyebrow-jump and head-bob; in Ron’s, however, it more often preceded a discerning squint-and-scowl, or worse, the suspicious double-take. Ron gulped and reached for his tie knot, only to be dealt a fierce smack to his hand.

“Don’t you dare.”

“It’s tight!”

“Good. The better to throttle you with, if you mess this up.”

The band was playing something slow and sleepy that even the most excitable students deemed un-dance-worthy, so the crowds had clustered in little geodes of conversation around the sides of the room.

“You came!” cried Professor Slughorn when he saw Draco. “Dear boy! Such a pleasure to see you again. I must introduce you to my friend Lord Thicknesse. He’s a premier undersecretary to my dear absent friend Barty. You’ve heard of Barty, I’m sure? Crouch? Of

course, not many haven't, he's simply one of those men. And who is this?"

Ron was too well-trained in the art of weathering Percy's bluster to bat an eye at this barrel-dump of irrelevant information. He turned to Draco and cleared his throat, which was the agreed-upon sign for: *Do I sneer at this person or simper?*

Draco clicked his tongue, and Ron arranged his face into the weakest, most un-hateful impression of a scowl that Draco ever had the pleasure of not being offended by. He was doing something with his eyebrows that made Draco want to shave them off and burn them at the risk of ever seeing it again.

"Professor, this is Lancel Prewett," said Draco. He himself indulged in a bit of show-offery with a designer expression from the Malfoy boutique of exquisite sneers — a scalding curl of his lip that in only a flicker of movement conveyed the vast gamut of scorn, indifference, and resentment at the indignity of being forced to expend oxygen on someone of so little consequence.

Slughorn's eyes slithered over Ron in a swift appraisal. "No relation to Ignatius Prewett, surely?"

"Yeah," said Ron, too quickly. "He's my great-uncle."

"By marriage?"

"Er — no, the other thing."

"Blood," Draco said sharply. "He's the blood son of Gideon Prewett. Professor, do you remember Gideon? You must have taught him, he was in your time."

"Now there was a wizard, Ignatius," said Slughorn, already distracted by whatever he had thought of to say next. "Quite the specialist in Charms. A talent! But the real prize was his wife. A rare match,

volatile, but so much promise… a real shame they never had children…”

Harry coughed, and Draco took Ron by the shoulder. “Fascinating,” he said firmly, in tones that admitted no fascination whatsoever. “Truly. Professor, you must excuse us. As you can deduce by looking at him, Lancel has a condition, and if he doesn’t ingest a liter of champagne every twenty-four hours, he’ll faint dead away. Come, Lancel.”

“Yes,” said Ron. “Champagne. Dizzy. Goodbye.”

The food table had been festively burdened with little trays of crab puffs and stuffed peppers, sandwiched inside a flock of snow-white napkins folded, perhaps a touch too realistically, in the shapes of swans. A trio of Ministry workers sat at a table off to the side near the dias, each dangling a flute of champagne from their fingers as if it were too cumbersome to flex the muscles in their hands. They were Orpheus Greengrass, Sibelius Nott, and Prescott Parkinson. Only Sibelius appeared to be having a good time; the others were bored and restless, as any adult at a party populated mostly by children ought to have been. Their conversation was occasionally interrupted by the approach of a boil-faced teenager, heart in hand, who desired to swoon or bootlick one of them. These were dismissed with the very lower bound of civility and sent unceremoniously away.

“They’re almost the only Ministry people here,” whispered Harry. “Where are the others?”

“Gone, I expect,” Draco said grimly. “Why would they stick around? The Minister’s not here, so what do they care?”

“But why are *they* still here, then?”

“Because of their children,” he said, with a chill pang of understanding. “That's Greengrass and Parkinson. And Nott, of course, but we knew he’d be here already. Bet you anything they’re all here tonight.”

“But that’s everything shot, then. They all know me.”

“Calm down, W— Prewett. For one, I highly doubt any of them will recognize you. You look good and awful, there’s a chance they’ll try to avert their eyes from politeness.”

“I danced with Daphne at the twins’ Christmas party! She knows what my face looks like, knobhead!”

“You are at far greater risk of being found out by using the word ‘knobhead’ than you are by the miraculous possibility that someone like Daphne Greengrass even remembers you.”

At this, the malevolent puppeteers in control of Draco’s fortunes gave a gleeful yank of the strings, and someone like Daphne Greengrass herself came limping into the room.

She wore a shimmery skirt in blue so pale it glowed silver under the lights, like its silk had been spun by someone thinking very hard about an untouched bowl of pigment somewhere to the left. Over this she wore a white fur stole of tremendous size that enveloped her whole bodice, a commitment of enough fabric to martyr at least two polar bears, and she wore her hair loose down one shoulder in a billow of yellow curls. She was the kind of beautiful that made everyone else in the room feel a little hopeless and miserable about their own life prospects. This was doubtlessly the desired effect, and Draco respected her for it.

In her left hand she wielded a silver cane long enough to hide a dueling sword. She applied it liberally in the task of hobbling over to them, at which point she thrust it down with a punishing crack against the tile, lifted her chin, and said: “Ronald Weasley, whoever told you to go black over ginger should be locked up with a randy dementor. Are you dying?”

A disembodied fit of mirthful coughing broke out somewhere over Draco’s ear. Draco covered his mouth with his hand. Ron’s cheeks warmed to the normal color of his hair.

“Are you terminally ill?” she continued relentlessly. “Are you counting your time in days? Why would you *do* this to yourself? You had lovely hair!”

“I did?” said Ron in bewilderment.

“Yes! A lovely copper-red, it was perfect! And this!” She swiped a finger around his ears, and it came away blue. She brandished her fingers in his face as if she intended to drive them into his eyes. “Thank Merlin it’s not a spell. You go home and you wash that at once, and then you tell me what girl hates you.”

“Why do you assume it’s a girl?” said Draco, who thought this was somewhat unfeminist, and also hilarious.

“Because there’s not a fourteen-year-old boy on the planet who’d touch a box of hair dye unless a girl told him to,” she said crisply, “and most of them still wouldn’t, unless they were in love with her. Draco, give it to me honestly. Who is it? Is she pretty?”

“That would be Hermione Granger, and I’m declining to answer the other question, on the grounds that the gut quite simply rebels. You’ll have to use your own judgment.”

She gave a scandalized little gasp. “Hermione! She is pretty. *Is* he in love with her?”

“No,” said Draco sharply. “That’s disgusting, Greengrass, don’t be ridiculous.” He paused. “And what do you mean, Granger is—”

“But she doesn’t hate you! So why, *why,* Ronald, why would a nice girl like Hermione—?”

“The hair is part of an operation,” whispered Ron loudly. “I’m undercover. Don’t blow it.”

“Undercover for what? The morgue?” When no one answered, she grimaced at her stained fingers and wiped them on Ronald’s shirt. It

was by a matter of centimeters that she missed Draco's dinner jacket; Ron turned impossibly whiter. "Alright, don't tell me, it's sure to bore me anyway. But if you're planning some Gryffindor prank, please don't spoil the party until after I've left, it took ever so long to do my hair."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Ron managed, and she patted him absently on the chest.

"In fact I'm glad you came," she confided in Draco, looping her arm over his. She passed the cane off to Ron, who was quite tickled by it, and 'accidentally' clubbed at least three purebloods in the leg before Draco snatched it away. "The plan was me and Pansy and Theo, but Pansy got a detention for making fun of Eloise Midgen and messed it all up."

"What'd she say?" said Ron, around a mouthful of crab cake. Draco glared at him and emphatically pressed his own jaw shut. It was as if he were the only one concerned with the 'undercover' business at all.

"Some nonsense about her boils. I told her not to get into it, but you know Pansy, she'll pick a fight with an empty room. Anyway, I was worried, because it was down to just Theo and me, and I think he'd climb out the window to avoid me."

Her tone was fickle with the deliberate carelessness of someone who cared about it deeply.

"Ugh. Haven't you two sorted all that out?"

"Sorted out what?" said Daphne, impossibly airier. "I haven't any idea what I did to disturb him. Maybe he just doesn't like me. Some people don't like me, you know. No, it's true," she added, when Ron scoffed.

"Theo likes you fine. Tell him to stop being an idiot."

“I have. Slytherin has.”

“Well, tell him again, then.”

Ron opened his mouth, closed it, raised a finger, and chewed vigorously. He swallowed, and unaware that Draco stood beside him almost aflame with pride, said: “Reckon he likes you, doesn’t he.”

“Theo? No, no. Oh, no, no, no. I’m sure he has a row of little alarm bells and levers in the back of his head that start going off whenever he gets Feelings, and it shuts down all blood flow beneath the brain. It’s an injustice, you know, for someone fit to be so unavailable; the Slytherin girls are thinking of unionizing… Oh, *piss.* Turn me around, quickly. And give me the cane.”

It was too late. Orpheus Greengrass, having spotted his daughter through the maze of heads, had left his table and now came bearing down upon them like six feet of fretful stork.

“Daphne Greengrass,” he hissed, like there was any other Daphne he might be squawking at.

Nothing individually, but the combination of his tone, expression, posture, and accidental resemblance to an anemic swan filled Draco with an instinctive antipathy.

“What am I to make of this? Where is your chair?”

“I don’t know,” said Daphne, sounding sulkier than he’d ever heard her. “The dungeons, I suppose.”

“When I sent Plinky to escort you—”

“For Merlin’s sake, what I’d do with a rolly-chair in a castle full of staircases beggars the mind, as does what possible use I’d have for Plinky, since house-elves can’t be used on Hogwarts grounds, *like I told you,* Dad.”

“Snape would make an exception,” he said stubbornly.

“You have a house-elf?” said Ron curiously.

“Two,” she said bitterly. “One for me, and one for Astoria. Dad, I asked permission to come.”

“Which was revoked. Your mother and I talked about this. You agreed! After what happened on Tuesday—”

“What happened on Tuesday?” said Ron.

“It was *tiny,”* Daphne snapped. “Basically nothing. I didn’t even go to the Hospital Wing.”

“What was tiny?” insisted Ron.

Finally the Greengrasses extricated their noses from each other’s business, and ogled him. Daphne was embarrassed and grateful and slightly incredulous, like she couldn’t believe he had the stones. Orpheus Greengrass’ wide gaze traveled from his boots all the way up to the top of his box-dyed hair, and then returned for another helping of the blue stain Daphne’s fingers had left on his dress shirt.

Ron coughed and stuck out his hand. “Lancel Prewett,” he said. “Son of Gideon. And you are?”

Draco was very nearly impressed: *And you are?* came out dripping with sticky condescension, as if he couldn’t be bothered to move his jaw. Now, that didn’t change the outrageous faux pas of asking for the name of a man who *absolutely should not* have required an introduction. Someone named ‘Prewett’ ought to have clocked Orpheus Greengrass at a mile. But perhaps, Draco thought valiantly, they could play it off as a simply seismic fit of daring.

“In any case,” said Orpheus, after an arctic lull in the conversation. He turned back to Daphne. “I should have thought—”

“Is this your dad?” Ron interrupted, turning now to Daphne once he realized Orpheus wouldn’t talk to him.

Daphne was frozen in the beam of her father's disapproval. Draco tried to transmit through her occasionally thick skull the importance of playing this correctly.

"Y-yes," she said. "Father, this is my dear friend… Lancel."

There was a pause before *Lancel* so long that several conversations seemed to start and finish in the background.

"Pleasure," said Orpheus, as if someone had eked it out of him with a chisel and an awl.

"Smashing," said Ron indifferently. "What's this about a Hospital Wing? You didn't tell me about that."

"I beg your leave," said Orpheus quietly. "This is family business."

"Yeah? Funny place for it," said Ron. "I was minding my business with my friend here until you came over."

"R— Lancel," interrupted Daphne, still caught between embarrassment and gratitude. "It's okay. My Dad's just—"

Orpheus gave a yelp and whirled around, clutching his hair. There was no one behind him.

Draco hastened to draw his attention back to the group.

"I want a drink," he announced. "Does anyone else want a drink? I'm parched—"

"What kind of example," said Orpheus, with an almost tender sort of anger, "does this set for your sister?"

The effect was immediate: Daphne burned white, then red, then suddenly choked up hard on her cane, and Draco swayed back, seized by a fleeting alarm that she was going to swing with it. "For Astoria?" she shrieked. "For Astoria? You have the gall to tell me *I'm* bad for *Astoria?"*

“Following your example has fared poorly for her in the past,” said Orpheus, and Daphne actually shrieked, a momentary pitch above the normal volume of the crowd, driving him back in an apparent peal of fright.

“My example? Mine? How *dare* you throw her around like that, how *dare* you, you think you’re the only person who cares about her? I’m the only reason Tori is still *alive,* and you have the *gall* to stand there with your heinous presumptions and call *me* selfish for wanting a life, as if it’s any harm at all to Tori what I do? As if I’d *breathe* if it stood a chance of hurting her — I’d give a lung for her, I’d give *both* my lungs for her, don’t you dare throw Tori at me!”

“Whoa,” said Ron quickly, and shouldered in front of her, putting himself in the most probable line of a cane-strike to Orpheus’ head. Orpheus seemed like he didn’t know whether to be grateful or furious. “Let’s put the brakes on. Take a huddle? Take a huddle.” He herded Daphne out of the group, hustling her out of her father’s sight. “Draco,” he added, “why don’t you take the big guy over here —”

But this was a moot point; as soon as Daphne had raised her voice, Orpheus had staggered back. He said to Draco, thickly: “Excuse me.” Then he whirled on his heel and cut away, moving so swiftly that the crowd before him had to part or be trampled.

“Blimey,” said Harry quietly, “are they all like that? Your lot’s parents?”

“That,” said Draco shortly, “is not ‘my lot.’” After a pause, he added, “And my mother would *never.”*

In a secluded corner of the room, Ron was trying to calm Daphne down. She was hyperventilating.

“It’s all about the breathing, right,” he coaxed. “In and out. Let’s get you something to eat. Mum always says getting something to eat will

fix you right up. Gives your mouth something to do, and your hands…"

"I don't want anything to eat! I want to bludgeon his stupid *smug* face in with this cane! I want him to *die!"*

"Got that. On the agenda," he agreed easily. "Eat first, though. Beat your dad's arse after. What, you're going to do cane murder on an empty stomach? Not bloody likely, let me tell you."

She sniffed, wringing the handle of the cane like it was a neck. Ron lifted a cheese puff from a passing tray and held it patiently, unobtrusively, in his palm. After several beats, she snatched it and shoved it in her mouth.

When Draco judged there to be a negligible risk of getting himself caned or bitten, he interjected himself into their dour silence with an announcement of: "Is your sister dying?"

"Merlin, mate," Ron said, flashing him an annoyed look. "Buy a sense of timing."

Daphne swallowed around something large and painful-sounding in her throat. "Not while I'm alive," she said hoarsely.

"So there's some degree of uncertainty on the subject."

"I can't believe he'd say that. Tori lives for my stories, anyway. It's not bad enough I have to lie to her every time I go home, give her a sense of *hope—"*

"Second question," interrupted Draco. "Are *you* dying?"

"Not presently."

"I was looking for a categorical answer," he said, staring at her. "Third, final question: What the hell, Greengrass?"

She glowered at him. Then she whipped out her wand and pressed it to her own wrist. *“Finite incantatem,”* she snapped, and a layer of cream-pale glamour peeled off like a sleeve. Beneath it, a long, jagged scar ran from the soft of her elbow to the tapered span of her wrist. Ron sucked his breath through his teeth.

“How recent is that?”

“You won’t believe me,” she said, “but summer.”

“Four months? But it looks awful.”

“Turn out,” she said, “that’s what four months of healing looks like, when you’ve been on a night-mare-y-go-round of medications and blood thinners. It’s murder on the skin and I’m very near dead of anemia, but at least this way I might live until thirty.”

“Thirty? What do you mean, thirty? Are you — are you ill?”

Ron’s eyes were so wide Draco could ride a broomstick through them. He’d chide him for staring if he didn’t suspect he was doing the same, all slack-jawed and stupid with shock, as if they were two rank imbeciles who’d never heard of someone being sick before.

Daphne drew her wand back down her arm and re-cast the glamour. Her expression would have been embarrassed if it were not so very sad. “It’s not so much an illness as a condition,” she said. “Mum calls it a blood maladict. Don’t ever tell her I said so, but I think she likes the way it sounds, all dramatic and evil, like it’s a curse visited upon our house for its sins. Whatever *my* shit-for-bones body has to do with the sins of the house of Greengrass escapes me entirely. The healers call it something long and complicated that I can never remember. Hereditary something-or-other. Tori and I both have it. Hers is worse than mine, I think I’ve given her half a dozen transfusions since last year. Oh, don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” said Ron weakly.

“It’s not as though I’m losing an arm,” she said casually. “It’s blood, I make more. My parents would do it, but they’re not matches.”

“So when she fell this summer,” Draco began, recalling a distant conversation.

Daphne shuddered. “Yes, that was quite the exciting day for both of us. I don’t think I’ve ever given quite so much at once.”

“That’s why you couldn’t come to France? Your sister?”

“I asked them to take her, too,” she said vaguely. “She could have come, but then you all would’ve had to be let in on the secret, because we’d have had to bring the medical equipment, and the nurses, and the healers… for her *and* me. And as you might expect, they’re none too keen on spreading the word…”

“But you said thirty,” said Ron, appalled. “You mean with the treatments — and all your medicines, and everything — Greengrass, you are going to get better, aren’t you?”

She shrugged. “I am *better,”* she said. “I can walk around, and go to school, and everything. I’ll get my O.W.L.s, I’ll get my N.E.W.T.s. That’s more than my grandmother ever got to do. She was bedridden at fifteen. The healers are very optimistic about me, in comparison.”

“But—”

“Don’t boohoo for me, darling, I’ve had quite enough of it for a lifetime,” she said dully. She grasped her cane and hauled herself, wobbling, to her feet; when Draco moved to take her arm, she slapped his hand. “Don’t you dare baby me, either. I haven’t told anyone because if I get so much as a *hint* of the treatment I get at home, I’m going to set the whole castle on fire and run screaming into the Black Lake. I’m serious. I’ll tolerate it for Tori, and Tori *only,* but otherwise I’m rather fond of being treated like a person, and I’d like it to continue.”

Draco said, “Your father’s right about the chair, isn’t he?”

“Right about what?”

“That you need it,” he said. “You’re pushing your luck. Look at you, Greengrass, some days you can barely walk. If you fell — Merlin help you, if you’ve got anemia and you walked into a trick stair—”

This riled her with shocking efficiency. “And if I pushed you down those stairs, it’d snap your neck too, so don’t you explain danger to *me,* Draco Malfoy!” she said shrilly. “I’ve lived here just as long as you have, and I’ve managed, haven’t I! I’m astounded you have the gall to lecture me, when you’re off every year with some madcap plot to get yourself and everyone who likes you killed — just last year you came closer to dying than I ever have, and it was for *Harry Potter,* of all people, on the quidditch pitch!”

He could feel it when his face locked down, ironing out the traces of hurt. “I’ve handled myself perfectly well on each of those occasions. At least I was putting myself in danger for a reason.”

“For a reason! Life isn’t a reason? My own happiness isn’t a reason? You don’t understand. Nobody understands, nobody except Tori, and she’s all of nine years old. Draco, for my own good, *butt out.* My health isn’t your shout.”

“It’s my shout if I say it is, and I say it is. Do you think it’d be all trifle and butterbeers for me, if you keeled over tomorrow? Do you think it’d be fine with Nott?”

“Don’t bring Theodore into this.”

“He’s in it whether you want him to be or not. If you died I think he’d just about challenge the Reaper to an honor duel, and count himself lucky to get killed in the bargain.”

“Oh, and there you go, talking like you *know* him,” she said, regal with scorn. “Shows what you know. That would require him to give a

single solitary damn about anyone other than—” But she broke off, pressing the back of her hand to her wobbling lip, and then tumbled back down onto the window seat, where Ron put his arm around her.

“Easy,” he said sternly, to her and Draco both. “Take a cheese puff. You, too, Malfoy.”

Draco did not, in protest, eat another cheese puff. Daphne did, however, and it seemed to calm her somewhat.

“It seems like Nott is a touchy subject,” said Ron tentatively, “so, proposal: let’s leave off him for a second, yeah? Bloke’s not even here to defend himself.”

“Why *isn’t* he here, come to think of it?” said Draco, frowning. “His father’s here. This is his party.”

Daphne, after annihilating a cheese puff with all the violence Draco suspected she wanted to enact on him, daubed her lips with a napkin and said primly: “He might be late. He’s trying to miss his father’s interval.”

“Miss him?” Ron was confused. “Other way around, isn’t it?”

“If he liked his father a mite more than snogging a blast-ended skrewt, it might be,” she said delicately. “As it is, he’s trying to balance matters. He’s got to keep his father happy, which in his case involves seeing as little of him as possible while keeping up appearances. I don’t envy him… well, not most of the time, anyways.”

“You shouldn’t,” Draco said shortly. He had met Sibelius Nott too many times to harbor many doubts about his ability as a parent. “Nott’s a piece of work.”

“Like father, like son, I suppose.”

“Hopefully not.”

There was a thump from the crowd, and a tray of champagne glasses went crashing to the floor. While the partygoers whirled and gawked, a shimmer appeared in the air over Ron's shoulder, and Harry's face peeked out from a slit in the air. It was sort of like talking to a nose with fringe. "Oi, layabouts," he hissed. "I've been running around yanking the hairs off half the purebloods in this room. What happened to working together?" He noticed Daphne, curled shelteringly under Ron's arm. "What's all this?" he said, switching with breathtaking speed into the role of fretful mother hen. "Is she alright? What's the problem?"

"No, mate," Ron said, not unkindly. Daphne was mystified into silence at Harry's talking nose. He patted her shoulder. "We just put this thing to bed. Tell you later, but we're not picking it up again."

It was a testament to Harry's worth as a friend, and his unwavering trust in Ron as the same, that he didn't object. "Do we need to get her out of here?" he said, nodding to the door. He drew the cloak back a little. "She can have this — I'll put my hood up, we can make a dash for it."

"You have an Invisibility Cloak?" gasped Daphne.

"Er. No," said Harry, uselessly.

"Yes," sighed Draco. "Greengrass, this is another one of those pain-of-death secrets, alright? Gentleman's honor."

"Obviously," she said. "But what is he doing here? Is that why you've done such awful things to Ron's hair?"

"That's another pain-of-death secret," said Draco irritably. "Since apparently Potter has decided, without *consulting the group,* to induct you into our growing circle of trust."

Harry shrugged. "She seemed alright," he said. "Hermione said she had a cat."

“I do have a cat,” said Daphne eagerly. (“That’s not a recommendation,” said Ron darkly.) “Can I be in on the secret? I’ll keep it, I promise.”

“No,” said Draco.

“Sorry, no,” said Harry the Nose.

“Unfortunately,” sighed Ron, “it’s not ours to tell. There’s other blokes involved, and they’ve got a lot of skin in it, you see.”

“I understand,” she said, and Draco felt surprisingly grateful to her: trust a Slytherin to implicitly understand the importance of discretion. “But I do so love secret plots. I just gobble up all those muggle novels with the people sitting around talking about murder. Are you part of a secret society? Is it dangerous? Is it deadly?”

“Sort of dangerous, yeah,” said Ron, slightly smug. “Deadly, well, you never know. Probably not, but we take our chances, we do.”

She gasped.

“Weasley, knock it off,” said Draco shortly. “You’re not Godric Gryffindor because you gatecrashed a party with a bad dye job. And I’m not sure you want to be made an accomplice here, Greengrass.”

“Oh, but I do,” she said eagerly. “This is the first time anything exciting has happened to me in ages and ages. I can be helpful, you know! And if you’d only come to me in the first place, I could have done a *much* better glamour than whatever you’ve put in his hair. Would you like to see?” She drew her wand.

“Not *here,”* hissed Draco, shoving it down. He took back what he’d said about Slytherins; she was as bad as a Gryffindor. It was right back to herding cats. “If you really want to help us, you’ll help us get out of here without attracting attention, since we’ve already done *plenty* of that. And Potter, put your cloak back on, before someone

with more than two brain cells to rub together notices your chin bobbing around like a buoyant wedge of cheese."

"Uncalled for."

Daphne drew herself up to her full height and squared her shoulders. "An exit is easy to do," she said eagerly. "Would you like a distraction? I'm wonderful at those."

"Should say you are," muttered Ron, and then coughed, as Draco's elbow mysteriously appeared in his spleen.

"That'd be aces," said Harry. "Can you, er — get the attention of the room? As many of them as possible? We're going to try to get out without anyone noticing, or talking to us."

"The full room? All of them?"

"Yeah. Or as close to it as you can, it doesn't have to be perfect—"

"Please, don't be absurd. I was only clarifying. You'll go that way?" She pointed to the far door. Ron nodded.

"Thanks, Greengrass. We owe you one—"

"Oh, your manners are atrocious," she said fondly, standing up. "Don't you know anything? You don't *say* you owe me one, Mr. Prewett, you just bask in miserable envy of my talents while I save your skins. And then you buy me a very nice birthday present."

Draco was nodding in agreement.

"In the interest of which," she added, to Draco, "for your recollection: I'm a cool winter; I prefer silver to gold, and diamonds to pearls. But if it *must* be pearls, then pearls in gold, not pearls in silver. And I favor llama fur to cashmere, for preference. I can write it down, if you like."

"Don't insult me."

She glowed. “You are so *nearly* tolerable,” she said, which was great praise. Then she turned to Ron, kissed him on the cheek, and said: “You’re a darling. Never touch your hair without my say-so again. Goodnight.”

Hefting her cane, she cantered boldly into the center of the dance floor and turned about, giving her audience some tactical consideration. With a certain satisfaction, she tossed away her cane with a clatter. Then she flung herself to the floor, clutching her heart, and let out a perfectly operatic scream.

At which point — as the party exploded with the uproar, and Orpheus Greengrass very nearly clobbered a third year to death in his effort to get to reach his passionately writhing daughter — Draco, Ron, and Harry made a swift and timely exit.

-draco, confronted with a possible narrative foil and/or counterpart: absolutely not. no thank you

-i may have mentioned this before, but daphne started out as being a much smaller component of this book, but sort of wrestled her way into the narrative by sheer force of personality. in many ways, she's more like draco than any of the other slytherins — they're both more changeable, more flexible, and more open to new experiences. and they are both, of course, self-described hot blondes.

-the question of patronuses also raises the question of J.K.R.'s statement — word-of-god, naturally — that draco can't cast a patronus. this makes about zero sense to me and always has. the terms of the patronus charm are consistently described as emotional; your moral disposition, or how good of a person you are, has no bearing (usually) on whether you can produce a happy memory.

-e.g., bellatrix lestrange. this bint is heinously awful, and she is never not having the time of her life. being cartoonishly evil IS her calling. her job satisfaction is 100%. so she should be able to cast a

patronus at the drop of a hat, right? but death eaters can't, apparently. which means that either lupin doesn't actually describe the patronus in full accuracy to harry in book 3 (strange) or, alternatively, lupin is right, but that means the only reason that draco would have trouble is if he is sincerely so depressed that he can't manage a happy memory at all, which... honestly would be an incredible character detail if the books tried to take that seriously. but it's an INSANE thing to drop on us via word-of-god. like, that's a profound, character-altering fact. that should have been mentioned in the books.

-anyway, long digression just to say that I think it makes more sense if Draco does have happy memories, but he overthinks them, because one of his great faults is his cynicism, whereas Ron is generally an optimist. that explains why he can't cast the charm and also draws the parallel between him and hermione, who has the memories and knows how to use them, but just views magic as a clinical field, to her own detriment. /END RANT.

-next chapter next week! a promise: there will be quidditch. thank you to everyone commenting; you're the reason i'm still here. love and good luck with all school/work/lives starting up again in the new year. ciao!

The Blind Spot

Chapter 27: The Blind Spot

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Put your hands up and move away from the cauldron,” said Draco.

Hermione looked bewildered. Apparently when he said *move away from the cauldron,* she’d heard *sit on your bum and stare at Draco like he’s grown another head,* which was understandable, considering what both heads would have looked like. Even so, this was no time to sit around goggling at astonishingly beautiful objects. There would be plenty of time for that later.

“What’s wrong? Did you hear from Sirius?”

Draco shook his head and strode into the bathroom. Harry and Ron lingered by the door with their arms folded, doing their best impressions of brick walls.

Hermione, being by several orders of magnitude the smartest person Draco had ever met, deduced at once what the unlikely allegiance before her meant.

“Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no.”

“This is for your own good.” He plucked the stirrer from her hands and clamped the lid back on the cauldron, which burbled in healthsome cheer. “I’ve spoken to Dobby. He’ll mind the potion for the next three hours. Not that he needs to, since it’s all but finished, as you very well know.”

“What if it boils over?”

“It won’t.” He flicked his wand at her books, and they rose to cheerfully pack themselves into her bag, even as she fumbled to

stop them.

“What if it curdles? Dobby won’t know what to do. It’s really better to have someone who knows the signs—”

“Save your breath.” He held out her bag. “Up you get. Step lively.”

She gave a steep intake of breath, which she held in her chest for three baleful seconds, during which time he worried that she was going to make herself pass out in protest.

Then she burst out: “But I don’t *want* to watch stupid quidditch!”

Draco clucked his tongue. “Big mistake, Granger,” he said. “You should have stopped before ‘stupid.’”

“On the day of the big game, Hermione,” Harry said, beside himself with shame.

“Turn around three times and spit,” Ron ordered.

“Throw some salt over your shoulder,” said Harry.

“Burn some incense, while you’re at it,” advised Draco. “Today is no day to take chances. It’s the final, and none shall suffer a deserter to live. Up you get.”

“That’s why I *don’t* want to go! I don’t want to watch you two almost die, *again!* I’d be much happier if it were two strangers getting clobbered!”

“You’ve mistaken this for a negotiation. Now, either you can come, and watch your beloved housemates earn eternal glory with the best game of quidditch this castle has ever seen—”

“I choose the other option,” she said immediately. He shook his head.

“You didn’t let me finish. The end of that sentence was ‘and you can come easy, or you can come rough.’”

She drummed her fingers on the tile, concentrating so deeply it appeared she was trying to Apparate. When she spoke, however, it was in tones of such sweetness and entreaty that it flagged his fight-or-flight instinct, like the sweet colors of a poison dart frog. “Of course I’m happy to support you,” she said, doing something with her eyelashes that might be described as ‘coy,’ if the person describing it had dementia and cataracts. “I’d love to come. Really. I can’t go like this, though; I don’t have my red scarf, or my streamers. Let me go back to the dorms and fetch them, and I’ll meet you at the pitch.”

This was about as cunning as a club to the head. Thank God she hadn’t been in Slytherin.

Draco shifted his weight skeptically onto one hip. She continued doing that thing with her eyelashes, intensely, as if that was supposed to do anything except amuse him.

“Roughly it is. Boys?”

Harry and Ron moved forward with resignation. Hermione yelped and scrambled to her feet.

“No! No! I’m *not* coming, I *won’t!* Harry James Potter, if you come any nearer, they’ll have to dedicate you a whole ward in St. Mungo’s!”

“Fair enough, but wait for after the game,” said Harry, with the brave stoicism of someone who understood that this was no idle threat. “If you whomp me beforehand and Oliver finds out, they’ll have to dedicate you a building.”

Carrying her out of the bathroom was the hardest leg, as Hermione, in the true spirit of her house, fought to the bitter end with tooth and nail and jinxes that Draco only usually moved fast enough to block. When they arrived at the grand staircase there was a quick and

spirited renegotiation of terms, in order to prevent the disastrous consequences of someone dropping her, and she continued the rest of the way down to the pitch while riding piggyback on Harry. Needless to say, she complained vocally the whole time.

Slytherin was leading the tournament by two hundred points. This meant, as Wood had very well beaten through their heads, that they needed to win the match by more than that to win the Cup. It also meant that Harry was under pain-of-death instructions not to so much as think of touching the snitch unless Gryffindor was up fifty.

The day was cloudless and temperate, its ice-blue sky offered up like a rare jewel in an unusually gloomy May. Students of all houses streamed down across the dew-clad lawns, vibrating with excitement for the upcoming match. Most of them wore red-and-gold scarves, hats, or jumpers, even if they weren't Gryffindors, while just a few defiant non-Slytherins waved green handkerchiefs tied to their wands. There was hollering and noisemaking, trumpeting of horns, clapping of hands; a few raggedy choruses of *Let's have a holler for Harry Potter…* and, from farther down, a hard BANG! and a small blaze of red-and-gold fireworks, followed by a screech of: *"FINNIGAN!"* in the unmistakable howl of Filch.

They passed some Ravenclaws with red-and-gold streamers in their hair, one of whom was Cho Chang. When she saw them, she smiled and waved.

"Good luck, Harry!"

"Good luck *Harry?"* Draco repeated, disgruntled; but then he noticed that Harry was blushing.

Reaching the turnstiles, Harry let Hermione slip off his back. "You should hurry, if you want good seats. The stands will fill up fast."

"I *don't* want good seats," she said passionately. "I don't *want* to see you fall and break your neck, actually, it's rather low on the list of things I'd like to see."

“That only happened the once,” Harry said, offended.

“Once is usually enough!”

“Nah, don’t worry about it, Harry, we’ll take care of her,” said Ginny, shouldering her way through the crowd. She wore a giant cherry-red jumper with a G on it (Draco recognized Mrs. Weasley’s handiwork) and someone had painted a lion on her cheek. “S’only pre-match jitters. She’ll cheer up once we start winning. Come on, Hermione. You can hold my hand if you get scared.”

She held out her hand. Hermione grasped it with the grim expression of someone sealing a pact with the devil.

“I’m going to vomit,” she informed Harry and Draco, matter-of-factly.

“Save it for when the Slytherins come out,” said Harry. “It’ll seem like a statement.”

Muttering to herself, she allowed Ginny to steer her up into the bleachers, gripping the other girl’s hand like a hydraulic press.

“Best go change, I s’pose,” said Harry. “Think Wood’s about done sacrificing that goat.”

But they were stopped on their way through the turnstile by Professor McGonagall, who was dressed in a frock of spiritless black, save for a single red ruby in her jabot. “Potter. Malfoy,” she said thinly. “Why are you not in your quidditch robes? Warmups will begin shortly.”

“Yes, professor. We were just going—”

“Come with me,” she ordered. Draco and Harry traded a glance of apprehension and followed her down to the sandy den of the locker rooms. The last time McGonagall had intercepted them before a quidditch match, the news had been rather dour.

She swept them into a side room near the lockers, its size and smell evocative of its former life as a broom cabinet. Draco's heartrate spiked, and he ran through a mental list of people who might have died.

"Potter," she began, and paused. Draco sagged: thank Merlin, it was probably just the poor sod's wretched aunt. If there was any justice in the world, she'd keeled over dead during a bout of muggle 'dentistry.'

"Er… yes, professor?" Harry was pale with dread.

"You are flying a Cleansweep Four. Correct?"

Neither he nor Draco knew what to say to that. "...Yes, professor."

McGonagall pressed her lips together. Being a thin-lipped woman to begin with, this gave her the impression of having bitten a lemon.

"You are a very competent flier, Potter."

"Thanks," said Harry, sweating bullets.

"You have a fine talent for broom handling and a high level of general athletic skill."

"Thanks a lot," said Harry, sweating even more.

McGonagall steepled her fingers. It was like a row of birch twigs coupling. "At the risk of redundancy, however," she said primly, "it remains the case, for good reason, that professional quidditch players do not fly on Cleansweep Fours."

"Right, professor," said Harry, who at this point would have agreed to virtually anything. It was like watching a fellow get waterboarded. Draco almost broke into a spate of nervous laughter, and was glad he didn't; he liked McGonagall, and considered her dignified and fair, but she did not take kindly to japery of any sort.

“As Head of Gryffindor House,” she said coolly, “it would be entirely inappropriate for me to spend personal funds equipping our quidditch team. Each house team receives the same budget at the beginning of the school year; its spending lies at the discretion of the captain. It would be a violation of school rules, to say nothing of poor sportsmanship, for a teacher to become involved in the outcome of a school sporting event.”

“That’s tosh,” said Draco, incredulous. “There’s loads of money that goes into the Slytherin team. Look at their brooms!”

McGonagall regarded him impassively over her pince-nez. He closed his mouth.

“Professors,” she said, mostly to Harry, “do not play favorites. Head of House or not.”

Harry nodded. “I understand,” he said. “It’s alright, professor. I’ve been practicing on the Cleansweep, and I’ll do my best — it doesn’t matter how good their brooms are, we’ll just out-fly them. They can all come out on Firebolts if they want to. You can’t buy player quality, that’s what Wood always says.” He nudged Draco, who gave an affirming sort of cough, though philosophically he was unconvinced.

McGonagall gazed at Harry. Her eyes were bottle-green and clear, like a piece of sea-glass laved smooth by violent waters. They were also, if Draco wasn’t mistaken, slightly soft.

“Yes,” she said, after a long moment. “There are a great many things money cannot buy.”

She flicked her wand at the nearest cabinet, which flew open. “Including,” she added, in a raised voice, “the contents of that box, upon which not a single knut was spent.”

“What box?”

She nodded to the cabinet.

Tentatively, Harry withdrew a long wooden case that was several inches taller than he was. Draco had to help him lay it out on the floor, because it was heavy: the box was rich, aromatic rosewood, so deep a red it was nearly purple, with handles of gold flecked by age. The clasps were sticky, and so it took a moment to open, but once they did Harry let out an audible gasp that Draco was hard-pressed not to echo.

It was a broomstick. A beautiful broomstick, and an *old* broomstick, with antique warping on the seat, brass-and-leather stirrups, and a bush that had started to thin and splinter with age. For all that, though, it had clearly been taken care of: the handle gleamed a lush walnut brown, lustrous from many polishings, and the leather grips were all brand new.

The lettering on the handle read: NIMBUS 1995.

“Oh my *God,”* shrilled Draco. He couldn’t help it. Harry looked at him wildly.

“It’s — it’s good, isn’t it?” he said. “It looks pretty good — it’s got nice customaries, and everything—”

“You gibbon, of course it’s good! This is the grandfather model for what *I’m* flying! It’s the *original Nimbus!”*

“The original?” repeated Harry stupidly. “There are others?”

“Merlin’s saggy wet armpit, I’m going to find my copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* and beat you with it. This is the first Nimbus broom. It’s got to be nearly thirty years old. And I’m willing to bet this is an original model, based on the seams along the handle… you can see, it’s three pieces, it predates the wood-warping techniques they’d develop for the 2000… a bit less structurally sound, maybe, but unless you’re trying to hit semisonic speeds that could compromise the broomstick—”

“Mr. Malfoy,” interrupted Professor McGonagall, without so much as a blink. “You will refrain from beating Mr. Potter, now or at any point in the future. And you will recall that this box does not belong to you.”

Draco whisked his hands away, cheeks burning. “Sorry, professor.”

She was not smiling — anyone who confused her expression with a smile should be fitted for glasses — but neither did she seem displeased. In sharp contrast with her expression, there were two points of lively color dancing in her cheeks. “Your excitement is appropriate,” she said. “As is your assessment. That Nimbus was purchased within the first week of its release.”

“Merlin,” whispered Harry. He looked at her. “Is it, er… did you want to… I mean, I don’t want to assume, if…”

McGonagall adjusted her pince-nez. “What you do with athletic equipment that you find, of your own account, in the Gryffindor locker rooms,” she said impassively, “is between you and your captain. As a teacher, I can have no say in the matter.”

Harry’s jaw came close to unhinging. So, for that matter, did Draco’s.

“I can fly this? I mean, you’ll let me?”

“As I said,” said McGonagall, still very much not smiling, “I have no power to change the decisions made by any member of the Gryffindor quidditch team.” She opened the door. As she was going to leave, however, she hesitated in the doorway. She spoke with her head turned away from them, in a lowered tone, almost hushed.

“It’s tall for you,” she said. “Choke up.”

Then she vanished, and the high fast clicks of her heels were fading down the hallway.

Harry said, “Draco, look.” He was pointing to a bit of lettering on the underside of the case, near the handle. It read simply: M.M.

A beat passed.

“No,” said Draco.

“Probably not,” agreed Harry.

“It was just — a nice thing to do. Another student must have left it around somewhere.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, and then they both looked doubtfully at the Nimbus, which did not look like it had been ‘left around’ anywhere in its long life.

Footsteps swelled again in the hallway, these ones much quicker and much heavier. “OI!” roared Fred, shoving his head through the door. “There you are! Would either of you two malingering bastards care to honor the team with your presence, or shall I and the rest of Gryffindor keep tearing the bloody stands apart for you?”

“Sorry!” cried Harry, as they scrambled to their feet. “Sorry! We’re coming! We got sidetracked!”

“Oh, you got sidetracked, did you? On the way to the championship game? Well, good, you can explain all that to Oliver while he’s in recovery from his *heart attack!”*

They sprinted down to the lockers. They could hear the shouting through two walls and a locked door.

“THERE YOU ARE,” bellowed Oliver, as soon as they skidded in. “WHAT WERE YOU BLOODY DOING? YOU’RE NOT EVEN IN UNIFORM!”

“Long story,” gasped Harry, as he and Draco divested themselves of pants with a haste usually reserved for much more enticing circumstances. “Got here — fast as we could—”

“SLYTHERIN IS WARMING UP AS WE SPEAK! THEIR ADVANTAGE IS GROWING EVERY SECOND WE’RE NOT IN THE

AIR! THIS IS MARCUS FLINT'S WET DREAM!"

"Thanks a lot, Oliver," said George. "I was scared enough to go out there without worrying that Marcus Flint wants me carnally."

"If that doesn't make you fly faster, nothing will," muttered Katie.

"NINE THIRTY! NINE THIRTY, I TOLD EVERYONE TO BE IN THIS ROOM, GEARED UP, AND WHAT TIME IS IT? WHAT TIME IS IT NOW? IS IT NINE THIRTY? ANGELINA, IS IT NINE THIRTY?"

"Nope," she said, popping her gum.

"NO! IT'S NINE FORTY-NINE! WHICH MEANS WARMUPS HAVE BEEN GOING FOR HOW LONG, GEORGE?"

"About four minutes," said George, "but honestly, Oliver, you could cut them a break. I think I spent the morning before my first championship taking an enormous terror-shit in the prefects' bathroom."

Fred and Angelina tittered. It did a decent job of breaking the ice, though Oliver was still ready to breathe fire.

"Potter got a new broomstick," blurted Draco, partially because he thought it was worth mentioning, and partially to get Oliver off their backs. Oliver broke off, heaving for breath.

"You did?" he said. "Glad to hear it. Didn't want to say so, but the Cleansweep was a bit rubbish, honestly. What'd you get?"

"It's a Nimbus. It's pretty old, but, um, it's been well taken care-of."

"Bang-on," said Oliver approvingly. "Any Nimbus can dust a Cleansweep, that's for certain. Should do you a favor, too, since Higgs is on a Comet. Anyway. WOULD YOU GET YOUR ROBES ON YOUR SODDING BACKS AND GET MOVING, OR SHOULD I STICK A NIFFLER ON A BROOMSTICK AND TAKE MY CHANCES?"

They walked out onto the field to a joyful explosion of noise. A giant paper-machê lion danced above the stands, levitated by a crowd of industrious Ravenclaws, and enormous banners bearing “GO GRYFFINDOR!” and “LIONS FOR THE CUP!” unfurled from the stands.

“And here come the Gryffindors!” yelled Lee Jordan, who was wearing a suspiciously bulky black windbreaker. “It’s Potter, Bell, Johnson, Malfoy, Weasley, Weasley, and Wood! This is the best team that we’ve seen in some years, folks, and that’s with most of them on Cleansweeps. Potter’s not on his today, though, looks like he’s upgraded, thank Merlin— though not sure I recognize the model he’s carrying—”

He was drowned out by the roar of cheers from the Slytherin side of the stands as the Slytherin team landed in formation.

“And that’s the Slytherin team, for you,” said Jordan, with much less enthusiasm. “Higgs, Flint, Montague, Warrington, Nott, Goyle, Bletchley. Bit easier to make out than the Gryffindors, aren’t they, since they’re about two-thirds of the student body by weight.”

More boos came from the Slytherin crowd, and laughter from the Gryffindor one, though Draco thought it was a bit unsporting. He especially didn’t like how Goyle reacted when Jordan said it, which was to draw his head into his shoulders like a turtle and shrink into himself.

Theo, on the other hand, smiled and blew a kiss off his third finger in the direction of the commentator’s box. The Slytherin stands roared.

Flint and Wood approached each other and performed the ceremonial crunching of fingerbones.

Draco, standing across from Flint in the lineup, leaned over to whisper at Goyle. “Greg,” he said. “He’s only joking.”

“He knows that, Malfoy,” Theo said boredly. He whacked Goyle gently on the thigh with his club, and Goyle snickered, thumping him back. “Flint has this funny thing where he likes his players bigger than a dormouse on Growth Potion.”

“What’d you bring to the table, then?” said George, yawning.

“Not sure, but I think it’s whatever you do,” said Theo, “plus class.”

Draco had something for this, but he broke off when he got a better look at Theo’s face. A dark bruise circled Theo’s left eye, deep and yellowing in some places, green in others, a patchwork quilt sewn around the button of his bloodshot cornea.

“Good Lord, did you walk into a bludger?” said Draco. “Or twelve?”

Theo twitched his face away, irritated. “Shut up.”

“This isn’t trash talk, you prideful louse, it’s concern. Is Flint letting you play like that? Your visibility’s got to be piss-poor.”

“And it’d still put me just about level with your beaters on their best day, so why don’t you concern yourself with them, and not about what my captain’s letting or not letting me do.”

“Nott, for Merlin’s sake, you look like someone went at your eyeballs with a melon baller.”

“Would it kill you, for once in your life, to butt out?” snapped Theo. “Does it rankle your Gryffindor sensibilities to not have a finger in every pot in this stupid castle? Is it so hard for you to grasp the idea that your involvement is not only unwanted, but unhelpful?”

His first instinct was to give as good as he got. His second instinct was to wallop the first instinct in the nose and demand a straight answer. He honored neither of them.

Instead, Draco took his tongue between his teeth, and bit down until the pain flushed out the venom. He watched Theo while he waited,

considering.

When he spoke, it was so quiet that only Nott and Goyle could hear, and Goyle frowned like he didn't understand.

"Why did he do it?"

Theo flinched.

"Theodore Nott? Suffer in silence? Don't make me laugh," murmured Draco. "If that was more than an hour old, you'd have gone to the infirmary. And they'd ask the same questions I did. But that's not fresh, and you're not there, so what did you say to him?"

"I—"

"MOUNT YOUR BROOMS!"

Theo jerked away, nakedly relieved. Draco swore and threw a leg over his Nimbus.

"Three… two… one…"

Her whistle disappeared into the roar of the crowd. Fourteen brooms rose into the air.

"And it's GRYFFINDOR in possession, Draco Malfoy of Gryffindor with the quaffle, headed straight for the Slytherin goal! Through Flint, but whoops, quaffle intercepted by Warrington, Warrington of Slytherin in a dead shot up the field — oh! *Drops* the quaffle to dodge a bludger, that's a bit of George Weasley's handiwork, devastatingly handsome chap, that George Weasley, still single, ladies, if anybody's wondering — and it's Johnson who recovers, Gryffindor back in possession, swerves Montague, ducks another bludger, and that's a shot that's a SHOT TAKE THE SHOT — SHE SCORES! TEN-ZERO GRYFFINDOR!"

Angelina swept over the Gryffindor stands, cheering, and a roar of delight followed her. A row of seventh years started doing the Wave.

That was, until Flint came careening past her and knocked into her shoulder with a painful *THUMP.* She screamed and nearly fell from her broomstick, only to be boosted up by Katie.

Flint spun around, waving his arms. “Sorry! Sorry, I didn’t see her!”

Draco couldn’t tell if he was serious. He didn’t seem like he was lying, but clearly no one on the Gryffindor team believed him. Wood was bellowing for a red card. The pitch fell into disarray for a moment, and Hooch whistled for a halt.

A moment later, a beater’s bat smacked into his skull, driving his nose into the handle of his broom. Draco winced.

Fred Weasley swooped past, empty-handed, to recover his bat. “Sorry, sorry!” he snarled at Flint. “Didn’t see you!”

“MISTER WEASLEY!” Madam Hooch shot between them, pumping on her whistle, while Flint clutched his bloody nose and wailed. “That’s quite enough! Yellow card to the Gryffindor beater, for deliberate damage by improper means! And penalty shot to Gryffindor for incidental damage by negligence!”

“Come off it, Miss!” howled Fred, but Madam Hooch blew her whistle. She threw the quaffle to Draco, who caught it and zipped off to take the penalty.

“Come on, Malfoy!” yelled Jordan. “YES! HE’S BEATEN THE KEEPER! TWENTY-ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!”

Harry swept by Draco and slapped him on the back with a breeze of laughter. The boy was speeding like the blazes, churning wind on the Nimbus ’95, his hair raked back over his head. The broom was too big for him, but that only let him zip around faster, his body arched down over the broomstick in a single clean line. Draco didn’t envy the Slytherin seeker, Higgs, who had to strain to keep up with him with his greater bulk. As he watched, Harry spun up into a dizzying corkscrew, bent himself in an inverted U over the field, and then

soared back for the ground with a giddy *WHOOP, WHOOP* that all but taunted Higgs to try to follow.

Show-offy prat. Draco couldn't help but be proud.

Professor McGonagall had a front row seat in the faculty box, sitting between Jordan and Professor Snape. Her face, naturally, revealed nothing, but she was watching Potter as if he were the only player on the field.

"Gryffindor in possession, back to Slytherin, back to Gryffindor, and it's Katie Bell, Katie Bell for Gryffindor, damn fine chaser, damn fine, she's dodging Flint — YOU FILTHY SCUM!"

Montague blocked Katie, and instead of seizing the quaffle had grabbed her head. Katie spun into a somersault in the air and barely kept ahold of the broom. The quaffle dropped into Warrington's hands. Madam Hooch's whistle rang out again as she soared over to Montague and began shouting at him.

A minute later, Katie put their second penalty past the Slytherin keeper.

"THIRTY-ZERO! THIRTY! HOW DOES THIRTY TASTE, YOU DIRTY SONS OF—"

"Jordan, remember our conversation!"

"But 'dirty' *is* a technical term, professor!"

Draco took the lapse in play during the quaffle repositioning to fly close to Theo.

"Nott," he shouted, "be reasonable. None of your bludgers are coming close—"

Theo whirled, nearly taking Draco out with a swing of his club. "Get out of my airspace, Malfoy, or I'll tell Hooch you tried to foul me," he snapped back.

“I’m trying to *help* you! You can’t see out of that eye! Forget the bludgers, you can barely fly!”

“I *don’t care!* Piss off, or I’ll take a page out of your beater’s book!”

Theo whirled his bat into position to make good on the threat. It would have seemed more menacing if his voice hadn’t been so desperate.

Hooch’s whistle screeched again, and they tussled out another brief round of scoring, swapping the quaffle back and forth across midfield. Gryffindor scored twice before Draco could get near Theo. This time, one of his bludgers had veered wide, and nearly taken out Cassius Warrington.

“Nott,” he shouted again. “You’re listing. You’re slow. You’re right-handed! You hit to your left side, which you *can’t bloody see!”*

“I can see you well enough to hit you!”

“If you crash, Pansy will kill both of us, and then my mother will find something creative to do with our corpses!”

This, at last, seemed to give Theo pause. The mention of Narcissa had him pulling up and scowling at Draco as if he had thrust a rank-smelling fruit under his nose.

“What do you care?” he shouted.

“What do I — what do I *care?* What do I CARE? How about I don’t want to see you *maimed,* you noisome twat, God knows why! Because I don’t *love* the thought of watching you punch yourself a new nose on a goalpost! Because, for some irrecollectable reason, my mother likes you, and if you make her cry I will quite simply *not* invite you to the family séances. God, Daphne likes them dumb, doesn’t she, you’re as thick as— oh, hell.”

Theo had nearly fallen off his broomstick.

“WHAT?” he bellowed at Draco.

Hooch piped her whistle. “Malfoy, stay away from Nott!” she shouted. “No foul play!”

“I didn’t,” Draco cried indignantly, but she was already zooming away: Goyle had nailed a double-hitter of bludgers at Wood, which caught him in the stomach, one after the other. He reeled in the air, clutching his stomach.

“YOU DO NOT ATTACK THE KEEPER UNLESS THE QUAFFLE IS WITHIN THE SCORING AREA! Gryffindor penalty!”

Angelina scored. Sixty-ten. Fred Weasley pelted a bludger at Warrington, knocking the quaffle out of his hands, and Alicia seized it and put it through the Slytherin goal. Seventy-ten. The Gryffindor crowd was screaming itself hoarse. Draco was off his rhythm, too focused on following Theo to pay attention to the movement of the quaffle. Anyway, it was Harry’s game, now: if he caught the snitch, that was the match and the Cup.

Draco passed the quaffle to Angelina, and the crowd gave a howl that was wildly out of proportion to the quality of the pass. He spun around in time to catch Harry shoot overhead, putting on a great burst of speed, his hand outstretched. His heart jumped, and he let out a shout, ready to cheer.

A bludger hurtled into Harry’s gut. Harry shouted and slid backward on the broomstick, his momentum jolting him forward so hard that for a second he was bent double. The sound of the impact was sickening. The strap for his glasses snapped, and they went twinkling into the air below.

Katie yelped and dove to catch them, while Harry slowed to a halt and clutched his stomach, gasping.

Every eye on the pitch whirled on the source of the bludger, and every eye saw what Draco did: Goyle and Theo, having a heated

argument in midair.

“FOUL PLAY!” Lee Jordan was howling into the megaphone, dancing out of Professor McGonagall’s reach. “OBVIOUS FOUL on the seeker! YOU DIRTY MEAN LUMP—”

Professor McGonagall didn’t even bother to tell him off. She was standing up, her hat abandoned, her face white as marble.

Heart racing, Draco scanned the pitch. Who could help him? Who would? To them, he was the Slytherin beater. They couldn’t give a damn if he got hurt or not.

But then again, he thought wretchedly. Then again. Maybe — maybe, sometimes, people could surprise you. *Maybe.*

“George,” he shouted.

George swept to a halt, hovering alongside him, and raked back his sweat-soaked hair. “Wotcher, Blondie,” he panted. “You alright?”

He pointed at Theo. “The Slytherin beater can’t see,” he shouted. “He’s blind from his left eye. If he gets clipped, he might fall.”

George grunted, waiting for the point.

“I don’t — it wouldn’t be — it’s not fair, is it? He’s playing with a bad eye. We shouldn’t let him — listen, Weasley, would you — I know it’s a lot to ask—”

George squinted. “I know him,” he said sharply, after a moment. “That’s the kid who came to our party. Theodore Snot.”

“Yes!”

He scratched behind his ear. “He’s a Slytherin.”

“Then he’s been punished quite enough, don’t you think?”

George massaged his chin. “You know,” he said to Draco, almost conversationally, “he *did* laugh at the Snot joke.”

Katie tossed the glasses to Fred, who zipped up to Harry and pressed them safely into his hands. There was a brief exchange that Draco couldn’t hear; Fred touched Harry’s shoulder, and Harry nodded. Then Fred shot off again, his bat outstretched in a deadly angle to his body. He swung at the bludger, sending it hurtling back towards the Slytherins, towards Goyle — but it was Fred, Draco knew, and Fred’s signature move was a backhand that spun wickedly, that spun so hard it banked the bludger in a sharp rightward curve at the last moment — devilish hard to beat, especially if you couldn’t — if you couldn’t see from your left eye—

“NOTT!” he bellowed.

Theo turned his head in time for the bludger to crunch into it.

He floated free of his broomstick, his limbs slack and unmoored to the broom. The collective gasp nearly shook the stands: it was very rare for a bludger to hit so squarely. Fred must have assumed that Theo would duck.

Draco thought he could hear two women screaming, although that was, of course, his imagination. There was no way he could pick their voices out at this distance.

He threw himself forward and started to accelerate, but he knew at once that the math didn’t work. He was too far, and Theo too low to the ground, for him to make any difference. He had caught Harry, once, on a wing and a prayer and some very unsafe flying; he couldn’t make the same magic work twice.

Head lolling, Theo tipped backward and crumpled off his broomstick. The Slytherins erupted in screams.

And then George Weasley swept up from below and caught him in his arms.

Now everyone was screaming. The Slytherins were screaming in relief; the Gryffindors were screaming in confusion; Wood was screaming, too, possibly from both. Madam Hooch was blowing her whistle at anything that moved.

“That’s WEASLEY, GEORGE WEASLEY, with the save,” Jordan said, faint with bemusement. “He’s got Nott, taking him back to the ground… and Higgs is grabbing his broomstick… everyone’s coming down for a time-out, now…”

Draco splattered a wide radius of mud when he landed. “He’s alright?” he demanded, shouldering through the Slytherins.

George had deposited Theo, none too gently, on the ground. Theo had regained consciousness and was leaning heavily on Goyle while Madam Pomfrey checked his reflexes.

“I’m fine,” said Theo weakly, clawing his way into consciousness. “Big bloody hoo-ha, for what, I ask you — I was taking a break from the game, I would’ve been fine in a moment.”

“You pissant,” said Draco in disbelief. “You were in free-fall.”

“You can’t prove that.”

“You could have broken your neck!”

“Oh for Merlin’s sake, it’s quidditch, Malfoy, the ground has Cushioning Charms.” He shoved himself upright, grumbling. “When did you become such a girl?”

“Red card,” Flint said, as soon as Madam Hooch was within earshot. “Red card on Weasley. Did you see that? He almost killed Theo, *would* have killed him—”

“If not for George,” snapped Angelina, landing nearly on top of him. “And nothing about Fred’s play was illegal, Flint, which is a lot more

than you can say for most of yours, so why don't you shut up and thank us for saving *your* player."

"Thank you? He wouldn't have *been* in freefall if it weren't for that bloodthirsty, mud-loving savage."

Angelina's wand was out and at Flint's throat before he could blink. He scrambled backward out of pure instinct at the look in her eyes. "Say that again," she said coldly. "Say that about Fred again, I dare you—"

"FLINT! JOHNSON! BOTH OF YOU, BACK DOWN!"

They lurched away from each other with bad grace.

"Bad behavior!" cried Madam Hooch, thrusting herself between them. *"Bad* behavior! Very bad indeed, from everyone, with the singular, commendable exception of Mr. Weasley! Both of you, back in the air. I don't want to see you *look* at each other unless one of you has the quaffle. Mr. Nott! Consider yourself benched, for your own safety."

A groan went up from the Slytherin stands: this was the equivalent of red-carding them.

"No! No! No complaints!" ordered Hooch shrilly. "Flint, you're lucky you're not facing a demerit for having him fly—"

"He's good to play, Madame H.," said Flint earnestly. "Really, he is. He'll swear it up and down."

"Like he said," Theo muttered, fumbling for his broom. "Up and bloody down."

"I'm sure he will! But he'll do it *from the bench!"*

The thirteen players rose into the air again. Draco deliberately didn't look at Theo, who was scowling so badly it must have made his

bruise hurt worse. He did, however, throw Flint a cold glare as he shot past him on the way up.

“It’s Johnson with the quaffle for Gryffindor,” said Jordan, with a certain solemnity. “Johnson to Bell, back to Johnson, dodges smellyuglybrute I MEAN CAPTAIN FLINT OF SLYTHERIN, dodges Montague also, to the goal — and Potter comes in to block Warrington — SHE SCORES! Gryffindor, eighty-twenty!”

Harry, who had almost pelted headlong into the stands, skidded to a halt in midair, reversed, and zoomed back into the middle of the field.

Draco, who was still reeling from the play with Theo, tried to lift his hand for a pass. Katie saw, and shot it over, but he fumbled, nearly dropped it, and had to sink in the air to keep possession.

Harry was racing towards something.

Draco wove through Warrington and Montague, the ball clutched under his arm. A shadow passed over his head: it was Flint.

Harry pressed himself flat on the broom handle and spun to avoid a bludger, like it was easy, like it was child’s play. The old Nimbus gleamed in the sunlight, carrying him like a dream.

Draco flipped the quaffle high in the air, sending Flint diving for it, and swept beneath his legs. Then he banked up, sharply, and tweaked the end of Flint’s broomstick. Flint yelled and tumbled sideways, rolling. Draco caught the quaffle.

Cheating wasn’t bad form if the other person cheated first. That was as good as in the rulebook. He was pretty sure he’d heard George say it, once.

Or maybe Flint just should have minded his mouth about Fred.

Harry threw himself forward, both hands off his broom. But Higgs was coming in from the other direction.

Draco swept up and almost careened into Goyle, who came in swinging his bat.

Harry knocked Higgs' arm out of the way and lurched into midair.

Draco pulled up short and punted the quaffle as hard as he possibly could.

"YES!"

The stadium exploded. Harry soared above the crowd, shaking something tiny and golden in his fist. The quaffle soared free and was caught by Angelina, who hocked it carelessly into the stands and shot towards the Gryffindor goal hoops, where all members of the team were rapidly converging. Draco, grinning, flew to join them.

Wood was on his knees in the mud, his arms out as if awaiting divine abduction, tears flowing freely down his face. His body quaked with great ugly sobs for the five unhindered seconds before Fred plowed into him at full speed and drove him to the ground in a bruising embrace. Then George came down bellowing on the pair of them, and Angelina and Katie leapt on, too, and Harry dropped in on top, splayed over the pile of limbs. Draco landed just aside this horrific eldritch amalgamation of limbs and house spirit, and said, smirking: "What was that about Marcus Flint's wet dream, you s—"

But he never finished, because a hand lashed out, and he was hauled in by the robes, yelping.

Inside the team hug it was warm and sweaty and smelled profoundly bad. It sounded like several people were crying; Wood was at least two of them. There were many people touching Draco at once, and he did not care for it at *all.* He barely enjoyed hugs with people of his *own* choosing on *good* days. This was far from being even that tolerable. It was an imposition into his bodily autonomy, for one; for two, it was damned uncomfortable. He squawked as his face got mushed up against someone's collarbones, and an elbow drove into his stomach.

Then again: they had won the Cup. So.

Draco sighed, and went limp. Some things had to be tolerated.

The hug dissipated after too many damn minutes, and he saw that the crowd had flooded the field. Percy was hopping around like a jubilant rabbit. Their former quarrel long forgotten, Ginny had climbed her older brother like a limpet to use as stilts, and now rode on his shoulders, waving a giant Gryffindor flag and screaming. Next to Lee Jordan — who had leapt onto the microphone podium and ripped open his windbreaker to reveal a ‘GRYFFINDOR RULES’ tee-shirt underneath it, roaring — was McGonagall, who had not even reprimanded him, for she had buried her face in a red-and-gold handkerchief.

And at the head of the crowd rushing to greet them were Ron and Hermione. Ron, greeting a pile that was thirty percent Weasley already by composition, simply bellowed and threw himself into the team hug, which welcomed him noisily and immediately. Hermione, however, came rushing up — her eyes were red from crying again, but not from sadness, he didn’t think — and threw her arms around Draco’s shoulders.

He staggered back.

“Granger, Potter is over there,” he said, jerking his thumb at the pile. “The bloke who won the Cup. Caught the snitch and everything.”

“For the last time, I don’t *care* about quidditch,” she said, though her voice was thick. “This is for not dying.”

“I… well, alright then,” he said, trying not to sound too pleased, and consented to fifteen generous seconds of submersion in Hermione’s riotous sweet-smelling hair.

When the crowd thinned enough to leave the stadium, they were marched back to the castle amidst a parade of red and gold. Draco felt odd and surreal and the levels of good cheer that were being

leveled at him: almost everywhere he turned, someone was clapping or flashing him thumbs-up. Someone actually went so far as to ruffle his hair, but when he whipped his wand out to eke satisfaction from the vile offender, they had melted into the crowd.

The whole school roved up the lawns to the castle in good spirits. But they stopped when they reached the entrance courtyard, milling around in a maze of bumping shoulders.

“What’s going on?”

“There’s something happening in the courtyard,” said Hermione, who the crowd had sandwiched under his arm. Someone jostled her into his ribs, and he gave them a rough shove back, clearing a small bubble for her to stand. “But I can’t see — can you?”

“No, I can’t, besides which there are about sixteen different people touching me. I’m sick of this. Let’s clear a path.”

He pulled out his wand; Hermione gave a squawk of disapproval; he rolled his eyes and said, “Relax, would you, I’m not going to maim anybody,” and cast a small Buffeting Charm into the crowd before them. Then he grabbed her arm and pulled her quickly through the gap, before the crowd could close up again.

In the courtyard there was a Shield Charm and a *Muffliato* cast around it, which meant they couldn’t hear what was happening, merely see it. The sight alone was dreadful enough, however. Sibelius Nott stood by the fountain, a stone-faced auror at either flank, holding a scroll of paper before him like an oustretched knife. Opposite him was Albus Dumbledore — looking angrier than Draco had ever seen him — and Professor Lupin, whose expression was in contrast rather calm.

“Can you hear?” hissed Hermione. “I can’t hear, can you?”

“No, they’ve got a *Muffliato* over the courtyard.”

“Can we get inside it?”

“Maybe if we had the Cloak, but it’s up in the Tower. Shame we can’t cast a Disillusionment Charm.”

“If only we could! Ugh, I’m *such* a nitwit, I spent all summer reading the Runes textbook, when I could have been doing something actually useful, like next year’s Charms—”

“Don’t beat yourself up, everyone needs some light reading,” Draco said absently. “But Nott’s leaving. Suppose we’ll have to ask Lupin himself.”

He was right. Nott took his leave of the courtyard with a flare of his purple cape, which Draco found horrifically pretentious and obviously wanted to copy for himself as soon as possible. When he crossed the threshold, the Shield Charm and the *Muffliato* both dropped, and he could hear the burble of the fountain once more.

Professor Dumbledore and Lupin were conversing with their heads together, a mirrored vignette of industrious woe. They scarcely took notice when Draco and Hermione appeared at their side.

“What’s going on?” demanded Hermione. Lupin had the scroll from Nott, and he held it away from his body as though it contained poisonous ink.

“Professor Lupin is taking a brief sabbatical,” Dumbledore said calmly. “A successive strain of illnesses have taken a toll on him. He will be retiring for an interminable length of time to his quarters—”

“It’s alright, Albus,” interrupted Lupin. He sounded tired. Lupin never sounded chipper, exactly, but now Draco feared him likely to keel over, so heavy was his tone. “Ms. Granger and Mr. Malfoy are trustworthy students. I have been placed under house arrest.”

Hermione shot upright like someone had sent a Petrificus straight up her spine. “For *what?”*

“Suspected contact with Sirius Black,” he said, with a hoarse irony that was almost amused. Draco glanced at Dumbledore, whose weathered face revealed nothing. How much did the old man know? How much had Lupin revealed?

Hermione said sharply: “On what evidence?”

“On the evidence that we were childhood acquaintances,” said Lupin reluctantly. “And on the evidence that dementors report sighting Black on the premises of Hogwarts; on the evidence that I am, of course, the most likely to have abetted his crimes—”

“That’s *nothing!”*

Draco jumped. Hermione radiated fury like heat. If she were capable, he believed venom would have flown from her lips. “That’s nothing! That’s so far below the threshold of reasonable suspicion it should make you laugh! Who’s your solicitor? Draco, can you call that man — Gamp, or Gunt, what was his name?”

“Gatz, yes. Easily done. I’ll owl him tonight. Unless the professor has someone he prefers.”

Lupin pinched the end of the paper and rubbed it between his fingers. “There are other charges.”

“Well? What are they?” Hermione planted her hands on her hips.

Draco interrupted, “Professor, does the Ministry think you have lice?”

It was hard to tell whose expression was stranger: Hermione, who apparently thought he had started talking in French, or Dumbledore, who thought it more like Ancient Greek.

“There are reasons for them to suspect it,” Lupin said quietly.

“What reasons? Good reasons? Standard-of-proof reasons?”

“They have… testimony from an old acquaintance of mine.”

“Does your ‘acquaintance’ have proof, then?” said Hermione.

Lupin shrugged. “As much as one ever can,” he said evasively. “Of course, if they had proof, one wonders why I was not arrested... nevertheless, I believe they take his word very seriously. If you will excuse me—”

He lifted his chin, and Draco turned to follow his gaze over his shoulder. A pair of aurors stood in the entryway to the courtyard, their hands clasped behind their backs.

“I have an appointment to keep,” said Lupin dryly. “I believe I was told that if I cooperate, they shall find no need to employ Veritaserum. Albus, you will find my lesson plans in the upper right-hand drawer of my desk. Please make the next third-year class as engaging as possible; I promised them something entertaining.”

“Don’t,” Hermione broke out. “Don’t go with them. Don’t let them interrogate you! What about Pad—”

“Albus,” said Lupin, authoritatively, and Dumbledore settled a hand on Hermione’s shoulder. Hermione broke off as if someone had cut the strings of her throat.

Lupin limped across the courtyard, a short walk made longer by the slow scrape of his cane and his bad leg against the cobblestone. Then the aurors flanked him, and taking him each by an elbow, they escorted him back into the castle. The doors swung shut with a sound as cold and final as a key turning in a lock.

Dumbledore waited until Lupin was gone to release Hermione’s shoulder. “Miss Granger,” he began, soft as velvet.

She twisted out of his reach and grabbed Draco’s hand. “We have to go,” she gasped. “Sorry, professor — I know it’s rude, but it’s really urgent — Draco, come on—”

For once, he didn’t resent her hauling on his arm like he was a reluctant oxen. He gave Dumbledore a short nod and ran after her, his long legs easily keeping pace with hers, as they flew up the stairs to the castle and careened through the double-doors.

As soon as they were out of the crowd, Hermione spun around and dragged them into a secluded alcove under a window. “Lupin,” she whispered.

“Yes. I know. *They* know. It’s obvious, I was right there with you—”

“But no proof—”

“They only suspect.”

“They’re going to question—”

“With Veritaserum, you damn well know it—”

“Doesn’t matter what he says—”

“—wouldn’t pass up the chance, never mind that rot about ‘cooperation.’”

“Yes! I know! But even if not—”

“Magical Security Act means he’s got the Trace on him,” he said darkly. “He’s trapped in the castle. He can’t reach Padfoot. He can’t warn him.”

“Yes, but the important part—”

“Is the interrogation will reveal Padfoot’s location, *I know,* I told you, I’m not Potter or Weasley, you don’t need to explain it to me—”

“No! *Listen* to me! The important part is the house arrest!”

He broke off. Their breath was coming in such short sharp bursts that it fogged the windowpane beside them.

“Why,” he bit out, aggrieved by the indignity of asking. He hated when she got somewhere before he did.

She didn’t notice his acrid tone. Her face was drawn with terror at whatever realization she’d come to while he was busy blustering like a ponce. “It’s a full moon tonight,” she whispered.

A bolt of fear sank deep into his gut.

“And he’s not—”

“No.”

“Even with the potion—”

“All they have to do,” she said, with remarkable evenness, though her voice was trembling, “is wait in that room with him. That’s all they have to do.”

He threaded his hand into his hair and gave a brutal, grounding tug. “Alright,” he said thickly. “So. What do we do? We have to get him out—”

“We have to take the potion, is what we have to do,” she said. “Tonight. And when he transforms—”

“Sirius won’t leave without him.”

“Sirius doesn’t know about it,” she said quietly. Her eyes were dark and clear with diamond-hard focus. It was sort of mesmerizing. “We’ll try to get the aurors off of Lupin, of course we will, but we only brewed enough potion for each of us to get two hours. If we can’t get him out, we’ll have to — I mean, Sirius is the one who doesn’t have protection. I don’t think — I have to believe that Dumbledore won’t let Lupin come to harm while he’s at Hogwarts.”

He nodded.

“Do you — do you think I’ve got it wrong?” She twisted her fingers, as if trying to wring out her indecision through her knucklebones. “Do you think I’m being cruel? To Lupin? I mean, we do have the potion — we might be able to, to, I don’t know, go get him first, and then take him, and—”

“You haven’t got it wrong,” he said. His hand closed over her fingers, stilling them. They were warm and soft, never having wielded anything tougher than a quill. “It’s brilliant. We’ve got it worked out. All we have to do is execute.”

“That’s the part where it always goes wrong.”

He drew his hand away quickly. Wouldn’t do to stand there holding her hand like a sappy twat. He wasn’t bloody Sir Luckless.

“Less of this dour nonsense, Granger, or you’ll put me right off the affair. I’m not in the business of investing in bad ventures. Remember what I said. When in doubt, just think: I’m marvelous.”

“Thank you, yes. When I’m running from a horde of dementors with a werewolf and a wanted criminal, and I’m trying to cast a Patronus, which, for the record, I have *never* done, I’ll just think, oh, you know, Draco Malfoy is *perfectly* marvelous!”

“First off, I’ve heard of worse ideas. But no, you horrible ninny, I meant you.”

And then he gave her a good-natured yank on her hair, hard enough to sting, so she didn’t think he was going soft or something. The sound she made ought to have been worth a Patronus all on its own.

-this one goes out to everyone who liked the quidditch game in chapter 23. brought to you buy: a useless amount of research about what would even constitute a "foul" in a game this dangerous. these guys live in a pre-CTE world, babey.

-professor mcgonagall continues to be my favorite teacher because she has an immaculate poker face but underneath it she goes harder than literally any professor ever has. why does everyone make fun of dumbledore for child endangerment when mcgonagall gives a first year a BROOMSTICK and lets him play in a league against SEVENTEEN YEAR OLDS. put some respect on her name. no one does it like her.

-in case it confuses someone, "sir luckless" is a reference to a Beedle the Bard story, but I won't say which one.

-someone had a question in the comments about whether hermione would have a time turner in this AU, which I'll answer here because it carries zero risk of spoilers: she doesn't! mainly because time travel plots are insanely difficult to write, and I hate them. I don't like how POA has Harry and Ron just sort of ignore Hermione going absent for certain periods of time, and I think it's unrealistic that she would be able to hide it from them for that long; at any rate, in this fic, Draco definitely would notice. and with respect to this story's continuity, it would not make sense for Hermione to need one, since she doesn't end up taking Divination (that comes up in Chapter 17) or Muggle Studies, which frees up her schedule.

-Also, less relevantly, I think the existence of time turners pushes the suspension of disbelief in the HP universe a biiiiiit further than I'd like, for preference; i.e., I think too many necessary plot developments (both in the canon storyline and before) would realistically be obviated by the existence of a time turner. secondary to that, I don't really even think the time turner was necessary to solve the problem in the original POA book, since I can think of a dozen other ways that Dumbledore could have helped out Harry and Hermione in saving Buckbeak and Sirius, if he really wanted to.

-thank you to all who commented — i read all of them! new chapter going up next week. things are about to get hairy. wink, wink.

Hello, Old Friend

Chapter 28: Hello, Old Friend

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

They went to dinner with everyone else, but none of them felt like eating. The greatest hallmark of their low spirits was Ron, who took three piddling bites of his beef wellington, pushed it away, and said, “Can’t, my heart’s not in it,” with the grief of a dying prince. Draco quietly Vanished his plate out of dignity, and Hermione did not even bother to fill hers, but drank four cups of coffee with sugar and nibbled a bonbon until she jittered like a screaming kettle.

After dinner, they went straight to Myrtle’s bathroom. Harry had stuffed the Cloak down the front of his robes (“Congratulations, mate, you’re finally out of training bras,” said Ron) and Hermione carried a laundry bag of old robes that had been left behind in the laundry rooms.

The potion had congealed to a sort of brick roux at the bottom of the pot, burbling and glutinous. When Draco gave it a testing stir, it clung to the stirring wand like a thick mud. Black smoke rose in tight coils like crimped hair. Every so often a bubble floated to the surface and caved with a wet *plorp.*

Myrtle floated above them, her chin pillowed in her hands. “Eugh! Yee-uck! What is that? It smells sim-ply aw-ful.”

She was absolutely right, but Draco ignored her. “Weasley, you’ve got the goblets?”

Ron pulled out a set of glass tumblers from the Great Hall that had found their way into his bag.

“Good. Potter, the hairs?”

“Got them,” he said, fumbling out a few vials from his pocket. “I tried to keep track of which one was the woman. I’m sorry, Hermione, I think it’s this one, but I can’t be sure.”

Draco ladled helpings of potion into each glass and held one up to the light, flicking it with his fingernail, until the portion leveled out. “A hair in each,” he ordered.

The first frothed and turned a sour snot green; the second waxed yellow like bile. The third turned the color and consistency of sour milk, and the final glass was a deep reddish brown, like clay.

“Yum yum,” said Ron grimly. “Some nightcap.”

Hermione shook out the laundry bag on the floor. “I Transfigured some Ministry robes,” she said nervously. “They’re a bit shabby, but between the fabric and a bit of patch-up sewing, they should hold for the night. They don’t have the crest, though, so I hope nobody looks too closely.”

“They won’t,” said Draco. “Our faces will be proof enough. Potter, who’s each hair from?”

“Me? Oh, I don’t know.”

Draco, who was still holding the ladle, reminded himself strongly that he did not believe in corporal punishment. “You collected them,” he gritted out. “How can you not know whose hair you were yanking?”

“How was I to tell? I don’t know any of them! You and Ron were off with Daphne.”

“You didn’t think to *check*— no, never mind. There’s no use now. We know one of them’s Orpheus Greengrass, I suppose; we’ll just have to hope that another isn’t Sibelius Nott, since he happens to be still lurking around the castle.”

They each took a glass. Ron and Harry took the blue and green, respectively; Hermione reluctantly accepted the yellow, and Draco took the red.

“Remember, it has to be all of it,” he ordered. “Otherwise you won’t get the full two hours. When we’re done transforming, we’ll have to move quickly. And remember, you’ll be acting as purebloods, so you have to really sell it: keep your noses up, keep your back straight, and if anyone asks you what you’re doing, the answer is always *who’s asking.”*

The others nodded solemnly.

“Well,” he said bleakly, *“sláinte,* as my father would say.”

He threw back his Polyjuice Potion in a long double-pull without coming up for air. It tasted like rotting fruit, a sweetness so intense it tipped into sourness. He gagged and forced himself to swallow, which, aside from staring down Quirinius Quirrell and apologizing to Hermione Granger, was a dead ringer for the hardest thing he had ever done.

Polyjuice was a fast-acting potion; inside a minute, his guts were writhing as intensely as a pair of copulating snakes. A searing burn emanated from his stomach out to the surface of his skin, which began to bubble as if it were hot wax. Ron said thickly: “I think I’m gonna be sick,” and ran into the nearest stall.

“Yeah,” said Harry, “Me too — uh oh—” and he flew into the one beside him.

“Don’t throw up,” Draco ordered, speaking thickly through the horrible quakes of nausea that were rolling up from his throat. “If any of you throw up, after I — ugh — spent a month on that bloody potion — *ah* —”

He dropped to his knees. His legs were growing, his hands thickening, the nails widening in their beds. His robes stretched taut

and split at the seams; he shucked them hastily, along with his pants, before he split those, too. A final peal of nausea drove him to the sink, gasping; and then it was over, as suddenly as it began.

Myrtle, in the background, was wailing. “Horrible,” she cried. “Oh, you horrible, horrible boy — you *vomited* on me!”

“They’d better not have,” said Draco, in a voice he didn’t recognize. It was deep and throaty, with a twang of London, rather than his usual Wiltshire drawl. He brushed back a sheaf of mousy brown hair around his eyes and checked the mirror. In doing so, he had to swallow a sigh of grief: gone were his fine white locks, his father’s eyes, his mother’s graceful nose; in their place were the cartoonishly square features of Garrett Goyle. A box of a jaw jutted under a hard, deep brow, and his hair was longer on the top than on the sides of his head; he recalled that Garrett usually wore it in a topknot.

Despite the hideous downgrade in appearance, he grinned. It worked. It had *worked.* He, Draco Malfoy, had brewed a N.E.W.T.-level Dark potion on a portable cauldron in a corner of a girls’ bathroom — admittedly, with help from Hermione — and it worked *perfectly.*

“I’m a sodding genius,” he breathed, touching his weathered cheek. In a better world, he would’ve had time to dash down to Snape’s office and boast till he was blue in the face.

“You three alright?” said a thin, elderly voice. In the mirror, Draco saw Brutus Travers hobble out of the bathroom stall, wearing Harry’s glasses. He was holding a lump of tattered clothes tactfully in front of his unmentionables. “Er, Malfoy, is that you?”

Draco, realizing that he was perilously unrobed, immediately hocked a set of robes over his shoulder and wrestled on some pants. “It’s me,” he said, unsettled by the deep pitch of his own voice. “Potter, looks like you got Travers. He’s a retired veteran from the Bureau of Curse Breakers. He used to be on track to become an Unspeakable,

but he resigned to join the Dark Lord. He mostly does philanthropy now."

"I'm a former Death Eater?" said Harry, repulsed.

"Barely. Travers was old when my father was gestating, I daresay he never cast more than a Stinging Hex in the Dark Lord's name — oh, there you are, Weasley. You remember Orpheus."

Ron crept out of the stall, tottering around like a newborn giraffe on his newly-elongated limbs. Watching Daphne's father smack his head into the stall crossbar was, admittedly, very funny, though Draco had to execute a sharp pivot to avoid getting intimately acquainted with the Greengrass family jewels. "Granger, you alright?" he called.

"Yes," said a low woman's voice. "Can you — can you pass my robes over the stall, please?"

They did, and she emerged, a round-faced blonde woman in the shape of a pear, with sallow cheeks and stubby fingers. Draco almost didn't recognize her without all the work she'd had done.

"Did you boys manage to… oh, you're tall," she said in alarm, craning her neck. "Goodness. Didn't I grow at all?"

"Not much," said Draco frankly. "Constance Crabbe is a short woman. If we see anybody, I'm Goyle, and that's Travers and Greengrass."

"If we all know each other, oughtn't we be using our first names?"

"Not in front of other people. Besides, you and I had a fight about a year ago, and I don't think we've spoken to each other since."

"Oh, dear," she said, tucking her wand into her robes. "Won't people be confused, seeing us together, then?"

“Possibly,” he said, with a flat look at Harry, “which is why it would’ve been ideal for Potter to ask me before he went around filching follicles willy-nilly. But it can’t be helped. Come on, we’re burning minutes. Are we all presentable? Robes on? Good, and don’t forget — Weasley, *what did I tell you about the tie?”*

They cracked the door of the bathroom, checked that the coast was clear, and set off.

“Stop doing that with your hands,” he muttered to Hermione.

“Stop what?”

“Fiddling with them. Constance Crabbe went to finishing school, she knows better than that.”

“Oh. How’s this? Better?”

It wasn’t. “For Merlin’s sake.” He grabbed her hand and clamped it down on his arm, where it couldn’t distract either of them. “There. Hold on, and don’t look so worried. These people don’t have to worry about anything, remember? Your biggest problems happen in the Society pages of *Witch Weekly.”*

Her fingers dug into his forearm. She lifted her chin and flattened her mouth into a puffy pout.

“Not bad, but make it richer.”

She lifted her nose.

“Even richer.”

She lifted it more.

“Perfect.”

They went down the marble staircase. The way out of the castle took them past the Defense the Dark Arts classroom, and as they passed

the door, Harry lagged behind.

Draco was the first to notice. “Travers,” he said warningly, and when Harry didn’t reply, he hissed: “Potter!”

“He’s stuck in there with the aurors,” said Harry, lingering outside the classroom with the pie-eyed longing of the hopelessly orphaned. “We look like we’re Ministry. We could walk in and tell them to leave.”

“Potter! No! The plan! Stick to the plan!”

“Sorry,” he whispered, and then he vanished into the classroom.

“You’re retired!” Draco shrilled at the closed door. “You can’t give orders! You’re not *an employee,* you— you—”

“But I am,” said Ron quickly. “I’ll run in and back him up.”

“No!” Draco was whisper-shouting at the top of his register, which hurt his throat. “Weasley! Stop! You don’t even know what *department you work in!”*

Ron gave a roguish little half-shrug, which looked utterly bizarre on Orpheus, and followed Harry.

There was nothing else for it. He let go of Hermione’s arm and hurried after him.

Harry was locked in argument with a pair of aurors at the door to Lupin’s office. “And I’m saying I need to talk to him,” he croaked, in a not-terrible impression of a crotchety old man. “I don’t care what you have him doing, I have important business! Business I can only discuss with the suspect!”

“Roger that,” announced Ron, striding up the aisle. “Travers and I have an important message.”

Draco wanted to concuss him with something. Roger that? *Roger that?*

“We’re under orders from the Minister’s Chief of Staff,” said one of the aurors, a mean-looking fellow with a prominent wand holster on his hip. The spikes on their coats made them seem taller. It wasn’t that Draco was intimidated, he was just observing a good design choice. “We don’t move until dawn.”

Draco shouldered Harry and Ron out of the way. ““And who do you think sent us here but Lord Nott? He requires both you in the Astronomy Tower,” he snapped. “At *once.* It is a matter regarding—” What would Nott care about? “—the escaped convict. Sirius Black.”

“Why wouldn’t he send for us?” said the other one, with all too reasonable skepticism.

He pitched his voice into its most nasal register. “Do I seem like I dribble my hours away contemplating the motivations of Lord Nott?” he snapped. “Is it for you or I to question the right hand of the Minister? I have done my duty, sir. You do yours.”

The aurors glanced at each other. Their expressions were uncomfortably knowing.

One auror reached out to touch Draco’s arm. “Sir—”

The door burst open, and in flew Constance Crabbe, breathing as if she had just done two laps up and down the grand staircase. “HELP!” she screamed, pointing at the doorway. “Help! Help! Please, help!”

“Mrs. Crabbe,” exclaimed one of the aurors. “What’s wr—”

“DEMENTORS IN THE CASTLE!” she shrieked. “Dementors in the castle — they must have seen Black!”

“What! Where?”

“I don’t know where it is *now,”* she screeched. “It was headed for the dungeons! Are you just going to stand there, or will you do your job?”

One of the aurors swore. “I told Nott he shouldn’t have brought those overgrown blankets to the castle. Never send a creature to do a wizard’s job, I said.”

“Yeha, well, you go and take care of it. I’ll handle the werewolf.”

“Fine. Tell Lord Nott where I’ve gone.”

The first auror jogged out of the room, leaving them alone with the other. Draco wracked his brains. Harry mouthed, ‘Now what?’ at him from behind the auror’s back, and he made a furious face back. What was he supposed to do?

“Sod this,” said Ron suddenly, and took a running leap at the auror.

“Weasley! NO!”

The auror’s shielding ward flared to life, and caught Ron with a crackle of white energy. He was thrown back against the wall, and the auror whirled on him, his wand high. Draco spat a curse and drew his wand, fired a *Stupefy* that fizzled against the same ward, and then two more Stunning Spells that ricocheted ineffectually against the stone walls. Hermione and Harry followed it up with charms of their own, but the auror’s warding was excellent — they were trained to deal with far worse — and his returning Stunner very nearly caught Ron in the chest.

Their one saving grace, thought Draco hopelessly, was that the auror had no bloody idea what was going on. “What the hell,” he bellowed. “What the actual *hell,* Travers? You were at Tracy’s birthday party—”

“And it was bloody awful!” roared Ron, shooting a Knockback Jinx that the auror cast off with barely a twitch. “I’ve secretly hated you for years!”

“Have you gone mad?”

“On the contrary! I’ve finally come to my senses!” He shot a Disarming Jinx at the same time as Harry, and with a slash, the auror dissolved both into harmless sparks — but in so doing, left himself open for Hermione’s *Flipendo,* which sent him bowling over the table and into the back wall.

He staggered upright almost at once, but Draco was quicker: he cast his wand at the bookshelf behind him and snapped, *“Carpe retractum.”*

The bookshelf keeled forward with a thunder of falling books and magical knickknacks. The better part of Remus Lupin’s considerable library descended on the auror’s head, and the iron-and-wood frame followed it with a tolling THUD and the unmistakable crack of bones.

The auror did not move.

“Bloody hell,” said Ron, in tones of awe and commingled fear. “Did you kill him?”

“Ron!”

“I was just asking!”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” Harry assured him.

“I hope not,” said Draco crossly, “but *you* two didn’t give me many options. At best, he would’ve Stunned you and hauled you in for questioning; at worst, you would’ve gotten a first-hand introduction to the ghoulish universe of spells they teach you in auror training.”

Hermione dashed to the office door and jiggled the handle. *“Alohamora,”* she murmured. It clicked open. “Oh, thank goodness. We’re lucky they didn’t hex it closed; we don’t have time to try ward-breaking, and I’m still a novice at Runes.”

“We didn’t have time for any of this,” Draco snapped, as they hurried out of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. “We had two

hours! Two! You'd better hope that everything goes as smooth as butter with Padfoot."

Which, he would later admit, was the sort of idiotic fortune-tempting that made him, too, partially responsible for all that would transpire.

They descended a winding staircase and jogged along the narrow hallways leading towards the entrance. In this part of the castle there were few windows, and the torches burned low, leaving wide shadows on the stone floors. The hallways were mercifully empty, since most of the students had retired to their commons.

In an alcove by the door, however, their luck ran out. A pair of students were engaged in heated whispering under the sconce, and with horror, Draco recognized both of them.

Daphne and Theo were bickering as though it was their last night on earth to air out their grievances.

"—right, I don't care what they say! He's a Hogwarts professor—"

"—course he is, but there are things—"

"So tell me!"

"I can't! It's more complicated…" This was muffled. "...want to end up like me."

"Don't you try to tell me… more pain in my life than you're capable of imagining."

"—don't want you to be… would have done worse…. think he'd do to you?"

"I don't care! And I don't care if he *is*, anyway! Blood purity, *blegh...* Half the purebloods in Slytherin… out of a paper bag!"

"You don't mean that."

“I do! Oh, but I do! I would rather live in a box and snog a *muggle* than than have to marry some rat-faced incestuous pureblood prat —”

“Don’t say that. Daph, don’t you say that *ever.”*

There was a scuffle, and a squeak. Then a pause. Draco held out his arm, sequestering the four of them behind a corner.

When silence fell, he crooked his fingers, and they swept into the hall.

Daphne and Theo whisked their wands away from each other's throats and hid them behind their backs.

“Dad?” said Daphne.

“Mr. Greengrass,” said Theo, with a cool mouthful of snide. “Mr. Goyle. Mrs. Crabbe. Lord Travers. What brings you to the castle tonight?”

Daphne stepped forward before Draco could answer. “Is Astoria alright?” she said, rigid with dread. “Dad?”

A beat of silence.

Draco angled his wand behind his back and covered a Stinging Jinx with a sneeze. Ron yelped.

“She’s fine! She’s fine. She’s alright. Er… resting,” he said, massaging his rear. “Listen, we’ve got to go… kiddo. We’re here on Ministry business. Top secret.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Daphne. “You mean you… you’re going to—”

Theo hauled her back by the elbow, a movement made brutal by haste. “Daphne’s had a long night, Mr. Greengrass. I apologize most sincerely for her impoliteness. I’m taking her back to the dorms so she can rest.”

“Don’t touch me! Dad, is it true? You’re going after—”

Theo’s strength surprised him: he hauled her up by the waist and bundled her down the nearest set of stairs. “We’ll be off, now,” he said loudly, over Daphne’s yowl of fury. “Give my regards to your families. I sincerely apologize for disrupting your evening.”

“Theodore,” said Draco. Theo blinked.

“Your eye looks brutal, boy.”

“Ah, yes. I walked into a hippogriff,” said Theo crisply. “It was my own mistake, sir, I was looking for your son.”

Ron developed a suspicious rasping cough, and Hermione thwacked him punishingly on the back.

Draco drew his wand. “Come here,” he ordered.

Theo turned the color of maggots. “I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t mean it.”

“Come *here,* boy.”

“My father is in the castle. I’ll tell him — I swear, if you hurt me, he’ll know—!”

He threw up his hands as Draco pointed his wand at his face. This made Draco vaguely sad for reasons that he had no desire nor time to examine.

“Episkey.”

The ring of purple around Theo’s eye receded, replaced by a clean pucker of healed skin. It wasn’t the best job in the world — Draco wasn’t a dab hand at healing spells — and there was still some bruising around the socket, but it was much improved, and it no longer made Draco want to gorge by looking at it.

Theo stared at him, agape.

“Do you mean to catch flies?” He swept his hand at Theo. “Make yourself scarce.”

Theo didn’t bother with thanks. He dashed down the stairs after Daphne, leaving them free to exit the castle unobserved.

The sun had set, and the sky glowed with the cool blue light that always lasts for twenty minutes or so after nightfall. The trees rose in a black wall to the west, and the moon sat full and gleaming over the turrets of Gryffindor Tower. A dementor drifted across it, giving a distant, lonesome moan.

More of its kind floated in a train of ghostly black silhouettes over the lake. Two drifted in the arms of the Whomping Willow, and a handful scuttled along the mist-clad grounds near the Forbidden Forest.

“Patronuses,” whispered Hermione. “Harry, Ron — Draco, if you can —”

“Expecto patronum,” said Harry, and a fountain of incandescent white mist poured from his wand. It wasn’t corporeal, but it bloomed like a flower around their left flank, while Ron’s incorporeal protected their right.

Draco, swallowing, drew his wand and thought of dinners on his private beach with Theo and Pansy. *“Expecto patronum.”*

It didn’t work, but he knew it wouldn’t. He couldn’t picture Theo’s face without seeing the black eye.

“That’s alright,” Hermione said bracingly. Her attempt hadn’t worked, either, and he took comfort in that. If Hermione couldn’t do it, it usually wasn’t worth doing. “Two should be enough; they shouldn’t come near us, anyway, unless we provoke them. Come on.”

They made it to the foot of the Whomping Willow, whose branches shivered idly across the clear night’s pergola of stars. Hermione

bent, hunting for a twig to poke the knot-hole. She let out an exclamation.

“Ron! It’s Scabbers!”

Ron gaped at her. “What are you talking about?”

“He’s here! He just came out of the Whomping Willow — ow!”

She snatched her hand back, nursing a bead of blood on her finger, and something small and furry raced between her feet. But Ron was too fast for the animal: he swept down, and plucked the fleeing rat out of the grasses. With a frantic squeak, it began to writhe in his hands.

“Scabbers!” said Ron, with more astonishment than relief. “What are you doing here?”

Scabbers looked terrible, which, considering that he was a rat, was really saying something. He was thinner than a rail, balding in wide patches (Draco had not been aware until this moment that rats could go bald), and he writhed in Ron’s hands as though in his death throes. Draco wondered if it hadn’t been a mistake not to let Crookshanks at him.

A rustling came from the base of the Whomping Willow, startling them all, and a black dog came tearing into the moonlight with a deafening snarl. Draco actually leapt back at the slavering snap of its jaws, even knowing it was Sirius: the ceaseless growls that tore from the creature’s chest made his guts turn to jelly.

At the sight of them, he gave another monstrous snarl, and dropped into a crouch, preparing to lunge.

“Sirius!” Harry gasped. “Sirius, it’s me, Harry — we took Polyjuice — we’re not Ministry, we’re your friends! We have to get you out of here!”

But Sirius paid no attention to Harry. His yellow eyes fixed unerringly on Ron. He prowled forward, his growl increasing with every step.

“Sirius?” said Ron weakly. He crept back. “C’mon, Sirius, it’s me… Ron… I know I’m ugly at the mo, but it’s temporary…”

“Sirius,” Hermione interrupted, “we’re here to rescue you. We have to get you somewhere safe. The Ministry’s searching the grounds.”

She reached out, and he snapped his jaws at her. With a squeak, she whisked back her hand.

“What’s wrong with him?” she whispered. “Is he alright? Doesn’t he recognize us?”

“Maybe he doesn’t, as a dog,” said Ron. “Maybe he can’t understand what we’re saying. My mum told me once that Animagi lose parts of themselves in the transformation...”

“Did she say how to make him transform back?” whispered Harry.

“Yes, there’s a spell for that,” said Hermione, wringing her hands, “but we haven’t learned it. McGonagall told me about it after the lesson on Animagi… it’ll be on the O.W.L…”

“Good to know,” said Harry flatly. “Remind me to put that on my study guide, if I’m alive tomorrow.”

“Don’t snip at me! I’m just as scared as you are!”

“STOP!”

All four of them spun around. Even Sirius stopped growling. Draco gave a thin groan of horror.

Daphne Greengrass was limping down the lawn at top speed, and quite possibly breaking a land speed record for the use of a cane. Her jaw was rigid with determination.

“DADDY!” she shouted, tripping down the uneven slope. “I want to speak to you! You *must* listen to me!”

“You’re joking,” wondered Harry.

“Ron, *do* something,” hissed Hermione. Ron made an outraged choking noise, which, Draco supposed, did technically satisfy her request, just not in a particularly helpful way.

As she drew up on them, she staggered in the wet grass. “Dad,” she said, breathless from exertion, “they’re going to go after Professor Lupin. You have to stop them.”

Ron’s jaw fell open.

“Now, I know what you’re going to say,” she said, her finger rising to forestall an answer that absolutely had not been coming. “I know. I’ve heard all the rumors, don’t ask me how, but Daddy, you must listen to me. He’s *good.* He taught me a glamour charm for my scar and he showed me how to use my cane properly, and he’s the only Defense professor I’ve ever had who’s let me do the exercises and everything — let me finish! I don’t care what they say about him. I don’t care! He’s my professor and if you let them take him away I will quite simply never speak to you or Mummy ever again until I *die!”*

Ron greeted her declaration with a weak: “Fair enough, then.”

She had been filling her lungs for a sequel. At his acquiescence, they emptied, abruptly, with an amusing *whoosh.* “Good,” she said fiercely. “So you’ll speak to Lord Nott?”

“Sure,” said Ron thickly. He was struggling with Scabbers, who was meanwhile going completely beserk, twisting and flailing in his hands. “Sounds great, honey. Now, would you get back to the castle? We’re kind of busy with something here—”

He gave a shout and dropped his rat. A ring of bloody toothmarks scored his hand. Scabbers tumbled into the grass.

Sirius lunged, knocking Ron and Harry aside. Draco stumbled back with a cry, and the rat screeched, burrowing into the long grasses and fleeing as fast as he could. “Sirius!” Ron bellowed, chasing them. “Sirius, stop! That’s my rat!”

“Sirius?” Daphne said. Her eyes were so wide they could fit moons in them. “As in Sirius Black?”

Draco seized Daphne’s arm and shook her. She squealed in fright. “You need to go back to the castle, now,” he snapped. “You’re in danger.”

“Mr. Goyle?” She could not have been more confused if Albus Dumbledore had appeared on the back of a unicorn. “Lord Travers? What are you all doing?”

“Ministry business,” said Harry, the Boy Who Lived To Be Unhelpful.

With a triumphant roar, Sirius pounced on Scabbers, who gave a scream and darted back under his legs. The dog’s gnashing jaws closed once, twice, over the place where he’d been, and a moment later, the rat sprinted out from between his paws. And then—

Then, something happened that made Draco wonder if the whole night had been an awful dream.

As if caught in an Engorgement Charm, the rat began to grow. A head shot upward from its tiny neck like an inflating balloon, and four limbs sprang from its tiny sockets. The fur shrank into its skin, and a thin crop of colorless hair sprouted around a wide bald patch on the head. The rat finally took the shape of a short, thick-waisted man, though something rodent-like remained in his narrow face and watery eyes, which darted here and there between the four of them.

He threw back his head and gave a mighty caterwaul.

“HELP!” he screamed. “HELP! HELP! IT’S SIRIUS BLACK! HE’S TRYING TO KILL ME! HELP! HELP!”

“Stop him, someone’s going to hear,” hissed Hermione, and Draco, his wand moving before she even spoke, threw a *Silencio* at him. But the damage had been done. As one, every dementor on the grounds began drifting towards the Whomping Willow.

Draco, in reflecting on his life and the many opportunities he had to die in it, would have preferred almost any of them to this.

For surely it would have been better, he thought, as the swarm of dementors descended on them, to die in a quidditch game, saving Harry Potter’s life; or to die in the Forbidden Forest, with one quick flash of a Death Eater’s spell; or to die in a vault below Hogwarts, at the hands of the Dark Lord himself; or anything, really, rather than to have his soul ripped out and eaten in the company of a murderer, his cousin, and four of his doomed friends.

When the dementors started moving, a spell of horror had frozen them all to the spot. Sirius was the first to act. He transformed back into a man, erupting in a riot of black hair and shabby robes.

Daphne let out a scream.

“That’s Sirius Black!”

“Enchanté,” snarled Sirius, whipping out his wand. “Patronuses, now, all of you, if you want to live.”

He whirled his wand in a familiar hand movement, and a familiar quadruped beast erupted from its tip. It landed, snarling and corporeal, on the ground before them and paced restlessly as the dementors drew closer. Harry and Ron cast their own, too, and their clumps of white joined the beast.

One of the dementors, testing its limits, gave a groan and dive-bombed the patronus, flinging itself against the silver beast. The beast snarled and lashed with its claws, and the dementor screeched as the light fell on its withered skin.

It swept away as quickly as it had come, and the others formed a ring just out of the Patronus's reach. Draco watched his breath turn to fog in the air before him, and his skin tingled with the beginnings of a familiar chill.

"Testing us," said Sirius grimly. "Stay strong… *oh no you don't!"*

The rat-man had been slinking back towards the Whomping Willow. Sirius whirled and snarled a curse that made ropes burst from the end of his wand. They snared the man and knocked him to the ground, where he fell, thrashing and moaning.

"No! No, help me," he wailed. "Harry… please, help me… he's going to kill me, like he killed J-J-James…"

"Really, Peter?" Sirius strolled forward, twirling his wand through his fingers. "Begging for help from a child? I suppose I shouldn't be surprised; you always did like to hide under James' skirts."

"You're Peter Pettigrew," said Harry, astonished. "You... you betrayed my parents."

"Yes," said Sirius grimly. "And he's going to die for it."

Harry startled. "What?" he said. "Sirius, no—"

Pettigrew shrieked and struggled against the ropes.

"Sirius," said Hermione urgently. "Your Patronus."

It had disappeared when he cursed Pettigrew. Without the silver beast to protect them, the only Patronuses were Harry and Ron's thin incorporeals, and the dementors were beginning to test them. They crept forward to the radius of light cast from Harry and Ron's wands, hissing and probing the barrier with their shriveled fingers. They were much closer than they had been when Sirius was there.

"In a moment," said Sirius. His eyes were glued to Pettigrew as if they were the only two creatures alive. "It'll only take a moment."

With a squeal, Pettigrew transformed back into a rat. The ropes fell slack around his body, and he skittered away into the grasses. Sirius gave a roar of anguish.

“Sirius! Sirius, no!”

But it was no use. He leapt forward and transformed into a dog, and took off at a gallop after Pettigrew, baying furiously.

“No!” roared Harry. “Sirius! Stop!”

When no answer came, he whirled on the others. “He’s going to kill Pettigrew,” he blurted, tight with panic. “He’s going to become a murderer, and then the dementors will come for him—”

“Who cares about *him?”* snarled Draco. “They’re about to come for us!”

The dementors had sensed the vulnerability in Harry and Ron’s patronuses, and now swept closer, pressing into a tight ring. His throat closed over.

“Expecto patronum!” cried Harry. “Ron, come on! *Expecto patronum!”*

“Expecto,” said Ron thickly, “expecto — expecto…”

But he couldn’t do it. The dementors were closing in.

“Expecto — expecto patronum —”

Ron dropped down on his knees in the grass. Fog was closing over them, thick and white, and it was hard to tell what was natural and what wasn’t. Draco could no longer feel his fingertips.

“Dad?” said Daphne, in a very small voice. She sank to the ground beside Ron and put her hand on his shoulder. “I don’t like this. Please — tell them to go.”

Draco was sorry for Daphne. He was more sorry for himself, Hermione, and Ron, and a little bit less for Harry, who he held partially at fault for getting them all into this mess; but really, he felt terrible for Daphne, who would have done better to listen to Theodore Nott. She had chosen rather the wrong night to become a better person. She would have lived longer if she had stayed selfish.

And so, probably, would he.

“Potter,” he began, drafting a sermon on the many ways in which he would hunt Harry’s spirit across the afterlife. It clocked in at one hundred and thirty-two words, and seventeen were expletives. But Harry said, “Shut up for a second, I need to concentrate,” and Draco was so offended by his audacity that he actually did it.

Harry closed his eyes and screwed up his whole face. “Do you remember New Year’s?” he said. “New Year’s Eve, in the Shrieking Shack? With Remus, and Sirius on his violin?”

“Of course I remember it,” Draco said tartly. “It was the last New Year’s of my life, and I spent it in that hovel. I’m considering coming back to haunt it.”

“I never thanked you for coming.”

A strong contender for the saddest thing Draco had ever heard in his life, and coming in just under the wire, as it was about to end. “You poor imbecilic mutt,” he said, aggrieved. “You don’t have to say thank you for that. Have some self-respect.”

Harry smiled. His eyes were still closed.

“You’re such an ass,” he said. Then: *“Expecto patronum!”*

A dazzling silver animal burst from the end of his wand, enormous, with long legs and a forked coronet of antlers that protruded almost a meter over its head.

It cantered forward, regal and blazing a silver brighter than moonlight, and the dementors parted before its touch with a terrible shriek. They could not bear to touch it. Its hooves left no mark in the soft mud.

“Prongs,” whispered Hermione, nonsensically. Draco absently patted her arm. Poor thing was going mad from shock.

It lowered its head and broke into a gallop. The dementors peeled back at its approach, whirling in raggedy circles like a flock of alighting vultures. It galloped in a loop around the hemisphere surrounding them, sending dementors spilling into the night; then it whirled and cantered back, scaring off the few that had crept back in its absence to try and get at the children. It reared up on its legs, towering over them, and struck out with one powerful hoof. The dementor it caught howled, clutching its body, which — Draco stared — had started to smoke where the Patronus touched it.

“A full corporeal,” said Ron hoarsely. “Blimey.”

“Thanks,” said Harry faintly. “I’ve never… I mean, I didn’t…”

“Don’t let’s get excited,” said Draco warily. The other dementors were swooping in, and they had started to flank the Patronus on either side, boxing it in. It fended them off as best it could, but it could not be in two places at once.

“Ron, can you do one?” pleaded Hermione. “To help it?”

“I — I can try, maybe, but it’s damn hard to concentrate—”

“I know, but please — it’s struggling, anything helps—”

For the sheer number of dementors was taking a toll on Harry. A pale sheen like death had descended on his face, and long bolts of cold sweat dripped down his hair and cheeks. He was maintaining the Patronus with a viselike grip on his wand and gritted teeth, but with every new dementor, another peal of cold rolled down Draco’s back,

and a fresh wave of despair broke over his head. He couldn't imagine holding onto a happy thought, now; he couldn't imagine being happy ever again. Had he ever been happy? It was hard to remember.

"Come on, Harry. You can… you can do it, just think… think about Sirius. Think about Lupin…"

A white light bloomed through the fog. At first he mistook it for the stag, but the stag was all but gone, its flickering remains struggling against the encroaching hands of a dozen dementors. The light in the distance was brighter, stronger, even cleaner than Harry's stag. It swelled into shape as it came nearer, and the four legs of another horse-like animal resolved into focus.

Galloping over the wide lawn, trailing strands of silver like gossamer, came a pure white doe. Its hooves left little starbursts of white over the lawn wherever it stepped, and its wide eyes shone with an unearthly magic light, like the eerie bloom of *Lumos.*

It leapt into the horde of dementors and shattered them effortlessly. The creatures shrieked and split away, steam rising from their melting cloaks. The doe rounded and made another pass, tearing into them with savage intensity, as the cold receded from Draco's trembling frame.

Now Harry's stag found its second wind. It reared up and galloped after the doe, sweeping another row of dementors back from the Whomping Willow. The sky filled with the ragged hems of fleeing monsters.

"Is that yours?" Hermione asked Draco.

"No," he breathed, pushing the sweat-damp hair off his face. It was so cold he could feel crystals of frost tangle around his ears. "I don't know whose it is."

“Don’t know, don’t care. Whoever it is, I’m going to kiss them,” Ron declared. He hauled himself upright, bringing Daphne with him, though she was in a bad way: she sagged on him almost entirely for support, her face utterly leached of color. “Let’s hurry, before they find something else to do. Daphne, er — can you stand?”

“Yes, Daddy, I… I’m sure I can… but you sound ever so strange,” and then keeling forward, she passed out.

He caught her.

“Balls,” said Ron. “That’s one more thing to worry about.”

“Poor thing,” said Hermione. “She was just trying to help Lupin.”

The grounds were very dark now; the only light came from the distant windows of the castle. The moon shimmered behind a thatch of clouds. Hermione said, *“Lumos maxima,”* and her wand cast a wide beam.

“Shall we go find Sirius?” she ventured nervously. “He must be somewhere out there, on the grounds.”

“Sod Sirius,” Ron said savagely, adjusting Daphne in his arms. “He left us there with the dementors. I hope they do get him, mangy old git.”

“Don’t say that, you don’t mean it!”

“Yeah? Where’s he, then? While we risked our skins to get here.” He shook his head. “Scabbers,” he muttered. “Scabbers, my rat… Peter Pettigrew… I let him sleep in my *bed…* eugh…”

“We’ll have time to reflect on the latent horror of your childhood later,” said Draco. “What we ought to do is get inside. We only have an hour left on the Polyjuice, if that.”

“But Sirius is still out there,” said Harry.

“So? I’m with Weasley.” He jerked his chin at Ron. “If it weren’t for that doe, he’d have hung us out to dry. And frankly, we couldn’t find him even if we wanted to; he could be anywhere in the grounds, including the Forbidden Forest. There’s not a chance.”

“We can’t just leave him—”

“Can so,” said Draco coolly. “And I will. I already volunteered to die once for my scurrilous rat of a cousin, tonight, and I shan’t be doing it again. Nor will you.”

“You’re leaving?” said Harry, shocked. Draco bristled.

“No, *we’re* leaving,” he snapped. “All four of us are going back to the castle. I don’t care if I have to Stun you and drag you in by your ankles. I’m not letting you kill yourself for a man who wouldn’t do the same—”

“Draco, please,” said Harry. Seeing earnest anguish on Travers’ wrinkled face made for a killer dose of cognitive dissonance. “He’s my godfather. He’s the only family I’ve got. What if — what if it was your mother?”

In terms of dirty shots, this was somewhat like bringing a rusty knife to a game of checkers. He might have expected that from Theo, or Pansy, or even Hermione, when she wanted something badly enough, but Harry Potter didn’t go fumbling for ammunition in his family history. It wasn’t his way.

“What do you mean, if it was my mother?” he snapped. “It doesn’t — she’d never put us in this position. She wouldn’t. *My* mother wouldn’t leave me. Ever.”

Harry shrank into himself. Another rusted knife, straight through the gut, and Draco was only a little sorry for it. Served him right, didn’t it. Teach him to start fights he couldn’t win.

“We have to do something,” said Hermione quietly. “We should get Daphne back to the castle, at least. She didn’t sign up for any kind of rescue mission.”

“If you want my vote, we carry her up, then go to Dumbledore,” said Ron. “He could do something about Pettigrew, at least.”

“That is an *excellent* idea, Weasley.”

“Actually — yes, it is,” said Hermione. “Of course, we’ll be in *so* much trouble, but maybe if we explain…”

“Trouble?” repeated Ron incredulously. “You think? We’re to tell him he’s got a murderer and Sirius Black loose on his grounds, and you’re worried about losing House points?”

“House points? If we’re lucky! Breaking curfew, attacking an auror, improper use of a Polyjuice Potion — even if it was all for a good cause, I expect we’ll be in detention *forever.* Speaking of which, do they let you study in detention, if you get your lines done early? I hope they do. Maybe Professor McGonagall will answer questions about the exam; then at least it wouldn't be such a waste of time.”

“You cock-eyed optimist, you,” said Draco.

Together, they hurried back up the path to the castle. As they passed Hagrid’s hut, they heard voices. A cluster of wandlights emanated through the fog from the pumpkin patch.

“Oh, damn,” hissed Hermione, drawing them back. They ducked behind the massive swell of one peach-pale pumpkin, which comfortably hid the five of them, such was its size. “Who’s there? Draco, can you see?”

Draco, un-enamored of his conscripted scouting duties, inched his head up over the pumpkin. A group of men stood amongst the squash blossoms, speaking in low voices. In front was Sibelius Nott, his hood drawn low over his narrow face. Beside them stood another

Ministry official and a hooded wizard holding a long silver blade. The fourth had his back to Draco, but he was unmistakeable: it was Hagrid.

“Where is the beast?” said Nott.

“He’s — he’s in the paddock,” Hagrid croaked.

Draco whisked his head out of sight as footsteps crunched up the garden path, and he swept his hand down. The four of them ducked.

“You retain the right to hear the official notice of execution,” Nott was telling Hagrid. “You and Macnair will both sign it. Macnair, remember: one clean stroke, no dallying. The last lawsuit was bad enough...”

Draco mumbled a curse under his breath.

“What? What is it?” whispered Harry, who was at the back of the party, and could not hear.

“They’re killing something,” he replied. “One of Hagrid’s creatures, I couldn’t hear which. Could be any of them, really—”

“Fang?” gasped Hermione.

“No, I don’t think so.” Fang trotted in Hagrid’s wake, his tail between his legs. “He said it was in the paddock.”

“Bet it’s Buckbeak, then,” whispered Ron unhappily. “He keeps the hippogriffs out there, remember?”

Sure enough, Nott’s voice drifted back to them. “It is the decision of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures that the hippogriff Buckbeak, hereafter called the condemned, shall be executed on the sixth of May; sentenced to execution by beheading, to be carried out by the Committee’s appointed executioner, Walden Macnair... as witnessed below. Mr. Hagrid, please sign where directed.”

“Well, let's get this over with,” said the Ministry man. “Mr. Hagrid, perhaps it will be better if you go inside.”

“No, I — I wan’ ter be with him... I don’ wan’ him ter be alone.”

“We should save him,” Hermione whispered wildly. Draco snapped his head around and stared at her like she’d proposed a quick game of draughts. “We could do it now — just run along behind the paddock, and let him go!”

“Are you daft? They’d see us!”

“Not if we were quick!”

There was a rustling of pages. “Macnair, you will sign where directed, as well.”

He fought the urge to pin her down and sit on her until all endangered creatures and deadly foes had safely passed them by. “We’ve taken on enough lost causes tonight,” he hissed at her.

“And at least this way it wouldn’t be for nothing!”

He was preparing to summarily demolish her argument with a yet-to-be-identified piece of logic, but he was interrupted. Somewhere in the distance there came a long, throaty howl.

“What’s that?” demanded Macnair. “Are there wolves in the forest, Hagrid?”

“You don’ get wolves up in these parts,” said Hagrid haughtily. “They don’ take well to the weather, an’ the centaurs don’ like ’em.”

“Centaurs? What centaurs?”

“Blimey, yer green. Biggest population of centaurs in Europe lives righ’ in these here woods,” said Hagrid indignantly. “Even my firs’ years know tha’.”

Nott lifted one spindly finger, a silent order for peace. They obeyed him. The howl came again, even closer. He gave a small, horrible smile.

“It’s not a wolf,” he said. He drew his wand. “Macnair, Exavier, with me. Hagrid, we’ll be back for the beast shortly. Retreat to your domicile and lock your doors.”

“Wha’?” said Hagrid, bemused. “Where you lot goin’?”

“Hunting,” said Nott, and the three men set off into the night.

“Stop them!” hissed Hermione, as soon as the garden gate clicked shut. “Stop them, stop them! They’re going after Lupin!”

Draco said, “Fine, but what’s the pl—” and made it no further: Harry had taken off like a shot after the executioners.

“Harry! Harry, wait!”

Hermione took off running, too.

Draco turned to Ron.

“I’m going to kill him,” he said calmly. “I am. I’m going to tie him to the Whomping Willow and beat him with a Cleansweep until he’s broken every bone in his arms and legs, and then I’m going to feed him some Skel-Gro and beat him to death again. I’m telling you now so I don’t lose my nerve, later, once he’s said something sad and orphan-y. But I am going to kill him. Even if Granger gets cross with me. He’s not getting out of it, this time.”

“Move fast then, mate, because Nott’s ahead of you in the queue,” said Ron.

“A good point,” said Draco, “well made,” and he ran after Harry and Hermione.

In the shadow of the forest, they dodged skirts of dense black underbrush, and gnarled roots that surged unexpectedly from the gloom to snare their ankles. Sibelius Nott was hurrying at top speed, which for a man of his age was not very fast, and they closed the distance quickly.

“Stupefy!” hissed Draco, and a red bolt caught Macnair in the back. He went down without a sound — Hermione cast a clever *Silencio* on his falling body — and Sibelius, caught up in the thrill of his pursuit, never heard him fall. Then Harry cast another *Stupefy* that snagged the Ministry official in the shoulder, but Hermione’s *Silencio* went wide, and the man crashed noisily through the brush.

Nott whirled around. His eyes searched the underbrush for his comrades.

“Exavier?” he called warily. “Where are you?”

Draco ducked behind a tree, panting.

“Back up,” said Harry urgently. “They might see us.”

“Oh, God,” said Draco, mostly to himself. “Merlin. God and Merlin, together, buggering each other on a table — I attacked a Ministry official. Unprovoked. Potter, we both attacked a Ministry official.”

“I know that, thanks, I was there. Can you duck? Your head’s showing.”

“We’ve committed assault. That’s a crime. We’re juvenile delinquents.”

“What? Yeah,” said Harry distractedly. “Good thing you’ve got the lawyer from hell, otherwise we’d be in actual trouble.”

“Yes. No, you’re right, that’s true. Thank you for reminding me,” said Draco honestly, feeling much better.

Harry whacked him in the head. He made an outraged noise and clutched his skull, which frankly hurt not at all, but served as a handy metaphor for his pride.

“I wasn’t serious! We could’ve been done for just then with the dementors, and *now* you’re getting worried because you might get a citation? Blimey, you and Hermione deserve each other—”

“Both of you, shut up!” hissed the aforementioned girl. She, Ron, and Daphne’s thankfully still-unconscious body were crouched in a blackberry thicket. “Is he gone?”

Harry kicked Draco’s shin in a way that communicated how he, the tallest of them, should try and see.

“He seems to be,” he reported. “He’s gone off looking for Profe—Moony. Who, if he’s got any sense, has slunk off to the Shack by now, so he’ll be looking for a while.”

“Good,” groaned Ron, “because I’m just about to...” And he made a noise that Draco could have lived a glorious life without hearing, but now never could, having heard it.

Shades of Weasley red erupted through the sheaf of blond on his head, and the cartilage of his nose bent and sprouted into its normal shape. His face rippled and sank in on itself as if the flesh were melting plastic. Watching the transformation was horrifying in ways Draco hadn’t remotely contemplated while he was undergoing it, but fortunately he didn’t have to for long, because at that moment, a roil of nausea caught him in the gut, and his own face began to do the same.

“Damn — *ugh* — that’s our disguises gone.”

“They might as well, it would’ve been hard to explain to Dumbledore,” said Hermione, in the hoarse cadence of her real voice. Her real body was swimming in Constance Crabbe’s robes, and the high-collared blouse draped low around her collarbones,

making her look like she'd been cast as a charming ragamuffin in *Oliver Twist.*

Harry was rifling through the pockets of his now-vastly outsized robes. "Anyone remember where I put my glasses?" he said helplessly.

She sucked a breath through her teeth. "I might have them. Check your pockets?"

"Wow, good idea, wish I'd thought of it—"

"Well, it's your own fault for not keeping track of them!"

"Shush," said Ron suddenly. Being shorter, he had shifted to carrying Daphne over his shoulder, which was an indignity Draco decided at once to conceal from Daphne all her life, as a gesture of respect. "You hear that?"

The grounds radiated the eerie quiet that only comes in perfect darkness. Bullfrogs cricketed under the lake, and wind whistled through the trees, but these were superficial noises, insufficient to melt the underlying veneer of silence that emanated from the forest and the empty lawns, the clouded sky, the curls of intruding fog.

"Patronuses?" whispered Hermione. She came to stand beside Harry and Draco.

"Yeah," said Ron warily. "Yeah, let's get those up again. Harry?"

Their spells died on their lips. A figure loped through the fog. In the billows of silken gray it was a silhouette, and then a sharper one — its progression from shroud to biped stirred first anxiety, then relief, then anxiety again — and then it sharpened to the point of distinction, and all relief died a cruel death in Draco's roiling stomach.

It was eight feet tall, with limbs that hung to its knees and claws that hung well below that, stifle-jointed legs that moved strangely, as if it wasn’t accustomed to walking on two instead of four. The hunched length of its body was unnaturally skinny around the waist and flared into a haggard, skeletal ladder of ribs, layered in waxen gray skin. Atop its shoulders drooped a canine snout and a razored ridge of yellow teeth. Its eyes were the luminous, wild yellow of rabid dogs.

Its head hung low from a ghoulish long neck, swiveling from side to side. Its nose was twitching.

It was walking towards them.

Chapter going up a little early this week, because I've had more time to write. Update coming soon. Comments make the words go fast, so thank you to everyone who shed a little love on the last chapter!

The Killing Moon

Chapter 29: The Killing Moon

See the end notes for content warnings.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Draco made all of these observations using about five percent of his brainspace; the other ninety-five was reserved for pure and mind-annihilating terror, which he thought was an impressively low percentage, considering.

“Lupin,” said Hermione, in a voice that was barely more than breath. Her choice of name was kinder than Draco’s; his mind was stalling on *werewolf.*

He gripped his wand. He prepared a Stunning spell that he knew very well would not work, because he had asked the werewolf who taught it to him.

The creature walked faster, its bony arms swinging horribly at its sides. Every step made something deep in Draco’s mind writhe with discomfort. It looked wrong. It looked like someone had taken a human body and stretched it like taffy, and then performed all manner of arcane curses on it. It looked like the kind of thing for whom existence itself was suffering.

“Draco,” said Hermione.

“Yeah, Granger.” His voice grated out through a thick strainer of fear, in coarse lumps.

Her hand found his. She laced her fingers through it. It brought him to bear. It brought his mind, which had been floating pleasantly

somewhere between atmospheric layers of fear-based mania, back down to the earthly realm of normal, hair-raising terror. He slotted their fingers together. Squeezed. Felt alright — not great, but not like he was already dying.

Alright, he thought. There were, in fact, worse ways to die. Not many of them. But there were a few.

“In a few seconds I’m going to run,” she said calmly. “Would you like to run with me?”

“Interesting. It’ll try to run after us.”

“I know that. I read the textbook.”

“You recall, then, that a werewolf is a coursing predator.”

“Yes.”

“Meaning it likes to chase its prey.”

“Of course I do. But I read this one paper that said getting eaten has a one hundred percent mortality rate, so I was thinking—”

“Don’t get lippy, obviously we’re running, I’m just hypothesis testing.”

“Well! *Thank* you for your attention to scientific procedure!” she said, strangled, and it was a comfort to know they were both hysterical. “Would you care to run now, or let it get closer, and test a few more hypotheses?”

The werewolf dropped to all fours and broke into a dead sprint. They ran.

Branches splintered at Draco’s robes as they tore up the hill to the castle. A trawling finger of an old elm tore a cut in his cheek. Thorns and bracken grasped at his ankles like they longed for his fall. The four of them thundered through the forest with the grace and subtlety of a stampeding wildebeest, though none of its precious speed, and

behind them the thundering feet of a baying creature swelled in volume until he fancied he could hear it slavering in his ear.

Fear did him a favor: it made him care not one bit about anything else. His trembling limbs — his legs sore from quidditch — the nausea of Polyjuice on an empty stomach — all these fell aside in a clean pure surge of adrenaline, which answered his hindbrain's call to remove this dreadfully soft mortal body from danger.

He was faster than Hermione, and so nearly dragged her through some of the dicey patches, the small ravines and ledges of gnarled roots — a felled log knee-high stood in their path, and without pausing to consult her he leapt up and swung her over by their tethered hands, jumped down, and kept running, ignoring her shriek of surprise.

Harry, meanwhile, kept pace. His lack of glasses made Draco nervous, because it gave him a tendency to stumble and run into things at the time when they could least afford it, but there was nothing to be done about it. If they survived, Draco was going to weld the stupid things into his goddamn face.

It was Ron who scared him. Ron, who was carrying Daphne's on his shoulder, and making admirable time for it, nevertheless lagged behind them, closest to the werewolf, who was faster than all of them by a margin Draco could not really bear to think about.

In the end, it didn't matter if he thought about it, because it was true. A snarl like shredding sheet metal ripped open the air, and it was joined by Ron's scream.

Harry whirled around.

"RON!"

Draco and Hermione skidded to a halt up the path, and he rounded in the grip of a dread so thick he thought he might throw up.

The werewolf stood on its hind legs over Ron and Daphne, who had tumbled to the ground in a tangle when Ron fell. Its skeletal torso heaved and swelled, and it threw back the unnaturally long column of its throat to howl.

Harry leapt forward. Draco had time for only one thought — a mental apology to Ron — before he threw his arms around Harry's waist and hauled back with all his strength.

With a bellow of betrayal, Harry was torn away from his best friend's side.

"LET ME GO! LET ME GO, HE'S GOING TO KILL HIM—"

"Yes! He's gone, he's down, it's right on top of him, do you want to die too?"

Harry was inconsolate. It was not at all obvious that he could actually process the words Draco was saying. "RON!" he bellowed. "RON! RON, GET UP!"

The werewolf lunged down. Ron, with heretofore unknown agility, hurled himself to the side and rolled into the bushes, avoiding the brutal shutter of its jaws. Harry let out a wild bleat of relief.

Remaining unmoved, however, was Daphne.

"Oh God," said Hermione in a high-pitched whisper. "Oh, God, oh God."

The creature reared back from its first attempt, snarled, and lunged again. Its jaws snapped closed, and this time, instead of the cold whisper of air, there came the wet crunch of meat and bone.

Draco could not speak. He knew that they should be running — it was almost certainly what Daphne would do, in their place — but he was transfixed by the horror of what he was seeing. His mind had deactivated itself in self-defense.

“No,” gasped Hermione. She clamped a hand over her mouth and gagged.

After several seconds of eternity, the werewolf raised its head. Viscera covered its muzzle. Draco did not, out of respect or temerity, permit himself to look down at what lay below it.

It lurched forward and roared at them. Blood and spittle flew from its jaws.

“Professor Lupin?” said Hermione. “Please—”

“He can’t hear you.”

“Professor—”

“He killed Daphne,” said Draco, hearing his own voice distantly, in all its strange calmness. Why did he sound so calm?

“Remus,” said Harry quietly. “Poor Remus.”

A candle of fury ignited at that, and he clung to it, desperate for any feeling that wasn’t dread. Poor *Remus? Poor Remus!* Half of Daphne was on its *teeth*—

The creature took another lurching step. Draco drew his wand and with his heart in his throat he prepared the last spell he would ever cast.

Which never escaped his throat, as it happened, because a jinx from behind him hit the werewolf and launched it violently into a tree.

The trunk bent. Bark sloughed. Leaves scattered. The werewolf fell in a flounder of limbs, and Draco had not the time to even turn before his sternum gave the queasy jolt of a Seizing Charm.

He sailed backwards, feet skimming over the ground, and was dumped unceremoniously on his face in the grass. A tritone of thuds beside him sounded off for Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

A black cloak flickered in his periphery. He rolled over and sat bolt upright. It gave him two wide eyefuls of a miracle.

Severus Snape always held his wand like it was a weapon. Usually, this meant it was point-down, moved little, and used sparingly. At the moment, said wand was extended fully in front of his body and aimed at the werewolf unerringly, unflinchingly, without a quiver of hand or twitch of cheek to indicate he felt anything but the impersonal disgust of an exterminator for vermin.

Severus Snape's wand was a weapon for a reason. The look on his face said the reason was this.

The werewolf stood up and staggered blearily into a curse that clipped off its left ear. It screamed and clawed at its head, ducking away, as Snape advanced.

"Incarcerous."

Ropes leapt from the end of his wand like starving cobras. One lashed itself around the werewolf's wrist and squeezed until bones snapped. The other left a red welt like a horsewhip on its chest. A third snaked up its neck, curling around its throat in a killer's embrace. The werewolf staggered and gave a howl of pain. It cantered drunkenly at Snape, who raised his hand and not his voice, and said: *"Deprimo."*

An invisible fist knocked the werewolf brutally to the ground. Its snout was hammered deep in the dirt and dragged through it, thrashing and yowling, as dirt and twigs splintered against its face. Its arms bent unnaturally behind its back as the force laid it flat and held it down, twitching, at the unwavering point of Snape's wand.

"Sonoraria," he intoned, in tones so calm they neared boredom.

From Draco's view, nothing happened, but the werewolf felt differently: it screamed, bucked, and clawed at its ears as if it wanted to rip them off.

Snape did a strange thing, then: he sighed. He spoke so quietly that Draco almost missed it.

“If I retained a single modicum of compassion for you, I would kill you,” he murmured. “Certainly Albus would.”

The werewolf writhed in the dirt, in great pain.

“But you should live to see what you are. It’s far too late, of course, for it to do any good. Only your last hours will be spent in contemplation of the revolting arrogance which has led you on this long path to your ruination, and has terminated, not unfittingly, with the slaughter of a child.” He paused. “I regret only that it will make your death a considerable relief to you.”

A flick of his wrist ended the spell. The werewolf ceased writhing and slumped in a shuddering heap.

Snape put his wand-tip nearly flush to its head. “That said. You will be amazed, Remus, at the things that fail to kill you.”

“So would you, Snivellus.”

And Sirius Black strode out of the shadows.

His frayed overcoat swept behind him like a mantle of raven-wings. His wand dangled from his bony fingers, loose and lazy, dangerous like a smoldering fuse. In his eyes there lay not the slightest degree of levity, nor apprehension, nor even lack of murderousness, any one of which, Draco thought, would have been welcome.

Snape didn’t turn around.

“I told him that he was helping you into the castle,” he said softly. “I told him again and again. Let me follow him, I said. Let me search the Shack. It was always your old hideaway—”

“You tried that once,” said Sirius, eyes glittering. “Didn’t think you’d want an encore, old sport.”

“I want you to know that I take no pleasure from this,” said Snape. “Albus said he was harmless. I told him he was foolish — a *tame werewolf,* I said, listen to yourself — and he said I had too little faith. Understand that I wish he had been right. I made the creature his potion. I gave him every possible chance. It was my own mistake to do so, though I ultimately lay the blame with Albus.”

“God, but I forgot how you could whinge the ear off a statue,” said Sirius coolly. “It’s always fascinating, watching *you* become the victim of all your stories.”

“But not yours,” said Snape, his voice silken. “That would be James Potter.”

The following silence could swallow a thunderclap without breaking. Sirius pointed his wand at the back of Snape’s head, and there were one, two, three beats where he visibly wrestled with whatever spell was on his tongue. Snape did not even deign to turn around.

Sirius wrenched his hand down and took a breath that shook his whole body. His eyes screwed closed, and when he opened them, they were wet.

“Yeah,” he said brightly. “Yeah. Hey, remember when you asked Slughorn to expel James for fancying Lily?” He gave a bitter grin that was barely more than a flashing of teeth. “Only good joke you ever made, to be honest. How’s it feel to peak at eleven?”

Snape whirled. His wand pointed between Sirius’ eyes.

“Give me a reason,” he murmured. “Give me a reason to do it, and I swear I will.”

Sirius stopped dead.

“Could you?” He tilted his head. “Could you really, Snivellus? You have to mean them, you know. For James, yes, I’d believe it, and

Peter I doubt you'd ever waste an Unforgivable on, but I wonder if you could manage it. For me."

"You're a fool if you think I'd need an Unforgivable."

"Why? I mean, you said 'give me a reason,' but I'm sure you've got one already, or you wouldn't be here. Asking honestly. What did I ever do to you besides serve up well-earned humiliation? Or are you still nursing a grudge over a stupid prank?"

"A prank? *A prank?"*

His hand shook. Draco had never seen his godfather so uncomposed, and it frightened him almost as badly as the werewolf.

"You killed her."

Harry, who had begun to stir, fell still at Snape's whisper.

Draco's eyes darted to an agape Hermione, who mouthed: *Her?* But he didn't know who Snape was talking about; Snape wasn't married, had never been married, and had never thought about any women in that way, and certainly none that Sirius had ever killed.

"The Dark Lord was your weapon, perhaps, but it was by your hand they were slain. By your carelessness. By that flaw which has plagued you your whole life, the *want of a held tongue."*

Sirius startled. "No," he said suddenly. "You've got it wrong. Peter betrayed James and Lily."

"Azkaban has a reputation for infecting its residents with madness. I am not surprised that your weak mind was vulnerable to it."

"He was secret keeper! The Death Eaters got to him — it was through his mum, I figured it out — and he caved under torture. He's been living as a rat for thirteen years, but now he's here, on the grounds, and if you help me, we can find him—" He spoke more quickly, with palpable excitement. "And I'll go when the dementors

come. I swear on James Potter's unavenged grave, I'll walk into the Kiss with my arms wide open, and you can watch every second, you snotty wet cack, if you just help me — and if you let me have him first."

Snape's mouth was parted.

"You are mad," he said, after a moment. "What a pathetic pair you are. The madman and the werewolf. I — you know, I actually feared you, once."

"Severus. Please."

"No," said Harry, loudly. He was standing up. His glasses were squarely on his nose. And he looked furious.

Draco realized, with no shortage of emotional distress, that he was going to have to get involved again.

"He's telling the truth," said Harry.

Sirius broke away from Snape. "Harry," he breathed. "You're alright? You're not hurt — he didn't hurt you? The dementors — I'm sorry, Harry, listen, I'm sorry—"

Harry swiftly stepped around him and planted himself between his godfather and Draco's. "He's telling the truth, and you're not going to hurt him."

"Like your father before you," said Snape, each word so brittle it seemed to splinter against his teeth, "one seems to find you perpetually enmeshed in things beyond your intelligence, capability, and right to interfere with. Step aside, or I will carry you back to the castle unconscious."

"Why don't you listen to him?" Harry demanded angrily. "He's telling you the truth! I saw it with my own eyes! Peter Pettigrew was here.

He’s somewhere out there right now, a murderer, and you’re standing around here rehashing, what, your school drama—”

“You are an ill-tempered and arrogant child,” said Snape calmly. “It is a regrettable thing to be, though not particularly surprising, considering your forebear. But it is not a death sentence, and so I will not allow you to labor under this delusion any longer. The man behind you is a murderer. He killed your father, and—” his breath hitched— “your mother. He conspired with a Dark creature to conceal his crimes, and assuredly would have killed you also, had he not managed to delude you into taking up his defense.”

“He’s my godfather,” said Harry.

“That does not matter to him. Potter, listen to me. That man is not your family. He does not love you. He does not care for you. I would wager he never even thought of you until you became necessary for his survival. Take this on my word, and I will swear it on the grave he neglected: Sirius Black has never loved any creature on this earth besides himself.”

When Snape finished speaking, Sirius looked murderous. Harry did not. Harry was unaffected.

“Yeah, maybe,” said Harry. “But the thing is, he’s my godfather.”

A shadow rose behind Snape while he rolled his eyes. “Potter—”

There was a horrible shriek. The werewolf, wild-eyed with pain and dripping blood from its jaws, lunged at him with a wild scream.

Draco gave a hoarse cry and sprang to his feet, but Sirius was faster: in three quick strides he lunged forward and transformed. The black dog hurled itself into the air and locked its jaws around the werewolf’s neck, dragging it away from Snape.

Dog and beast locked jaw to jaw, snarling, and rolled over and over in a blur of snapping teeth. The werewolf staggered to its feet,

whipping its head in the effort to shake free, but the dog held fast. Black blood welled around the wounds its teeth left in the werewolf's throat. It whimpered where the werewolf's claws shred through its fur, but still, it held fast.

Snape was on his feet in a flash, and swept down on Harry. "You," he snarled, "and you — *all* of you are going back to the castle. Go."

"But sir—" Hermione was distressed.

"Not a word, Miss Granger."

"Something needs to be done about Daphne," interrupted Ron. He was shaking, but his voice was firm.

Snape nodded shortly. "Understood. I will deal with the girl. It may not be outside my powers to save her. But you must go—"

There was a howl and a rumbling growl; Draco turned to see the werewolf taking flight. It galloped into the forest. The dog bayed and followed, nipping on its heels.

Snape hissed: "To the castle. Go," and flew after them, his cloak billowing like the shadowy helm of a dementor.

"Sir!" Draco called, in horror. "Where are you going?"

Snape hesitated.

"Something that I should have done a long time ago," he said. "Take your friends. Hurry. Send for the headmaster; I will deal with the beasts insofar as I am able."

And he disappeared, too, into the Forbidden Forest.

There were several heartbeats of stunned silence. Four students stood alone in the forest glade, and one fallen alongside them.

Then Ron tripped over to Daphne's side. He was limping badly.

“Ron, your leg,” Harry said urgently. “Did it—?”

“Nope,” Ron said crisply. “Don’t be a worrywand, it feels like a sprain. I can still walk.” His tone was one of good-natured levity concealing extreme pain.

He knelt gingerly and gathered what was left of Daphne into his arms. “Merlin,” he muttered. “She’s — God, Lupin really… Hermione, maybe don’t look.”

“I already did,” said Hermione in a small voice.

“He’s going to kill Sirius,” Harry said.

They all turned to him.

“Something he should have done a long time ago,” repeated Harry, urgently. “He said *beasts,* plural. That’s not… he’s talking about Sirius. Killing him. He should’ve done it the night my mum and dad died, that’s what he means.” His hands were bundled in fists at his sides. “He would’ve done it earlier, if I hadn’t stopped him.”

“Harry,” said Hermione, “whatever you’re thinking: please, *please* don’t.”

He was shaking his head. “Here’s — here’s what we can do, alright, you’ve got to get Daphne up to the castle, but I’ve — I’ve got to go.”

“No, you don’t,” said Draco, dumbfounded. “That’s my godfather out there, too, with a werewolf after him, and you don’t see me swooping in—”

“Yeah, but it’s different, isn’t it?” said Harry brusquely. “You know that. It’s different for me.”

Which it was. And moreover, Harry was simply different from Draco, in a deep and fundamental way, simpler, bolder, and shinier, and Draco knew it. He had understood it so long ago he couldn’t remember when it happened.

But that didn’t mean he could go gallivanting off and *kill* himself.

“Potter. See reason, for Merlin’s sake.”

Harry didn’t listen. He smiled, a bit sadly, and then turned and ran into the forest.

“HARRY!” shouted Ron. He swayed to his feet, holding Daphne. “I’m going to put dungbombs in his mattress for a year. Two years! Nutter.” He looked at Draco and Hermione. “I don’t — oh, damn. Neither of you can carry her, can you?”

“With Levitation Charms, we’ll manage,” said Draco. “Between me and Granger, we could even lift Goyle. As for the matter of Potter, however—”

“No, you have to go after him,” said Ron calmly. “It’s safer with two, and I’m the only one who can carry her, plus my leg would slow you down. So it’s you two.” He shifted on his bad leg and grimaced.

“What,” said Draco.

“But you’ll make sure he’s safe,” he said sternly, “won’t you. You won’t come back without him. Because I wouldn’t.”

“I say again,” began Draco.

“Yes, of course,” said Hermione. “Only if you’re sure you don’t need help taking her up.”

Ron shifted Daphne in his arms. He glanced down at her and grimaced. “Yeah,” he said. “I reckon I don’t. She’s not fidgeting much, is she.”

“Straight to the Hospital Wing. I know we said Dumbledore first, but under the circumstances—”

“Of course, Hospital Wing, barmy. *My* priorities are in order, remember?”

“Well, I’m only saying that someone might try to stop you.”

“They can try,” said Ron darkly. Hermione nodded.

“Be safe, then,” she said bracingly. “And — a Patronus, maybe? For safety?”

“Oh, yeah. Good idea, Mione.” He wrestled his wand out of his pocket and managed a sloppy swish without letting go of Daphne. His bad form, Draco noticed despairingly, did nothing to impede the quality of his Patronus, which erupted more corporeal than ever: a pure silver sheepdog, which ran a merry circle around the glade and then came to nudge at Ron’s ankles, herding him towards the castle.

Hermione cooed. “It’s beautiful, Ron.”

“Not bad,” Ron admitted. “I was thinking of… well, doesn’t matter. I’ll tell you when I see you.”

He saluted. “And if I don’t see you,” he said, “then you should know, for the record — drinking that potion was the worst thing either of you ever made me do.”

Hermione laughed. Draco narrowed his eyes.

And assuming a businesslike stride, Ron loped up towards the castle, his Patronus yipping at his heels.

It was dark in the Forbidden Forest. In other news, water was wet, and Draco was going to kill Harry Potter. The moonlight filtered down distantly from the treetops, barely glancing the branches above their heads, winnowed all away by the time it reached the forest floor. Draco kept his wand lit at a low level and hung close to Hermione.

“I didn’t know that, about Snape,” she said, by and by. Though she didn’t raise her voice, it felt queerly loud in the silent forest.

“Neither did I,” he said, and paused. Perhaps it wasn’t better to admit that. He was his godson; he sort of felt he ought to have known. Hastily he added, “I knew they went to school together, of course. And that there wasn’t any love lost between them.”

“But why?” Hermione was ponderous. “Even if it is a case of school bullying, thirteen years is awfully long to hold onto it. Imagine if I was cross at — say, at Pansy Parkinson, for the next thirteen years. Enough to kill her! I don’t think I could do it.”

“Are you?”

“Hm?”

“Still cross at Pansy.”

“For calling me a mudblood?” said Hermione coolly. “I don’t know, I have a sort of sensitivity to it, Draco.”

“Right. Fair enough.”

“If she apologized, that would be one thing,” said Hermione absently, peering into a glade. They were winding downhill, on a path that scissored back and forth across one side of a small valley, and at the bottom there was a river that fed into a lake. “I don’t believe in… indelible sins, and such… everyone should get a second chance, but that doesn’t mean…”

“That doesn’t mean you have to like them. I understand.”

“No, that’s not it. I’d forgive her, I suppose, she’s only twelve, and she had a hell of a year — but she never—” She pulled up short. “What’s that?”

A creature cantered through the clearing. It had the body of a horse, the head of an eagle, and the eyes of an instrument of war. A broken chain dangled from its neck.

“Buckbeak!” said Hermione in delight.

“Ah,” said Draco calmly. “Good. Another thing that wants to murder us. That’s what, six? Seven, tonight? Fancy we can set them all against each other, and have a tournament.”

It gave an inquisitive screech as Hermione stepped into the clearing. She swept into a deep bow, after one heart-pounding moment of which Buckbeak sank to his scaly knees.

Miraculously, it remained there when she picked up its chain. “It looks like someone went at this with bolt-cutters. Hagrid must have freed him when the Ministry people left.”

“Marvelous. Once again, Hagrid is a friend to all beasts except humans. Get clear of him, would you? I like the number of limbs you’ve got, it suits you.”

“No,” she said incredulously. “We’ve got to help him.”

He tried not to whinge. “You’ve said that about half the things that’ve tried to kill us tonight!”

“Oh, don’t be such a wuss,” she said, uncannily channeling Ron. “Besides, if we run into Lu… into the werewolf again, then I bet you’ll be glad to have Buckbeak around.” She fumbled somewhat with its chain, and then — he squawked in fear — swung her leg over its back. “Hop up, come on!”

“No.”

“Draco *Malfoy,* stop whinging and get on the hippogriff!”

“It wants to eat me!”

“No, it wants to eat corn and dormice,” she said primly. “Which you’d know, if you paid attention in Care of Magical Creatures!”

“I was busier trying not to get *eaten* in Care of Magical Creatures.”

“Would you hurry? Harry’s out there somewhere, and he’s all alone!”

This was a clumsy hail mary, but it worked. “I’ll say this, and you can ruminate on it while we’re getting gored to death. You don’t get those kinds of teeth from eating dormice,” he muttered, but he begrudgingly swung his leg up and settled himself gingerly behind her on the hippogriff’s back.

“You have to hold on to me.”

“Oh, now she’s an expert on hippogriff riding, what *can’t* she do—”

“It’s like tandem riding a broomstick, idiot, you’ll slide off if you don’t have a hold. Put your arms around my waist. Surely you remember?”

She was far too smug. Something had to be done about her ego, or it’d soon collapse the gravity of the planet.

He put his arms stiffly around her waist. She let him hold onto the chain, which made him feel better, and then flicked the chain to start the hippogriff, which made him feel worse. It hissed and cantered forward, a jolting, horribly bouncy ride that made him feel like he was strapped atop a stagecoach going over lava fields.

“Ow! My head!”

“Just hold still, honestly—”

“You hold still, if it’s so easy.”

“—not my fault it’s moving around, hold on better—”

“Fine,” he snapped, and he hauled himself forward until his knees slotted around the outside of her thighs. “There. Happy?”

She squeaked. “Good,” she said thinly. “Just fine, so long as you stop complaining.”

The hippogriff trotted smoothly through the midnight forest. The rhythm of its gait bumped Hermione’s back against his chest, and he resigned to ignore it, along with the way the wind whipped her hair

against his face, and the way his arms got sore from holding himself against her. The whole thing was dashed uncomfortable and not at all how riding horseback had been advertised to him — but then, most horses didn't have the will to power.

They reached a lip overlooking the lake, and Hermione cast *Lumos.* The light filtered down over the little bowl of the valley, revealing a black span of water, a thin slice of pebbled beach — and on the other side, two figures, hunched low in the reeds, their faces indistinct. A silver stag paced in the air beside them, its head high.

"Harry? Harry!"

"Shh, don't bring the whole forest down on us."

Hermione did not answer but did what he considered possibly the only stupid she had ever done: she nudged Buckbeak's side with her heels.

Buckbeak squawked and leapt straight into the dark air. Draco let out certain sounds that did not bear repeating and clung to it with every ounce of strength quidditch had ever imparted. This was a good deal more than Hermione had, who launched heedlessly into screaming as soon as they took flight. He clapped a hand over her mouth and wrapped the other one around the chain, and with gritted teeth, he held on for her sake, too.

The great wings pumped powerfully beneath them. Air and water rushed under their feet as Buckbeak glided over the lake, which drifted up beneath them quickly — too quickly — Draco thought for a sickening moment they were going to plunge inside — and then it was pebble and grass, and its claws touched down with uncharacteristic grace in the dirt. The creature galloped to a halt, and Draco wasted no time in vaulting as far away from its back as he could.

Hermione hunched over on its neck, trembling. "Oh, no," she said. "I didn't… oh, I really didn't think it would do that. Had no… no idea."

He patted her on the leg, still doubled over for breath. “Not one word,” he gasped, “about quidditch. Ever. You madwoman.”

She gave a stifled whimper and slipped down. He reached up to catch her and lowered her onto the moss.

Hermione took a deep breath and knocked her head against his collarbone. He looked down, surprised.

“Interesting,” she said. “I — do you know, I hate flying? All flying. It’s not just broomsticks, I’ve recently discovered.”

“If it keeps you away from hippogriffs, I’ll take the good with the bad.”

“Yes. *Certainly.* Mm. Let’s… oh, Harry, is he…”

They turned to the figures on the beach. It was Harry, bent over a shabby man in a coat, facedown.

Hermione said a word that made Draco snort in appreciation, and raced over to his side.

“Harry! Harry, are you alright? Is he…?”

Harry lifted his face from Sirius’ cloak. His cheeks were wet. “Snape went after Lupin,” he said hoarsely. “He hit Sirius with… with some sort of curse, I don’t know what, but he isn’t waking up.”

“Ennervate.”

“Tried that,” croaked Harry, as the spell vanished ineffectually into Sirius’ chest. “Whatever it is, it doesn’t respond to the counter-jinx. I dunno how to wake him up, so I’ve just been trying to keep the dementors away.”

“We’ll take him up to the castle, and Dumbledore can have a look,” said Hermione seriously. “There’s not a spell he can’t undo. Or Madam Pomfrey. Ron’s already gone up with Daphne—”

“You said Snape went after Lupin?” Draco said queasily. That his godfather was quite probably one of the strongest wizards alive did not enamor him with the possibility of his facing off against an angered werewolf.

“Yeah. Remus threw Sirius off, and then Snape hit Sirius with a jinx — I think to hold him in place — and ran after Lupin. I think he meant to come back for Sirius once he’d… once he’d…”

“He’s not going to kill Lupin.” Hermione rubbed Harry’s shoulder, bracingly but perhaps none too comfortingly, as if she were trying to scrub his anxiety out of his skin. Nevertheless, Harry seemed calmed. “He said so, didn’t he? He wants Lupin to stand trial, for…”

She trailed off and traded a hopeless look with Draco. There was no way to frame what Lupin had done in any way that would exonerate him. If he was lucky, they’d only give him the Kiss. If not, then Snape was still right — there was a lot that happened in Azkaban that didn’t involve death.

Draco said, as tactfully as he was able: “He’ll have the chance to defend himself.”

“But it’s the Ministry’s fault,” snarled Harry. Draco and Hermione both startled. “If he hadn’t been trapped in his office, he’d have taken his potion, and he wouldn’t — they wanted him to transform, they were baiting him — I bet they *wanted* someone to get hurt, so they could —”

“Even if you’re right, they were probably aiming for the aurors, not the students,” said Hermione quietly. Both boys looked at her. “That would be much cleaner. He transforms, attacks an auror, they subdue him, he goes to Azkaban. That’s what I — that’s what someone would do, I suppose, if they wanted to entrap him.”

Draco inclined his head at her curiously. She shrugged.

“It’s still their fault,” said Harry stubbornly. “He doesn’t deserve to be punished for it.”

Draco thought that philosophically there was a great deal of ground they had yet to tread before they could come anywhere near that conclusion, including a discourse on the question of moral culpability in altered states and what was a reasonable expectation of risk, but the time for none of it was now. “Let’s get him out of here,” he said, nudging Sirius’ head with his boot. “Least *he’s* not killed anyone tonight. Not for lack of trying.”

Together, he and Hermione lifted Sirius with a pair of Levitating Charms, and maneuvered him onto the hippogriff. Harry mounted its back and tied himself to Sirius with the length of the chain, fastening their waists together. “If he starts to slip, you should let him fall,” warned Draco. “No use going diving for him, he’s probably survived worse.”

“And you should go straight back to the castle. If you see Lupin—”

“No matter what Snape’s doing to him, mind—”

“—let him be,” Hermione finished.

Harry raised an eyebrow at their little vaudeville act.

“Aren’t you two coming up?”

“No,” said Hermione.

“No,” said Draco passionately.

“I don’t think so, actually, thank you.”

“We wouldn’t fit.”

“I’m sure Buckbeak has a weight limit,” Hermione demurred.

“Even two was a strain.”

“In fact I thought he was a bit slow, don’t you?”

“You know, Granger, it was the first thing I noticed.”

Harry snorted. “Thank you for coming,” he said. “I wish I could — you’ll be alright, going back?”

“Harry, of course we will,” said Hermione warmly, with a confidence that Draco didn’t feel at all. “It’s only a short walk, and there’s two of us. Take Buckbeak, really.”

She sounded confident enough that Harry seemed mollified.

Draco added, “And if you don’t stop thanking me for things like *Christmas parties* and not *letting your godfather perish of his wounds,* Potter, I swear—”

“Alright,” said Harry, grinning. “Alright.” He turned to his Patronus. “Er — stay with them, will you?” he asked it. “As long as you can.”

The stag snorted and pawed the ground with its silver hoof.

“I think that’s a yes,” he said, after a moment. “I’m not really sure. Okay. See you two soon; hurry back! I’ll tell Dumbledore to send someone out to help. Or Hagrid, if I see him.”

“Bully,” said Draco dryly. “Saved by invasion of the blast-ended skrewts.”

Harry waved good-bye, brushed Buckbeak’s flank with his ankle, and the creature galloped off into the trees.

The stag remained with them, watching a bit quizzically as its owner disappeared.

“Question,” said Draco.

“Yes.”

“That business about ‘a short walk,’ and ‘it’s fine, there’s two of us’ — that was bluffing.”

“Of course it was. We’re alone in the woods with a werewolf and a murderer, there could be four of us and it wouldn’t matter. And it’s twenty minutes to the castle, at least.”

“So. We’re still in mortal peril.”

“Oh, some sort of peril, probably,” she agreed.

He took a deep breath.

“They should have an option to list you as a cause of death on autopsy reports.”

“What! Me! What did *I* do?”

“Ask Saint Peter. If you’ve anything to say about it, I won’t live long enough to get the job done.”

They cut a crescent path along the lake, their way lit by the glow of Hermione’s wand and the silver stag. It was silent except for the crunch of gravel and the whisper of running water. “Who do you think sent the doe?” Hermione wondered.

He shrugged. “It could have been one of the Ministry’s.”

“You think Sibelius Nott can produce a full corporeal?”

“He’s a powerful wizard. You don’t get to be the Minister’s right hand unless you’ve got chops. Why wouldn’t he?”

“But he’s so cranky!”

“So’s Weasley, before he’s had his breakfast. That’s nothing to do with it. I’m sure there are some terribly cranky people with beautiful Patronuses. Patroni. Patronae?”

“Patronudes,” mumbled Hermione, which he resented himself immediately for laughing at, as it was highly dumb and also swotty, and neither was to be encouraged. Nevertheless, she looked pleased. “And I suppose you’d better hope so.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know.”

The leaves overhead whistled in the breeze. Shifting clouds threw layers of gauze and silk over the opalescent moon. They followed the brook through the forest until it widened, and fed into a thick stream that slipped through winnowing trees and onto the round silver plate of the Black Lake.

“But we’re on the other side of it, now!” said Hermione excitedly. “We came in at the other end. Did Buckbeak take us that far?”

Draco shivered. “Space can move differently in magical places, Granger. Best not to think about it.”

The friendly lights of the castle glimmered through their white stoles of mist. A distant, crooning howl wavered in the air. They both fell silent, though it was so far that there was no chance of them being overheard.

“At least he’s alive,” said Hermione after a moment.

Draco did not comment on the fact that this was the kindest thing either of them could think to say about him.

There was movement in the reeds ahead. Draco put a finger to his lips, and they crept forward with their wands extinguished, stepping softly on the gravel beach. Harry’s Patronus fell in step with them, queerly silent.

It was a man, laid on his back in the clump of bullrush. He was groaning and holding his leg as if someone had put an awl through

his knee, although the moon gave insufficient light to see if it was merited.

“Help… help, oh, help… help me…”

“He’s been hurt,” whispered Hermione. Draco, keenly aware that this was Hermione’s trigger phrase for unwise action, held his arm in front of her.

“Hold on. Can you see his face?”

“No; can you?”

“I think it’s Pettigrew.”

He was in a sorry state: the right leg of his trousers was stained all through with blood. His face was smeared with mud where he had been rolling at the lake’s edge. He had attempted to bury himself.

“Black must have gotten to him, after all,” he said.

“Or Lupin,” said Hermione. Her tone was strange: she was staring at Pettigrew with intense and ungenerous scrutiny, like he was an Arithmancy program she’d twice gotten wrong.

“What.”

“Nothing. It’s just… it didn’t occur to me before, but that’s… that’s the man who killed Harry’s parents.”

“In a manner of speaking,” he said, thinking once more that there was philosophical ground left untilled on the subject; but then she raised her wand, and he squawked, grabbing her wrist. “Granger! What are you doing?”

Her eyes blazed. “He’s an evil man.”

“I’m not sure *evil* is a useful — never mind that. Think strategically. If we bring him in, it’ll clear Black’s murder charge.”

“The Ministry is a corrupt, backwards, bigoted, antiquated—”

“—political body with discrete, if problematic, interests, and killing innocent wizards isn’t one of them. Believe it or not, they’re not going to off Black just for laughs. Also — Granger, come off it, really, you’re not going to kill him. Not even for Potter.” He said, more quietly: “He wouldn’t want you to, anyway.”

Hermione huffed instead of agreeing.

“Incarcerous.”

Ropes erupted from the tip of her wand and lassoed Pettigrew’s hands together. He thrashed upright, shouting.

“H-h-help! He’s after me, he wants to k-k-kill me—”

“Shut him up,” Draco snarled, “he’s going to bring half the lake down on us—”

But Pettigrew didn’t need a Silencing Charm: he choked on his own spittle. His eyes had fallen on the Patronus, and they grew so large the animal could have cantered through them.

A sickly, ash-pale cast crept over his skin. He gave a horrible quake. “Oh,” he said. “Oh — oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.”

“What’s his problem?” hissed Draco.

“I don’t know! Search me!”

Pettigrew wiggled backwards, writhing like a worm. “No,” he moaned. “Please, please — I’m s-s-sorry, you must believe me, please! I didn’t mean it — s-s-see how I p-p-protected the boy, I t-t-tried to…”

Harry’s Patronus bucked its head mildly and took a few steps forward; in response to which Pettigrew screamed as if someone had planted a stake in his heart.

“Please! Please, Prongs!”

Hermione gripped Draco’s shoulder. “He thinks it’s James Potter,” she whispered.

And Draco saw what she meant: for in the moonlight, through tuffets of fog, to a man half-delirious with pain and the residual madness of thirteen years spent as a rat, Harry’s Patronus could very well be mistaken for a ghost.

“It was always you and me,” breathed Pettigrew. “Always you and me. First, wasn’t it? You were my f-f-friend first. The boys from the Hollow. Brothers. And, and, and I always did right by you, didn’t I, Prongs?”

Harry’s Patronus, apparently bored of Pettigrew’s whinging, dropped its head — ostensibly to sniff at a patch of grass — but Pettigrew, mistaking it for a charge, screamed and whipped out his wand.

“Draco, he’s got—!”

“I *know, move—”*

One of them moved first, though unclear who, because they both hit the grass in the same place more or less and knocked into each other, landing clumsily in the mud. Pettigrew’s spell lashed through the place where they’d been, sailed harmlessly through the Patronus, and struck the trunk of the Whomping Willow, where it cleaved the bark three feet deep. Draco thought of himself standing in the air where it passed just a moment ago, and went cold.

The Willow did something he had to call a scream, even though it didn’t have a mouth to scream with. All its branches went rigid at once, rising in a perfect halo around the black pillar of its trunk, where the wound wept sap as bright and red as blood. Then it whirled and, bending itself down, brought the full force of its body down on Pettigrew with a mighty WHOMP.

It was hard to describe the sound of a tree attempting homicide. In many ways it was like watching one fall, only faster, with purpose.

With a tremendous crunch and splintering of branches, the whole upper half of the tree rolled down like the mallet of God, making a noise that blotted out even Pettigrew's incoherent screaming. Draco shoved at Hermione and shrilled, *"Go go go go go,"* feet scrambling in the slippery bank, as they careened out of the way of its hurtling branches.

Wood snapped and leaves flew. With a final groan, the Willow bent low, almost double in the middle. Some of its roots had erupted on the other side, forced up by the pressure of its exertion. The riverbank where Peter lay was covered in shattered branches, and nothing moved.

Hermione and Draco lay just clear of it, sprawled on the beaches, breathing hard. The water came up to lap at their ankles, and small red fish nibbled at the soaked ends of their robes.

"Do you think," Hermione whispered, "did he — did that—"

"Hard to say," said Draco, though he couldn't imagine surviving something like that. The tree must have weighed several tons. It was like dropping a small house on someone's head.

A coarse moaning filled the air. Black shadows coalesced in the branches of the Willow.

"They heard," snarled Draco. "Excellent. Now I'm going to die because of a vengeful *tree—"*

"No time! Get up!"

They scrambled up the bank. Dementors coursed over the lake, their cloaks skimming the silver face of the water. Down from the lawns they poured, too, drawn by the Whomping Willow's war cry.

“Where’s Harry’s Patronus? Did the tree kill it?”

“He must have cast another spell,” gasped Hermione. “They’re not lasting invocations, Patronuses — and you can’t cast two spells at once, that’s Merlin’s Second Law—”

“Fitting as it would be,” Draco gritted out, “I’m not going to die listening to you tell me things I already know. Did you ever, incidentally, manage a Patronus?”

“No!” she wailed. “I can’t! It doesn’t work for me, I’ve tried and tried —”

“Come off it, me neither. Maybe you can’t do it if you’ve got any brains. Nonetheless, wand up. We’ve got a few seconds left to master it in, and you and I have done much better in less.”

A thin wisp of silver escaped his wand and hovered like mist before him. At the same moment, Hermione sank to her knees in the grass, gasping for breath. A cold vise closed around Draco’s throat. He still stumbled to kneel beside her, and she gripped his arm for balance, her eyes fluttering in her fight to stay conscious.

He spun around, the familiar, icy cold penetrating his insides, fog starting to obscure his vision; more were appearing out of the darkness on every side; they were encircling them.

Hermione trailed off, teeth chattering. She slumped forward and braced herself on the ground. “I’m so c-c-c-cold,” she murmured. “S-s-s-so cold.”

“Granger. Granger,” he said sharply, shaking her. She gave an uninspiring noise of protest. “Don’t go to sleep.”

“What?”

He could barely think except to mumble, “Don’t go to sleep,” again, because something in his cold-addled mind insisted that was

important. She couldn't be allowed to fall unconscious. That was paramount. That was the one thing.

White fog descended over his eyes. There was nothing he could do. He would die here, and he would die nothing, no one. His father would revile him in hell, surely, for having done so little of consequence — and to die for what? For a man he didn't even know, who his rightful family had rejected long ago, and who would probably die tonight, anyway. And he would not even have the pleasure of dying for something noble. He would die because he'd been too stupid to save himself.

What a pathetic end. What a pathetic life.

Something happy, he thought. *Something happy.*

Christmas at the Manor. His mother on the piano. His father's laugh. He couldn't remember that too well, but he remembered he'd liked it. His first broomstick ride: the rush of air through his robes, the ground swallowed in clouds under his feet. A fleet of boats on the Black Lake. His first spell. A troll in the girl's bathroom. Shattered toilet stalls. A smarmy little know-it-all who did everything first, best, and perfectly—

Well, of course it didn't work. That wasn't a *happy* memory, dolt.

Hermione let out a final breath and dropped to the ground.

"Granger. Get up. Get *up.* This was your idea, you don't get to… to skip out…"

His head was full of cold fog. His eyes fluttered closed.

Warm afternoons over a cauldron. Smoke rising in thick coils against a vaulted roof, sunlight streaming through frosted glass, the foul smell of Polyjuice, a witch throwing bits of paper at him. Doing it perfectly, the first time. Doing something important. *You should donate your brain to science!* The color of the light on her hair

always reminded him of marigolds. There had been a room full of them, and they'd been sitting on a bed, talking about Transfiguration. She'd missed classes and asked him to give her the homework. He'd stolen the sweets people left at her bedside, and she'd tried to pull his hair when she found out — he held the wrapper over his head and she'd well nearly tackled him, candy and Transfiguration notebooks everywhere, and after that he'd been picking her hairs off his robes for days, in that warm, summery hospital ward that smelled of flowers.

"Expecto patronum."

From his wand blossomed a profusion of mist. It swirled together in the air over his head, gaining shape. It sprouted two wide feathery wings, a pair of talons, a heart-shaped face.

It soared high over the lake, its wings trailing ribbons of silver mist, and everywhere the mist fell, dementors scattered. The fog overhead unspooled itself and unveiled a bright bowl of stars like crushed diamonds. The air was warm again, warm like the first night of summer, warm like the nights he'd spent in the hospital wing last year.

Draco laughed, high and loud and delighted.

A fuzziness was encroaching on his head, so it was in something less than full lucidity that he congratulated himself, and scripted mentally the boast he'd make to Hermione, once she woke up. He'd done it. Exhausted, sleep-deprived, on an empty stomach and a gut full of fear, he'd done a corporeal Patronus for the first time in front of a full *horde* of dementors. Hermione would be eating crow for months. Hermione was going to gnaw her own teeth to nubbins with envy, and he was going to rub it in her face until she tried to kill him. Forget losing to him in Potions. Emotional magic was his *bread and butter.* Emotional magic was his wheelhouse. He was the god-king of incantations and alchemy and all majyyks under the sun. Oh, it was going to be so bloody good. He was going to compose an ode to himself, something full of fanfare and rhyming couplets, about how

he, the brilliant and powerful Draco Malfoy, the greatest wizard of his generation, would ride eternal in the sacred bowers of living memory.

Then the greatest wizard of his generation keeled over, banged his head on a rock, and passed out.

Content warnings: Violence and gore (oblique, PG-13). Context: a teenage girl is attacked and partially eaten by a werewolf.

I'm standing by "patronudes" and owning to it. The last chapter of Book 3 will drop in a week, and I'm very excited for it. Almost as excited as I am for Book 4, which I'm halfway through and having the time of my life with. Much thanks, as always, for encouragement!

Sidebar: I'll probably bump the rating to M after the next chapter drops. While in theory "T" should cover all PG-13 material, in practice, I think most people read "T" to be a sort of "for all ages" rating, while "G" means no romance/no sexual feelings. Many people think differently, I'm sure, but the "M" rating will comfortably cover everything I plan to do, as well as all the violence & gore (which, as we all know, upticks precipitously in the second half of the series, and — without spoiling too much — will also uptick even more precipitously in this fic).

The Prisoner’s Flight

Chapter 30: The Prisoner’s Flight

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

He was delighted to wake up, not because he was in any particular comfort, but because it brought the relieving assurance that he was still alive. Or, if he wasn’t, then he was in some permissible configuration of afterlife, because Hermione Granger was wriggling and making the funny irritated noises that she always did when she fell asleep on the common room sofas, which meant he’d have someone around to bother for the rest of eternity.

The whole side of him was cold and achy from the pebble beach, and water lapped at his legs. He lifted his head blearily and found his face more or less submerged in a familiar bird’s nest of hair, none the more tamed for having been slept on. The front of him was wonderfully warm. It wasn’t until his head cleared that he figured out why.

Hermione had burrowed into him while unconscious — or perhaps the other way around — and his arm was thrown haphazardly across her waist, curling her spine into the hollow of his chest. Every so often she mumbled and bumped her shoulder against him, as if to check on him, which would have been sweet if it wasn’t irritating and probably the reason he’d woken up.

His face felt hot.

He blinked, twice, and then rolled over and scrambled free of her. Just like her to use him as a bloody coverlet, no mind for *his* comfort, and wake him up in the bargain — and how she’d managed to sleep in such apparent comfort on a bed of rocks, he had no idea. Perhaps falling asleep on library tables was a sort of endurance training.

His mouth tasted as if something had died, decomposed, and spawned a new species of fungi inside it. He climbed wearily to his feet. The sky was still dark, but an inkling of light clustered suspiciously on the eastern horizon, suggesting the time that had passed since he fell unconscious. The Whomping Willow was back upright, he noticed; the ground beneath it was scalloped and crushed, the reeds laid flat in the mud, but no one was there.

“Draco — Draco! Is that—? *Draco!”*

He turned, and over the rounded cusp of the lawn came Harry Potter, fresh-faced, unhurt, and dressed in his own robes. Ron followed a heartbeat behind, running freely, without the slightest mind to the injured leg he’d sported when Draco last saw him. The two dashed down the hill to the lake, beaming like hell.

Draco spared a moment of gratitude that he had woken up when he did, so they hadn’t seen how he’d slept.

“Potter!”

“Draco! Hello — what are you — oh, sh—”

Far too late to save himself, Harry saw the Stinging Jinx that came soaring up the hill. He yelped and spilled onto his back, dragging Ron down with him, and Draco stalked over in a snit of thinly sublimated murder.

“That’s for running away and nearly getting yourself killed — the *first* time — this is for the second — that’s for the third—”

“Malfoy, c’mon, he didn’t mean—”

“You! *Off!* I’m going to do you after, for making me and Granger go get him.”

“I broke my ankle!”

“Good, I’ll do your other one. Get out of the way! Oh, *don’t* hug me, if you so much as touch me I swear I’ll make you wish you’d snogged a dementor when you had the sodding chance—”

In the end, Draco only jinxed him a little bit, throwing several halfhearted Knotting Spells on his shoelaces and a curse that would leave his socks inexplicably wet for weeks. It was still no surprise when Harry tackled him. Ron followed and — to Draco’s slight surprise — joined in, throwing a brotherly arm around Draco’s shoulders and shaking them in a *quite-glad-you’re-not-dead* sort of hello.

“We’ve been looking everywhere,” Harry said breathlessly. “Hagrid’s out searching the forest; we thought you might’ve been hiding in there.”

“Please. We got bored of waiting for you slow louses, so we fancied a nap.”

Hermione opened her eyes and stretched with a yawn that ought to have cracked her jaw. “Oh, hello,” she said sleepily. “You’re here. Ron, your leg.”

“Pomfrey fixed it,” said Ron gladly, lifting his trouser-leg to show a hale and fine-looking ankle that any Victorian would be proud to flaunt. “Only sprained, she said. I let her fix me up and then I snuck out, once it felt alright.”

“Oh, Ron, you *really* shouldn’t do that, the healing process might not be finished, it’s not s—”

“If you say ‘not safe,’ I’m dumping you in the lake,” Draco informed her.

She sniffed and climbed to her feet, accepting his hand up. “Harry, what about Sirius?” she said. “He’s not—”

“He’s alive! I took him to Dumbledore, and we explained everything — I told him about Sirius and Pettigrew—”

“Oh, Harry, Pettigrew — he was here, on the riverbank, but the tree went after him, and we didn’t see—”

“He might be dead,” said Draco, “but if he is, his body’s at the bottom of the lake. It’ll take an age to dig him out.”

“That’s alright; Dumbledore believed us,” Harry said eagerly. “He said Lupin had given him a similar story when they spoke—”

“He knew all along?”

“No,” exclaimed Ron, “no, that was the thing; Dumbledore didn’t know Sirius was here, but Lupin always believed Sirius was innocent —”

“—he just couldn’t prove it, you see, so he was out looking for Pettigrew—”

“—which is what he was doing those thirteen years before he came to teach—”

“But he couldn’t find him, could he, because Pettigrew was living as Scabbers,” Hermione finished, with all the satisfaction of a finished problem set. “So he came to Hogwarts, and told Dumbledore what he’d been doing.”

“Only Dumbledore believed him,” said Harry. “Everyone else thought he went mad.”

The four of them stood there, breath churning into mist in the fine dawn air, with expressions of exhilaration. A fine atmosphere of triumph that lay over everything, like a layer of gilt. They had made it through the night; they were alive, and no one had died. The monsters were gone, and now it was morning again.

Draco was reluctant to disturb the tranquil atmosphere, but at length, he felt he had no other option. “That’s a fine mystery that we’ve just solved and everything,” he said, “but there’s still the problem of the Ministry.”

Three expressions deflated in the same crestfallen swoop. “Oh,” said Hermione. “Drat. Of course; I’d forgotten. Without Pettigrew, we can’t prove anything.”

“Forget Pettigrew,” said Ron incredulously, “think about Lupin. He’s done for. Once they find out about Daphne—”

His stomach clenched: he’d forgotten about Daphne.

“Is she,” he said, and swallowed. “Is she—”

“Daphne Greengrass has been admitted to the hospital,” said a calm voice. “Thanks to the herculean efforts of Poppy Pomfrey, perhaps the finest Healer currently living, she is expected to survive.”

Draco spun on his heel, wand out, more from instinct than hostility. Hermione immediately yelped and shoved his hand down, aghast beyond measure, for Professor Dumbledore sat on a stone outcropping over the lake, a train of ice-blue robes pooled gracefully behind him on the stone. His weathered face was washed full of strange serenity in the pink dawn light.

“She will!” said Hermione faintly. “That’s wonderful—”

“How did you get there?” demanded Ron.

Dumbledore smiled at this rank intransigence. “The Hogwarts Headmaster must have his secrets and bolt-holes,” he said. “Else, what reason could one have to take the job?” He inclined his head at the four of them. “Besides, of course, the obvious pleasure of watching such fine and enterprising young minds enter the kingdom of their powers in juvenile delinquency.”

For Harry, to whom male figures of authority had always and would always be a hamartia, this was a knuckleduster to the gut. To Draco, for whom male figures of authority lived in the same part of his brain as rival quidditch teams and muggle rockstars, this was a dropped gauntlet.

“Sorry, sir,” said Harry weakly.

Draco thought that he was nowhere near the kingdom of his powers, and was about to tell him so, but Hermione interjected and saved them all from the fallout. “Sir, can you tell us what’s happened to—”

Something funny happened then: all three boys finished her sentence with a different name.

“Sirius?” said Harry.

“Lupin?” said Ron.

“Professor Snape?” said Draco.

—In the aftermath of which there was a great deal of awkward foot-shuffling and embarrassment by all.

Dumbledore held up a hand. “Permit me to move chronologically,” he said. “I have had a very long night. Profesor Snape returned to the castle with Professor Lupin in the early hours of the morning, and has since been in treatment for wounds sustained during his efforts.”

“Wounds?” said Draco sharply.

“Several superficial curses,” said Dumbledore calmly, “and the sorts of gashes which tell a story. Nothing that time and talent will not heal. Professor Lupin and Sirius Black have both fled the castle, being that the Minister’s appointees — including one quite badly injured auror — have charged both of them with murder and aggravated assault, respectively.”

“But Sirius never—”

“There is not a shred of proof to support Black’s story, except your word, Harry. A street full of eyewitnesses swore they saw Sirius murder Pettigrew. I myself gave evidence to the Ministry that Sirius had been the Potters’ Secret-Keeper.”

“But you believe us?” said Hermione anxiously.

“I do,” said Dumbledore. “But I have no power to make other men see the truth, or to overrule the Minister of Magic.”

Draco felt the sense of disappointment that he had come to associate with Dumbledore, which was that he could not simply wave his wand and make problems go away. He had expected that a man of his station would be able to do something — but he supposed even Dumbledore’s power had limits.

“So they’re gone?” said Harry quietly. His body was a slump of resigned grief. Draco was suddenly angry at both Black and Lupin, jointly, for failing to stick around long enough to say good-bye; who cared if they *were* on the run, anyway, when Harry had risked his life for them, and apparently hadn’t even earned the dignity of a goodbye.

You couldn’t do that to people. You couldn’t waltz into someone’s life and out of it, as if they were so much a revolving door. You had to go in deliberately, being mindful of the furniture, and be careful not to kick anything over. You oughtn’t move in unless you meant to take care of it.

Dumbledore tipped his head back to the skies. “Dawn is my favorite time of day,” he murmured. “There is a moment, between the last hour of night and daybreak, when one can perceive the exquisite contrast of the sun in one end of the sky and the stars in the other. A more splendid fabric of heaven I have never seen.”

Draco cleared his throat impatiently.

“You four are out of bed far too late,” he added, “but before I release you into the clutches of young Percival Weasley, would you care to take an hour and stargaze together? The Astronomy Tower is an especially nice place for sightseeing.”

“Respectfully,” Draco began, but Hermione stopped him.

“Yes,” she said suddenly. “Yes, please, Headmaster, we’d love to.”

Dumbledore smiled. He twitched back the sleeve of his robe, and revealed a silver charm bracelet, studded with what must have been dozens of charms that clinked together like a rack of keys. Selecting one from his wrist, he lifted it high between thumb and forefinger in the swelling dawn light: it was a small telescope.

“Ah,” he said. “Good. Now, Miss Granger — if you and your friends would kindly join hands?”

“What on—”

Hermione seized Draco and Harry by the wrist, and elbowed Harry until he grabbed Ron. Dumbledore ambled over and extended his other hand to Ron, who stared at it like it had boils, but took it.

Dumbledore lifted the charm and pressed his finger to a jewel in its center. There was a hard, unpleasant jolt somewhere behind Draco’s navel, and the world twisted around him like he was being folded through a crack in the very air.

When he came to, he was standing on the main deck of the Astronomy Tower, bathed in the blinding pink of sunrise. Sirius Black and Remus Lupin stood together on the railing, their shoulders brushing, their faces turned into the rising sun. Beside them stood the horrible silhouette of Buckbeak, the Hippogriff Death Forgot, whom Draco was dismally surprised to find had survived the night.

“Sirius,” breathed Harry. “Remus—”

At the sound of voices, the pair of men turned.

“Harry!” bellowed Sirius, and he flew away from the railing. Harry tripped forward, giddy with delight, and Sirius snatched him up, spinning him around in a way suited to children much younger than Harry. Harry, by appearance, gave not one solitary goddamn about this or most other things in existence. He wrapped himself around Sirius as if he had no intention of letting go before the millennium expired.

Lupin stayed where he was. He held himself as if tied together with flimsy and string.

“There you are,” Sirius rasped. “We were worried you wouldn’t make it. Dumbledore said you might be busy with your friends—”

“I thought you’d left without me,” Harry said in a rush.

“Perish the thought. Kill it dead, boy. I’d have mowed down the whole Ministry.”

“Oh,” said Harry, vibrating onto a heretofore undiscovered plane of joy. “Alright, then.”

“You’re not hurt, are you?” rasped Lupin.

Sirius made a production of picking over Harry, who flushed with a humiliated pleasure. “I’m alright,” he said. “Really, you should be worried about Ron — he’s the one who got hurt—”

“No, I didn’t,” said Ron hastily, when both men turned on him. “No. I mean, yes, but I got better.”

“You made a sacrifice for us,” said Sirius gravely, placing a hand on his shoulder. “We won’t forget it.”

“Well,” he said modestly, “I mean, I won’t stop you, if — you know, you want to get me a broom or something.”

“And to think, we’re indebted to a Malfoy, now, too,” added Sirius. “I really did think I’d seen everything.”

Lupin cleared his throat, a sad little facsimile of a laugh.

“I just know Lucius is rolling,” Sirius continued dreamily. “God, wish he’d lived, I would’ve rubbed in his face *forever.* But you — you, boy! You! Harry says you’re the Potions whiz — the Polyjuice was your handiwork, I take it?”

“Granger helped.”

“Helped? *Helped?”*

“Ow! Fine, it was a joint operation. Let me go.”

He tried not to preen. Then he gave up trying, because humility was dismally boring, and after all, he *had* done something marvelous.

Sirius gave a low whistle. “Sneaking out and impersonating a Ministry official,” he said. “Smuggling a wanted man off of Hogwarts grounds; fending off dementors; riding a wild hippogriff—”

(“He’s not wild,” said Hermione indignantly, “he’s quite domesticated, and if you treat him with respect—”)

He clucked his tongue. “Sort of intimidating, isn’t it, Moony? The ante’s been upped. The Marauders are old news. Dull as dirt. I’m going to wind up with an office job and one of those desk toys that bobs up and down. I feel like I should set fire to something, to prove myself.”

Lupin shrugged and turned back to the railing.

Sirius set his teeth unhappily and turned to speak in confidential tones to Harry. “Listen. He’s in a bad way, just now. He’s had a hell of a night, and Dumbledore just told us about the girl—”

“But Daphne’s alive. He didn’t kill her.”

“He didn’t… kill her. No, that’s true.”

“...What happened?”

“Nothing that he should feel guilty about, the fool,” he muttered. “He didn’t do anything. A man and a werewolf are different things. He knows that as well as I do.”

“Speaking of which,” said Lupin. He fumbled into his robe again. “I do — I must — I have something, here—”

He withdrew a letter and pressed it into Draco’s hands. Draco reached for the seal, and Lupin hastened to say: “No, that’s for — it’s for her.”

Draco flipped it over. The name *Ms. Daphne Greengrass* lay across the front in hurried black script. It was not signed, and there was no return address; the seal was a single blot of unmarked red wax.

“Please give that to her, as soon as she wakes up,” said Lupin anxiously. He picked at his hands as if trying to pull them off. “And — and if she doesn’t want to read it, which of course would be understandable, then please tell her — tell her that if she ever wants to, if she ever can forgive — not forgive, of course, I know, but if ever *needs* someone, needs to ask, or if there’s any complication that might benefit — a surgery, for instance, if she needs blood, or marrow, or a tissue sample — tell her to write to me. Please tell her to write to me. I’ll answer. It doesn’t matter where I am.”

Draco paused, thinking, and then brandished the letter. “This says you’re a werewolf.”

He nodded.

“You’re giving written testimony of your lycanthropy. To a recent victim of said lycanthropy. Whose father happens to be an official in the Ministry of Magic.”

“Yes, that’s about right.”

“And none of your so-called friends have brained you on the head for this idea?”

Lupin broke into a thin smile. “You are like your father, a bit,” he admitted. “If your father hadn’t been so miserable all the time. He abhorred mess, above everything.”

“Stop trying to distract me with sentimental hogwash, you ham-fisted old biddy, I’m talking about your right against self-incrimination!”

“Definitely Lucius’s,” said Sirius sagely, leaning on Lupin’s shoulder. “I think ‘ham-fisted old biddy’ is what he called me after I danced with Cissa at fifth year formal.”

“Both of you are — fine. Don’t come to me when your lawyer pitches a fit and *this* shows up in discovery—”

“Draco,” said Lupin quietly, “Severus Snape informed Sibelius Nott that I was a werewolf. An auror witnessed me transform. My plausible deniability is so shot through as to be a fine mesh. I think that one letter to a very scared young girl is not without my power nor my obligation.”

“Snape!” said Ron, outraged. “That slimy bugger, he told on you?”

“He has always considered me a danger to those around me. In this case, he was right.”

“But you took the potion! You weren’t hurting anybody! If they hadn’t started nosing around, you would’ve been fine!”

He shrugged again. “Maybe, maybe not,” he said. “We’ll never know. Snape has hated me since we were in school together, virtually from sight, for the crime of being a friend to James Potter. And being none too kind to him, myself, I might add.”

“He deserved everything he ever got,” muttered Sirius. Draco scowled.

“It doesn’t matter. He who laughs last, laughs longest, as they say… and even though I have evaded Azkaban, God willing, I expect Severus will be laughing for a very long time.”

Draco stiffened. It wasn’t possible; it couldn’t have been. Snape wouldn’t — Snape—

But he would. He knew his godfather. He also knew what his godfather would do to a man he disliked. He had never harbored any illusions about Snape being noble, or answering to his better angels. Part of what he liked about his godfather was his lack of any sort of noble impulse at all.

He just hadn’t — seen the other side of it, until now. It was an astonishingly cold place to be. He closed his arms over his chest and wrapped the outsized cloak tight against the spring winds buffeting the Astronomy Tower.

“Reminds me,” Sirius announced. He pulled something from his robe pocket, “this is for you, Harry. I doubt I’ll have reason to use it in the near future, so it might as well end up with its natural heir and successor — in any number of senses.” He gave him the Marauder’s Map.

“Thank Merlin,” said Ron. “Check where Percy is, would you?”

Buckbeak snorted and clawed the roof. Dumbledore, who had been pointedly admiring the landscape for a while now, turned and cleared his throat.

“It is almost sunrise,” he said softly. “The Ministry will expect me soon. I would not advise that you be in the castle when they re-enter it.”

Sirius and Lupin turned to Harry.

“Take me with you,” he said, the poor predictable git.

“No,” said Lupin.

“Please — I can come, I’ll be quiet, I can camp out anywhere—”

“You have to finish school, Harry.”

“Then after school! Once the term ends, I’ll come find you — or you can find me at the Dursleys’, they won’t care if I go, really, they’d be thrilled!”

“We’re not going anywhere I’d want you to see,” Sirius said, aghast. “You deserve three square meals and a warm bed to sleep in. Someday — and I mean it, someday, the minute I can manage it — but we can’t offer anything you deserve. We’re not — we’d not be good parents, just now, Remus and me.”

“I don’t care!” said Harry indignantly. “I don’t have those anyway!”

Everyone found somewhere to look that wasn’t Harry.

“You should have been with me from the beginning,” said Sirius, haggard with grief. “But we can’t take you with us. It’s too dangerous. I couldn’t do that to James.”

“Who cares what he wants?” said Harry loudly. “He’s not here!”

It would have been kinder to take a mace to both of their faces. They crumpled in the same way.

Dumbledore finally intervened. “Sirius and Remus must go,” he said softly. “Harry, it is time for your goodbyes.”

Harry, fuming, submitted to an embrace with Remus and Sirius that was as brutal as it was tender. Draco pointedly turned his back. A man wasn’t meant to see this sort of thing.

Almost by accident, his eyes fell on Hermione. She, too, had turned away from Harry and his godfather, and glancing up at him through the unbrushed shag of her fringe, her eyes were wide and shining. He mouthed: *Gryffindors,* and she smiled wetly through the curtain of hair.

Then she stepped closer to him and cleared her throat, sort of brushing her arm against his, as if she wanted his hand but wasn't quite prepared to ask for it; and he was glad she didn't, for it probably would have embarrassed him into speechlessness, but this way he could lean into her arm, asserting a nice comforting pressure, and her arm was warm despite the chill of the morning air, which was welcome, and it was all — manageable. It was just a nice little gesture, perfectly ordinary. He'd seen Harry and Ron do it dozens of times.

And if their knuckles brushed together, hidden in the wide sleeves of their baggy robes, where no one saw — that was accidental, and meant nothing in any case, for Hermione gave no sign of having even noticed it. And if she did — if she twitched her fingers a little, opening them up — then that didn't matter, for he didn't try to reciprocate, and he certainly didn't let the touch linger for any longer than the moment allowed.

Harry, Lupin, and Sirius finally broke apart. Sirius stepped forward and clasped Ron's hand. "Still got a good arm," he said, "and that patronus isn't half bad, either. Sorry about your rat."

"Sorry about your life," said Ron reasonably, and they shook hands.

Lupin turned to Hermione. "You've got a hard task ahead of you," he said. "But at least one Marauder ought to know what she's doing. Take care of them for me, will you?"

Hermione, who loathed weeping, tears, and any expressions of human vulnerability in herself whatsoever, gave a quick sniff and then ground her knuckles furiously into her eyes, as if trying to shove the tears back where they came from.

“That’s a yes,” advised Ron.

Then it was Draco’s turn. He prepared for a manly and dignified handshake, but Sirius had other plans.

“You’re a miscreant, a criminal, a delinquent, and a filthy disgrace to the name of Black,” he said, and clapped him on the shoulder. “So I suppose Cissa finally did something right.”

“I *beg* your pardon?”

With a bellow of laughter, Sirius threw himself onto Buckbeak, and helped Lupin up behind him. The animal shrieked, reared, and bounded up to the railing of the Astronomy Tower, where it gave a last piercing cry. The two men turned, backlit by the rising sun — and there was something strange and queerly peaceful in their expressions, for two people who had nothing ahead of them, and very little to leave behind.

Then Buckbeack leapt, and they soared into the bloody sunrise.

Harry sniffled.

“You must hurry back to Gryffindor Tower, if you do not wish to be seen,” Dumbledore said.

“Blimey,” said Ron. “I forgot about curfew. After last night, Filch seems like small potatoes.”

“Yeah,” mumbled Harry.

“No,” said Hermione.

Dumbledore smiled. “Then for our last act, we shall have a final trick,” he said. He once more unveiled his charm bracelet and removed one from its number: a silver charm in the shape of a lion, with a glittering ruby for an eye. “With my well-wishes, and my thanks for your assistance in something I could not have undertaken

myself, though it sorely deserved an attempt: try not to scare your housemates."

"What do you mean by that?" said Draco suspiciously.

But Hermione said, "Oh, thank you, professor!" and took the charm eagerly, gathering the boys into a circle.

With grim portent of what was to come, he let himself be crowded in. He traded a dark look with Dumbledore over his shoulder, and his last glimpse of the man — before Hermione pressed the jewel, and there came a mighty jerk behind his sternum — was a sly, benevolent smile.

Then they were standing in the middle of the Gryffindor common room. At once, the jewel glimmered out of sight in Hermione's palm.

"Well!" said Ron, whistling. "That's decent of him. Be a shame if we got stuck in detention after all that—"

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING OUT OF BED?"

There was a mighty squeak. A tousled Penelope Clearwater stood under the boys' staircase beside a shirtless and red-faced Percy.

Ron let out a peal of glee.

"Morning, Perce! Bit nippy, isn't it!"

"I don't — I — I — *you should be in bed!"*

"Don't even bother, mate," he said. "Hey, Pen. Good sleep?"

She squeaked again and covered her face in her hands.

"For goodness' sake," said Hermione tiredly. "If I wasn't dead tired already — Penny, there's a back staircase into the boy's dorms if you go through the broom closet, you should really try that next time."

Draco looked at her sharply. “How do you know that?”

“Lavender talks in her sleep. And yes, it’s hell, thanks for asking.”

“Well, I’m headed up,” said Ron, grinning like a Cheshire cat. “Gonna see if Fred and George are up yet, I fancy a little brotherly chat—”

“You stop right there! Ronald!”

Ron dodged Percy’s grab for him and raced up the stairs. Percy followed, hollering, and the Weasley boys scrambled up to the dorms in a thunder of footsteps and slamming doors.

Penelope darted her eyes at the portrait hole. Draco jerked his head at it, in a sort of: *well, out-with-you* sort of way, and whimpering, she made a hurried exit.

“At least one person had more fun than we did, last night,” offered Harry.

“Potter, if you make me contemplate anything related to Percival Weasley’s unvested person, I will Summon a dementor into this room and leave you here.”

And that was that: normalcy restored: they were back to a world where the worst they had to worry about was their prefect’s reaction to being humiliated, and succeeding in their exams, and whether or not they would be well-rested for their Transfiguration lesson in the morning. In the warm and sweet-smelling universe of the Gryffindor common room, where woodsmoke guttered softly from the fireplace, and the banners celebrating Gryffindor’s victory in the quidditch cup still hung high from the rafters, there was nothing to fear — this was the place that patronuses were born, a place where neither dementor nor murderer nor ancient grudges could encroach on those old stone walls. It had stood for centuries, and it would stand for centuries more. No one here would hurt him, and no one here would do worse than tease. It was the one place, besides the Manor, that he could be sure of a welcome and a cup of tea, perhaps a

biscuit, and a place to warm his shoes by the fire; and if Seamus was playing some muggle music, or if Oliver was talking about a new quidditch play, he would have entertainment, too; and if Hermione was curled up in her armchair, he would have someone to talk to about whatever he wanted, who would lift her head and give him the same bleary smile she did when she woke up from deep thought, and everything would be momentarily good.

It was the most ridiculous feeling, really, being home.

It was two weeks before Madam Pomfrey allowed anyone into the hospital. What happened to Daphne, as far as the school was concerned, was an exciting mystery; rumors ranged from a unicorn attack to an indecorous encounter with a group of wild centaurs. The disappearance of Professor Lupin, and his subsequent replacement by Professor Dumbledore, led conversely to a certain allure: why he had gone, and for what reason he could not say goodbye, incensed the imaginations of all and decorated tales of his departure with details that would have made the real Lupin blush. He was, by miscellaneous accounts, supposed to have run off and eloped with Celestina Warbeck; been chased down by a rogue gang of snatchers for a king's ransom; and cornered by a wizard he had jilted at the altar some ten years ago, who had returned to exact his revenge and his bride price. (This last one Draco was fairly sure came from *Witch Weekly.)* Then the Ministry put out a warrant for his arrest on the charge of lycanthropy, and the stories were more or less the same, only more explicit, which was horrible.

The Hospital Wing, however, was closed to visitors. Out of respect for Daphne's privacy, Madam Pomfrey refused to let anyone in unless Daphne agreed that she knew them, only because Daphne loved attention, she agreed to everyone, regardless of whether she knew them or not, which annoyed the nurse endlessly. So it was with palpable reluctance that Madam Pomfrey said, "She'll see you, Mr. Malfoy," when he came to the door.

The Wing was the same as it had been last year, when Hermione had lived in it. Wide, crystalline windows spilling warm light into the room; comfortable beds separated by silk screens; the scent of flowers and old stone. Only one bed was occupied, and it already had visitors: a dark-haired boy and girl with robes hemmed in green. Each held one of her hands.

“There you are,” said Pansy.

“Came as soon as I could.”

Half of Daphne’s face wore a mask of bandages, and the sheets were drawn high around her collarbones, showing only a hint of the gauze layered around her neck. Her one good eye was slitted open, circled with dark bags, and fogged with painkiller like a clouded opal.

It didn’t seem real. Things like this didn’t happen at Hogwarts. There were dangers, of course, but everyone survived, and everyone was well again, in the end; hadn’t Hermione been alright, after all, last year? Hadn’t Colin Creevey? Hadn’t all of them come out safely from the Vault, being trapped with the monstrous Quirrell? It wasn’t possible that someone could walk away from Hogwarts worse than she came. The idea kept slipping out of place in his head.

But she was there, in the Hospital Wing, and Lupin was gone.

“Draco,” she slurred. “Hullo. Thanks for coming.” Her lips moved slowly from pain.

“Naturally.” He dropped a pair of twigs in the jar by her bedside and Transfigured them into lilies. “Here. Couldn’t come by llama fur on short notice. One’s from me, and one’s from Weasley.”

Theo, who had been bent solemnly over Daphne’s hand, gave a twitch. “Weasley?” he said quietly. “What’s he care?”

“Ronald is my friend,” said Daphne, her voice breathy from exhaustion. “He and I… had a smashing time… at a party, once.”

With one eye hidden, it was impossible to tell — but he could have sworn she winked at him.

Pansy gave a shuddering breath. When she lifted her face, it was coated in a sheen of tears.

“He’s going to pay,” she said. “If I have to kill him myself, he’ll pay for it.”

“Loose lips, sunken ships, Pans,” said Theo, with a glance at Draco.

Daphne flapped her hand. “It’s… alright,” she managed. “He can know… ‘bout Lupin. Won’t be… a secret long, anyway… once everyone sees.” She gestured to her face.

“Did you know?” Pansy snapped. Her lip trembled. “Did you know they had a monster in the castle? Teaching children? *Again?”*

“How would I know?” said Draco coolly.

She held his gaze for a long moment before she turned away. Guilt twinged. He liked Pansy. He wanted well for her. But a few secrets would never hurt her, and they wouldn’t hurt him, either.

There was a new badge on her robes. It was heart-shaped and golden, and it had the letters L.P.Y. engraved on it, with a small insignia of a wand and a spear of ivy, crossed.

“S’okay,” slurred Daphne. “Lots of attention… whole school… likes me now.”

“Everyone liked you before,” said Theo.

“Stop… lying. Makes me feel like I’m… dying.”

“You’re not dying,” he said firmly, and squeezed her hand. “You’re going to be well again soon, do you understand? I’ve all sorts of terrible designs on our summer, and you’ve a part to play in all of them.”

“Should’ve told me earlier, prat,” she mumbled. “If I’d known I had… summer plans… I would’ve pushed my mauling up… to January.”

Pansy barked a laugh. Theo gave a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“I’m going to tell Madam Pomfrey to lay off whatever’s in that drip. It gives you such an awful mouth.”

“Imperious,” she sighed. “I should perish… just to teach you a lesson. S’what… *you* would do.”

“I should never forgive such pettiness. It is beneath you as a lady to stoop to my level.”

“That’s true. Dratted unfair, too. Get me some… ice water?”

“For the lady? Anything.” He rose to his feet. “Come, Pans,” he said. “Let’s scare some victuals off one of the nurses. I feel like terrorizing someone, just now, and there aren’t any first years about. Draco, will you watch her?”

“I’m not dying,” groaned Daphne. “You all… harpies… gerroff. Leave me… and my wounds.”

“I’ll stay,” said Draco. Daphne poked her tongue out at him.

Theo motioned for Draco to step out. Draco followed him outside the screen, and they moved out of Daphne’s earshot.

“What did Madam Pomfrey say—”

“Very little,” said Theo grimly. “She doesn’t want to scare us — like looking at her wouldn’t scare anyone badly enough. No one knows how far the venom got into her system before the healers extracted it. She’s slated to stay for the rest of the month and check in with a specialist at St. Mungo’s.”

“But she’ll live?”

“Live, yes, thank God… in what state, and for how long, no one can say, considering— other factors.”

“You mean her blood condition?”

Surprise parted Theo’s mouth, but he erased it with a twitch of his jaw. “They’ve only done limited tests, because she’s so frail. So far, there’s no sign of it worsening, but these things can sour in the course of a minute.”

“And the other thing?”

“The other…?”

“You know what I mean.”

Theo folded his arms and glanced over his shoulder. Daphne had tipped her head toward Pansy and they were murmuring together in soft, wet whispers. “They don’t think she has lycanthropy,” he murmured. “Yet.”

A weight removed itself from Draco’s back. “Side effects?”

“Some. A taste for rare meat; heightened senses of smell and hearing, from what they can tell. Aggression, potentially, though that might just be Daph. It’ll take a full moon to tell.”

“I thought her blood condition might make her more susceptible.”

“Remains to be seen.”

“Well. Good, then.”

“To say the least.”

Daphne gave a feeble cough. It echoed in the cavernous Hospital Wing. Pansy held a cup to her lips.

“You know, when I came to Hogwarts,” said Theo suddenly, “I thought it was the greatest place on earth. That it was this epicenter of magic, and power, and politics, and all the great wizards in history came here to be trained... You know, they take you over the lake in those boats, and you see it swimming out of the fog, and you think... suddenly they've got you sitting there like an idiot, believing in a castle in the sky.”

“...What’s your point?”

Theo shook his head. “What a joke,” he said bitterly. “What do you think they do here? Teach? This is the same school it was forty years ago. The same classes, the same books, the same people, the same problems. And while they fill your brain with rot, they’ll leave you out to dry in the face of actual danger — where were the teachers, for Daphne? Where were they for Pansy, last year? It’s a *joke.* I’m so goddamn tired of it.”

“I say again,” said Draco, masking alarm, “what is your point?”

“That we used to be the greatest wizarding school in the world, and now we’re lucky if we can keep our neck above the water with Durmstrang. My father said it was a husk of a place, and I should have listened to him. Then maybe Daphne would — it doesn’t matter. And Dumbledore is part of the problem. Everything that happens here is his fault, and when they come for this place, I hope they start with him.”

His voice was cold and flat. Draco doubted whether he would even hear it if Draco tried to argue; he seemed lost in his own world.

“Dumbledore didn’t do that to Daphne.”

“He hired a *werewolf,”* said Theo. Draco took a step back. “A monster. That’s the second time one of my friends almost died, and just because we’re not Gryffindors—”

“To be clear,” said Draco. “You think you were targeted because — you’re Slytherins.”

“Yeah! Yeah, I do! When’s the last time one of *your* housemates got hurt, Draco? When’s the last time a teacher went after one of *your* friends, and don’t you dare say Snape, because Daphne’s in the Hospital Wing and Pansy still wakes up screaming, and the worst that’s ever happened to you is losing house points—”

“No, you idiot, Pansy was targeted by a Death Eater because he *knew her* already, which was her father’s fault, not Dumbledores’ — and Daphne broke curfew voluntarily, her house didn’t have a thing to do with it—”

“Yeah? Yeah? Really! So it’s pure coincidence, then? That it’s my friends who keep getting hurt because of Dumbledore’s carelessness?”

“It wasn’t carelessness. Lupin wouldn’t have—”

But he couldn’t say that. If he revealed the Ministry’s role in the attack, he would have to explain how he knew where Lupin had been on the night of the full moon, and why he hadn’t taken the Wolfsbane Potion, and how Draco knew he hadn’t taken it in the first place.

“Lupin wouldn’t have what?” Theo demanded. “Wouldn’t have *what?* Because if you tell me he didn’t mean to kill her, I swear on my house I’ll end yours right here.”

“Werewolves don’t have sentience or intention.”

Theo snorted. “Sure,” he said. “Sure. *That’s* your defense. Okay, sure.”

“I’m not saying it’s not awful. Of course it is. And Dumbledore should face the consequences—”

“Dumbledore should be *sacked,* if not subjected to thumbscrews. Draco, I don’t think you can fathom how sincere I am.”

Draco had never seen Theo so heated in his life, except the once, and it was almost exactly this time, last year. His face was pink, his collar askew. It was unsettling.

“Granger was in the Hospital Wing for a month,” he said quietly.

Theo’s nose wrinkled. “What?”

Draco reached out and tugged his collar straight, eliciting a little noise of disgruntlement from Theo. He kept his tone neutral. “Granger was in the Hospital Wing for a month,” he repeated. “Creevey was in for three. You don’t know Leanne Thompson, I expect, but she lost almost a full year of her education. Had to repeat a term. You asked when was the last time a teacher went after one of my friends. I told you.” After a pause, he added, “What happened to Parkinson was unconscionable. But she wasn’t the only one.”

At this, Theo’s face became impassive. He didn’t blink.

“If I ever see Lupin again, he’s going to wish he never touched a wand,” he said.

“Spare me the theatrics. I’m not a girl, and I don’t know who you’re trying to impress.”

Theo snorted.

“Bastard,” he said, but it was calmer. Draco shrugged.

“How’s the eye?”

“Fine,” said Theo crisply. “As it ever was.”

“Yeah. Alright. Bad luck about the Cup, by the way, but there’s always next year.”

“I could still out-fly you eight days of the week, Malfoy.”

“I’m still waiting for you to prove it.”

Theo hesitated. “Tell George Weasley,” he began, and pursed his lips. Then he managed: “Tell George Weasley that — that I haven’t forgotten.”

“Absolutely not, I’m not your owl. Tell him yourself, if you’re driven to such hysterics of passion over it.”

“Or don’t, then, git, see if I care.”

“Hold your breath, I dare you.”

They jostled each other in a fraternal antagonistic way, and Theo swept from the Hospital Wing. A gleam of gold sat beneath the Slytherin badge on his robes.

Pansy had gone to find Madam Pomfrey and get more ice chips. Draco took her place at Daphne’s bedside, and Daphne turned her head to locate him with her one good eye.

“Draco.”

“Greengrass. Comfortable?”

“As I’ve ever been.”

“So not at all, then.”

“Ha, ha. Funny boy.” She moved her hand and flopped it rather pathetically on top of his. “Draco.”

“Yes,” he said, alarmed. He leaned away somewhat. If she was going to throw up or burst out bleeding, he’d prefer she do it somewhere away from his person.

“If I tell you something, will you make a triple-secret pinky-swear promise not to tell another living soul?”

“No,” he said. “I'll promise normally, though.”

“Okay,” she said, and beckoned him closer. He put his ear to her mouth.

“I can walk,” she whispered.

He drew back. “What?”

Her eye twinkled. “I'm… strong now. I can feel it… in my *bones.* At night, when Madam Pomfrey goes to bed, I get up and I… I can *run…* I can leap, and jump… and the closer it gets to the full moon… the stronger I am. I feel like I could run forever… and never get tired. I could dance all night… and never need to sit down... And I can… My body… after fourteen years of no… it’s finally saying yes .”

“...You’re imagining things.”

“M’not. I can *feel* it. You see that… dent in the railing?” She pointed to a divot in the rail of her bed. “I made that… the other day… trying to get up, for my bath. With my bare hands. Theo doesn’t believe me… but you will, won’t you? You know… I wouldn’t lie.”

He stared.

“What?” she whispered. “You don’t… you don’t think I’m… a monster, do you?”

“No, of course not,” he said at once. “I’m not sure you’re *sane,* but you’re certainly not a monster. You understand what you’re saying is preposterous.”

“Everything about my life… is preposterous. Now it’s just… finally getting… preposterously good. Isn’t that… nice? After all this time?”

“I’m a little caught up on the premises here. You’re not worried about transformations?”

She smiled, a sly, ferocious little thing. “Well,” she said. “They’ll have a hard time keeping me inside *then,* won’t they?”

Then she giggled at whatever expression he was making. “You don’t believe me,” she said. “That’s alright. You will.”

“That’s not it.” He drew the letter from his pocket. “I have something for you.”

She reached for it feebly. “You wrote… me a letter? Goodness. Are you in love with me?”

“I should sooner put my own eyes out with an awl. Any affection I may harbor for you is tacit and strictly familial. In my heart of hearts I regard you as my ebullient and uncomfortably flirtatious aunt.”

“Such… a prude,” she sighed. “Well. You can’t blame a girl… for trying.”

She opened the letter. After a moment, her brows twitched together, and the mirth fell from her face.

“Where… did you get this?”

“Dumbledore gave it to me,” he lied. It wasn’t exactly wrong. Dumbledore had been involved. “He wanted it conveyed to you.”

“And did he… tell you… who sent it?”

There was a delicate game to be played herein. “He said the letter was from someone who cares very much for your well-being.” Draco paused. “And someone who you stand to help considerably, if you feel inclined to it.”

“He wants me to lie?”

“No. He doesn’t. And I’m not asking you to. I’m telling you, as a question of fact, that what you tell the Ministry will change the course of his life. Having those facts, it is your business entirely what you do with them.”

“You can be such a dreadful bureaucrat,” she sighed, leaning her head back on the pillow. “You won’t just… ask me to lie, will you? Because that wouldn’t be… *proper.”*

“It wouldn’t be appropriate. It’s your decision to make.”

“So *moral,”* she said, amused. “Pansy… was right.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“She told me,” said Daphne, her eyes fluttering closed, “that it wasn’t about… disposition, or bloodline… it was about… who you were… in extremis. What happened… when the chips were down… and you had to get what you wanted. Hook or crook… she said… you’d choose the knife… you were never really like us… in extremis.”

“What on earth is that supposed to mean?”

But she had no answer; her head turned against the pillow, and her body slackened in sleep.

Exams came and went. It was sunny again, and Draco spent the few hours he could escape the library flying in quidditch friendlies with the Ravenclaw team, which Harry always seemed to greet with curious eagerness. The D.A.D.A. exam had been canceled, leaving most students with only an aggregate grade, and since Lupin’s grading policy had been generous, few had anything to complain about, though many regretted his leaving.

“Wonder what they’ll give us next year?” said Seamus gloomily.

“I’d take a vampire, if he lets us play music again,” said Dean.

The closer summer came, the more subdued Harry became. Going home was not a cheerful prospect for him, and Draco suspected that it was made worse by the idea of living together with Sirius. That was Sirius' own fault, for nurturing outlandish hopes, but it couldn't be helped now, and it didn't help to tell Harry that the hope had been outlandish: that only depressed him more.

Draco had thought about asking Dumbledore if they couldn't let the poor sad sack come and stay at the Manor, for the sake of God and country, just to stop him from sighing and slumping around the common room like a wet cat. But Ron told him in confidence that Harry had already submitted these requests, discreetly, and been denied. At that point, Draco's first instinct was a more direct course of action, e.g. removing the aunt and uncle from the picture entirely — a proposal that Ron wholeheartedly endorsed, but he admitted to having worries about the extraordinary grounding he would receive for committing the murder act on vacation, which Draco acknowledged and agreed with.

"Besides, we'd be expelled for doing magic out of school," he said, pouring himself some pumpkin juice.

"You wouldn't need spells," said Draco haughtily. "They're muggles. You could knock them out with a strong Sleeping Draught."

"Now there's an idea. Hell, you could probably just set Dobby on them, he'd do it — oh, hey, Harry. Hear the news? It's dismal."

"What?" said Harry, throwing himself down beside Ron. Hermione joined them. "What's this about Dobby?"

"No. Percy passed all his N.E.W.T.s," said Ron glumly.

"Oh, well done, then," said Hermione, reaching for a bread roll. "Congratulations. I expect he's very proud."

"No, it's not! He'll be on about it all summer! When Fred and George get their O.W.L.s back, if they haven't failed anything — *that's*

something to celebrate. I think the only ones they cared about were Transfig and Charms, and maybe Potions, though they're dropping it next year… Fred said if he had to spend one more minute in that musty old dungeon listening to Snape, he'd—"

"Actually learn something?" said Draco dryly.

"Gargle some boomslang venom, I think, was what he said. Lucky git, wish I could drop Potions. Every time Snape looks at me I think he regrets not letting the werewolf have a go at me."

"One sympathizes," muttered Draco.

Ron put down his fork. "So I use your broom polish once, yeah, and I'm bloody dead to you, am I—"

"It's fifty sickles a pot, it says 'PROPERTY OF D. MALFOY,' I don't know how much clearer I can *possibly* be—"

"EY! 'ARRY!"

The familiar brogue drowned out the rest of Draco's winning argument. Hagrid hurried down the Gryffindor table, his girth almost eclipsing the aisle. "Glad I caught yeh!" he cried. "Wanted ter congratulate yeh on the exam — top marks! All of yeh! Great bi' abou' the hippogriff flight patterns, too, 'Arry, I wouldn' have thought yeh would know tha' all jus' from the textbook."

Harry grinned. "It seemed intuitive," he said. Draco rolled his eyes, while Hermione broke into a furious coughing fit.

"Got some good news for yeh," added Hagrid. "Ron, had ter thank yeh for putin' me in touch with tha' brother of yers. He's says he'll take care of everythin', even the fancy permit business — I'm due ter visit his place in Romania over the summer."

"Least I could do," Ron said generously. "It was really a birthday present for Charlie, anyway, he's nutters about this sort of thing. Say

hello to Norbert for me, would you?”

“I will! Although Charlie said somethin’ funny about tha’, in the letter,” Hagrid admitted. “Said he’s in perfect health an’ everythin’ — only they call her Norberta, now.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, with a tinkling laugh. “She’s a girl-dragon?”

“Mad, innit?” said Hagrid happily. “Yeh got ter wait for the firs’ clutch to tell. Anyway, Charlie said he’d help me study for me license over the summer. An’ Dumbledore says that if I pass the test, he’ll hire me back next year!”

“That’s great!” said Harry enthusiastically.

“Yes, that’s wonderful,” said Hermione, less so.

“So I’ll be looking for all of yeh in my class,” he said, clasping Ron and Harry on the shoulders. The movement nearly slammed both of their faces into their plates. “I’ve got a great idea fer the firs’ day, this time, too! There’s summat called fire crabs off the coast o’ the Mediterranean — yeh’ll jus’ love em!”

“Fire crabs,” mumbled Hermione, once he left. “Class Three. Generally considered N.E.W.T. level.”

“I thought the classification system was wizard-centric and antiquated,” said Draco.

She gave him a plaintive look. He dropped the smirk and nodded at her. They had agreed not to continue with Care of Magical Creatures next year. Besides, it would free up a block for Muggle Studies, and he wanted to find out how one went about acquiring muggle music if your friend didn’t send it to you by owl post. These, along with things like ‘Cadbury’ and ‘normal muggle girl Christmas gifts,’ had become objects of unanticipated significance in his life, and he was begrudgingly willing to tolerate lectures on boring things like lektrisitty and Tories in order to understand them.

Gryffindor had won the house cup that year. Draco cared very little for this except that it meant they ate under red-and-gold banners for the end of term feast, and it made the Gryffindor common room almost unwalkable during the night before they left. Before making his perfunctory appearance at the party, however, he went down to the dungeons with a book under his arm.

Light spilled from under the door to Snape's office. He raised his hand, hesitated, and then knocked, firmly, thrice.

No answer came. He pushed in anyway.

Snape sat in a high-backed chair by the fireplace, a book open over his lap. When the door opened nothing moved except for his eyes, and Draco felt the cool shiver of a ward passing over his body, leaving him intact but awakened to the possibility of a very different outcome.

"I did not invite you in."

"I know, sir. But since we're leaving tomorrow, I wanted to speak with you before we left."

Snape's eyes moved to the door behind him. Draco shut it.

"It is past curfew."

"I presume detentions carry over into the next year, professor."

Snape gave a small grunt of acquiescence. They both knew very well the likelihood of him giving Draco a detention, but he disliked having his bluff called. Draco came in and sat down on the ottoman beside him. The fire provided ample warmth for the small stone room, and he noticed a bottle of brandy at Snape's elbow.

"What is it?" said Snape.

The words he had prepared deserted him. He was left with an empty mouth and an empty head and a pair of half-empty hands. "This

book," he said finally. He held out *Moste Potente Potions.* "You gave it to me last year."

Snape glanced at it and nodded.

"Right. Thank you, also, for that, sir. But I wanted to know— are the annotations yours?"

"Perhaps. Why should it matter?"

"Well, they're very good. And I used them to brew a potion that was rather difficult, and they made it much easier than it would have been — considering my level."

"Which potion would that be?"

"Polyjuice," Draco admitted, after a moment.

Snape's eyebrow gave a judicious twitch. "You brewed a Polyjuice Potion."

"Yes, sir."

"Successfully."

"By my eye, sir."

"May I ask where?"

"Second floor girls' bathroom, sir," said Draco, evenly.

Snape closed his book and put it on the table. He steepled his fingers and put his fingers over his mouth.

"You are aware—"

"It's against the rules. Yes. Sir."

“Draco, I want you to answer this question with all possible care for your own well-being and mine. I suggest you take commensurate time in crafting your answer. Does it serve me to know the purpose for which you required this potion?”

Draco took commensurate time in crafting his answer.

“No, sir.”

“Am I wrong in presuming it bears some relation to your involvement in the affairs of Harry Potter and Sirius Black?”

He spat *Black* as if it were something foul he had discovered lurking behind his molar.

Draco thought about it. He thought about his godfather, who he cared about more than most people in the world; and his friend, who cared about his godfather, also, more than most people in the world, despite a lamentable difference in quality between the two.

“I don’t believe it serves either of our interests for you to know that, sir.”

“Good,” said Snape crisply. “I take it on faith that it does not. If you did brew a Polyjuice successfully — which I doubt you did, in truth — then it would have been a formidable piece of magic. I will refrain from assigning detentions to you and any of your extraordinary inept conspirators, whose names I have not the slightest inkling, in light of the fact that it is impossible and therefore unlikely to have occurred.”

“But I *did*— I mean — well, fine.”

He sulked. The lack of an outright denial was the closest thing to acknowledgement he could hope for. He clung to it anyway. Praise, from Snape, was a rare thing.

The book weighed heavily on his lap. He slid his thumb along the line of ancient gilt.

“If I may, sir—”

“You may not.”

“Why do you dislike Professor Lupin?”

Snape did not *recoil;* that would imply some level of movement. Rather, the displeasure on his face soured and fermented into a deeper shade of foreboding.

“He is a danger to Wizarding society. He is a creature of violence and low cunning. He would have killed you and your schoolmates without hesitation. I could go on, but I do not believe I must.”

“He’s a werewolf, sir.”

“Your point?”

“That it isn’t his fault,” Draco ventured. “Entirely. Respectfully.”

Snape shut the book in his lap and put it to the side. Draco sat up straighter, nervous for no reason at all.

“Remus Lupin,” said Snape softly, “has manufactured himself a past he can live with. It appears I alone will not indulge him in it. He remembers a world, a Hogwarts, and a set of friends that bear no resemblance to the people I or anyone else knew. Inside him is a rotten core of selfishness that no grandiosity of pretense will ever cut out. He has no dignity, no loyalty, and no code higher than his own pleasure. He would choose Sirius Black over every man, woman, and child in this castle… and he did.”

Draco didn’t really see evidence to believe that, but this was not the day he dared to ask why Snape did. What he did want to know about, and the last piece of the puzzle he had yet to grasp, was the last Marauder he hadn’t met.

“And James Potter? What was he like?”

“Never speak to me of the Potters.”

The fire guttered low, like it was afraid, too.

“Yes, sir.”

But he couldn’t unhear what Snape had shouted in the Forest, unshackled from dignity, from reason, from the very world around him: *You killed her.*

Her. *Her,* he’d said, and he’d been talking about the Potters just before. *Her* — but it wouldn’t make any sense.

“Draco.”

“Yes, sir?”

“I said that you were dismissed,” said Snape. “If I must resort to more strenuous methods to remove you from my company, I will do so, but we will both regret it.”

Draco rose, gathering what remained of his dignity with him. “Sorry to disturb you, sir. Have a good holiday.”

“You as well,” said Snape quietly. “Tell your mother that I send my regards. And Draco?”

“Yes, sir?”

“If you must insist on lying down with dogs,” he said, “then I entreat you to better protect yourself against infestations of fleas.”

Understanding nothing, he agreed that he would, and let himself out.

The Hogwarts Express left at an awful early hour the next morning. Harry and Ron, exhausted from the night’s celebrations, spent most of the ride napping on each other’s shoulders.

“They’re adorable,” said Draco. “Do you have one of those whatsits? The poillerode?”

“A Polaroid, you mean? No, but where did *you* hear about one of those?”

“Always the tone of surprise,” he sighed. “I’m a man of depth and mystery, Granger. Perhaps I’ve hit the books early on Muggle Studies, and I intend to give you a run for your money.”

“...Seamus told you?”

“Creevey.”

They talked of that for a while, of muggle cameras and Colin’s moving photographs, and the difference between that and ‘viddiyos,’ which he struggled to grasp. Then she pulled out a paper on the use of the Fidelius Charm, and asked him whether he thought the author’s methodology wasn’t the slightest bit skewed towards his own hypothesis, and he challenged her to come up with any other way of running the experiment, which she did, and the ensuing argument kept them occupied all the way to England.

When Harry woke up, Hermione had gone to change into her muggle clothes. While Draco and Ron chatted about England’s chances in the World Cup that year, Harry trudged out to the bathroom and came back in a ratty gray shirt and denim jeans tied up with string.

“I say,” said Draco. Hermione ducked in beside him, wearing a cheery peach-pink cardigan that matched the pearl clip she was tucking into her hair. She seemed much more comfortable than Harry in muggle clothes, he noticed; Harry wore them like something draped unwillingly around his neck, whereas Hermione appeared to move as easily as she did in robes, if not more. In fairness, muggle clothes for women were fathoms better than for men.

“It’s not like the Dursleys take me shopping,” said Harry defensively.

“Why the devil don’t they let you wear robes, then?”

Harry barked a laugh. “That’s a good joke,” he said. “And let the neighbors see? Petunia would pass out… Dudley might think it was funny, but then he’d try to set them on fire.”

“I remain perplexed by why you tolerate the existence of a *Dudley* in your domicile,” said Draco primly, as Hermione settled herself beside him. She was fiddling with some muggle device shaped like a rock, only it had buttons on it, and an antenna she could pull out and wave around. “It seems dreadful.”

“Not really my choice,” said Harry, not without humor. “Big problem with having kids. You can’t get rid of them until they’re eighteen.”

Draco stared at him.

“Dudley is a *person?”*

“I’ve been thinking about the business with the holidays,” said Ron philosophically. “I’ve figured out a strategy. I’m going to get Fred and George onside, first, and then we’re going to blackmail Percy; Mum won’t care about a million N.E.W.T.s if she finds out he was out-of-bed with a girl. And she’ll give him anything he wants, since it’s his graduation. Then we take it to Dad, and he’ll say yes, obviously—”

“Why on earth wouldn’t you *say* — but it went after my owl! You talk about it like a wild dog! You’re not telling me the ‘Dudley’ is related to you? By *blood?”*

“—and it’s the World Cup this summer! So you can come with us, and we’ll go and see it! Dad can get tickets from work, probably. What do you say? June tenth?”

The crosstalk had gone over Harry’s head; he was saying to Draco, “I mean, yeah, unless he got switched in the infirmary ward with a mountain troll, which isn’t, you know, entirely out of the question—” But he was cut off when Ron elbowed him.

“June tenth. You reckon?”

“What?”

“That’s when Mum will expect you back at the Burrow. June tenth. Gives you about a week — that should be enough for your weird family blood wards. Tell your aunt and uncle, if they’ve got a problem with that, they can write Molly Weasley, and she’ll send them a letter they won’t soon forget.”

“Oh. I — that’s — but I couldn’t do that to your family.”

“What, we're not good enough for you?” said Ron jokingly. “You’d crap in tents with Sirius Black, but the Burrow isn’t up to snuff?”

“But your mother, your family… I can’t impose…”

“You’re family, you nitwit. C’mon, say yes. You know she’d be thrilled. She’s already plotting all sorts of ways to fatten you up, she wants to have you up a stone by Christmas.”

Harry beamed.

They played several games of Exploding Snap, in which Draco took great pleasure in handing everyone their arses, and when they were all considerably more cheerful, if more sooty, they bought a large lunch from the tea cart, complete with as many cauldron cakes as Draco’s and Harry’s pockets could jointly buy. Crookshanks curled on Hermione’s lap and nosed his head into Draco’s elbow, and he generously overlooked the amount of orange fur that was disgorged onto his robes. He did not think Hermione sufficiently appreciated his selflessness.

It was late afternoon, and the ridges of London were cutting into the horizon, when something flew into their window.

Ron bellowed, upsetting the remainder of his lunch onto the compartment floor.

It was a tiny owl, carrying a letter that was much too big for it. The owl was so small, in fact, that it kept tumbling over end over end in the train's slipstream. Harry whisked down the window and brought it carefully inside.

The owl dropped its letter onto Harry's seat and began zooming around their compartment, apparently very pleased with itself. Harry's snowy owl clicked her beak with a sort of dignified disapproval; Ulysses gave a discerning croak.

"It's from Sirius!"

"Already?" said Ron mildly. "He doesn't waste time, does he?"

Harry passed the letter around.

Dear Harry,

I hope this finds you before you reach your aunt and uncle. I don't know whether they're used to owl post.

Moony and I are in hiding. I won't tell you where, in case this owl falls into the wrong hands. I have some doubts about its reliability, but it is the best I could find, and it did seem eager for the job. I believe the dementors are still searching for me, but they haven't a hope of finding me here. We are planning to allow some Muggles to glimpse us soon, a long way from Hogwarts, so that the security on the castle will be lifted.

We are not living large, but living happier than I think we have either been for a long time, and we look forward eagerly to the next time we can meet. All of our best wishes and fondest hopes go with you. Be safe; be brave; and look after your friends. If they know what's good for them, they'll look after you, too.

Also! Moony reminded me: I am enclosing something else for you, which I think will make your next year at Hogwarts more enjoyable.

If ever you need me, send word. Your owl will find me.

I'll write again soon.

Love,

M — Your favorite unc PadMoon

Just PMMMMadfoot and

BASTARD MMJINXED MMMY QUILL PADFOOT

and Moony

Beside the signature lay two muddy pawprints.

"Trite," said Draco.

"What'd they send?" said Ron. "If it's not private, I mean."

Harry shook out the envelope. The other piece of parchment was short and somewhat ratty, as if it had been an afterthought.

I, Sirius Black, Harry Potter's godfather, hereby give him permission to visit Hogsmeade on weekends.

"Sweet, but McGonagall's not going to accept a permission form from a convict."

"Nah, she might," said Ron reasonably. "She's got a soft spot for Harry. You remember that thing with the broom?"

"Do I? I have lost *sleep* over that thing with the broom. I pray only that the forces of cosmic justice, wheresoever they are, are also losing sleep over the incident we now refer to as 'that thing with the broom.'"

“We won the Cup, get over it.”

“It’s the principle of the thing, Weasley.”

Ron was probably right. McGonagall, like many, had a soft spot for Harry, whether or not he had earned it by his own charm, or the possession of two brain cells to breed together. Driving soft spots into people’s heads appeared to be his primary survival talent.

“Hang on,” said Harry, “there’s a bit more, on the back. ‘I thought your friend Ron might like to keep this owl, as it’s my fault he no longer has a rat.’ Aww.”

All turned their gaze critically on the owl, which lacked the mass to tip a scale against a squirrel.

“Well,” said Draco, “on the bright side, it’ll keep your letters brief. He won’t carry more than one page at a time.”

“For goodness’ sake, Ron, don’t listen to him. It’s a perfectly wonderful gift. And just think, it’ll be so nice not to rely on Errol,” said Hermione. “All four of us will have our own.”

Ron studied the owl in apparent consternation over its size. Then he held him out for Crookshanks to sniff. “What do you reckon? Definitely an owl?”

Crookshanks rubbed his head against Ron’s hand. Hermione was beaming like he’d given her ten years’ Christmas presents in advance. Draco felt vaguely suspicious of the whole affair. It was very kitsch.

“Good enough for me! He’s mine.”

At King’s Cross, as the train sighed gray clouds over a flushed London evening, the musical echoes of family reunions filled the smoky and thick summer air. Faces familiar and not swelled out of the brickwork, with open arms and cries of names he recognized

much better than he had last year — and he had the strangest sense of a second homecoming, a homecoming that was also a going-away.

Near the end of the platform, Sibelius Nott carved a wide radius into the crowd, none of whom dared to press past the aurors that flanked him. Theo, prying himself apart from a scowling Pansy, stepped without any particular eagerness into that radius, where his father's hand came down on his collar like an iron clamp. Then the sight was lost in a gaggle of furiously embracing Hufflepuffs (he didn't know if the student's family were Hufflepuffs, but the insipid squealing merely seemed to suggest it) and he saw Astoria Greengrass and her parents, huddled together around Astoria's wheelchair.

It surprised him as much as them when, instead of descending the stairs, Daphne — who still wore an eyepatch and bandages over most of her face — hurled herself from the window. Upon a perfect landing, she swept her sister out of her wheelchair, spun her around, and threw her so high in the air that her fingers could have brushed the highest tip of the train's smokestack. Whatever noises of horror her parents made were drowned out by Astoria's cry of joy.

Hermione touched his shoulder, staring. "Is that…?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. He shook his head. "Couldn't be," he said. "I had the same thought, but it's surely someone else."

The crowds parted, and he saw Theo again, standing with his father and the Parkinsons. He gave Draco a thin smile and a wave. Draco returned it.

"Harry," said Ron thoughtfully, "what d'you reckon your aunt would say if my dad asked her what a muggle contraceptive was?"

"I don't know, Ron. I think your dad deserves the chance to find out."

"My thoughts exactly."

“Honestly,” sighed Hermione, as fifty percent of their group — ten percent, if you went by intellect — scurried off together. “One of these days, they’re going to *actually* breach the Statute of Secrecy, and they’re going to have such an ‘I told you so’ coming to them.”

“Which you’ll then undercut by helping them get out of it,” he said absently. He was looking for his mother.

“Obviously I will. You can’t say ‘I told you so’ to someone in Azkaban.”

“Right, of course.”

His mother stood in a candle of sunlight near the platform entrance. Her hair was coiffed like a magnificent bichromatic snail, and she was wearing a suit of verdant green, with black lacquered buttons that matched the strand of dark pearls around her neck. She was not smiling, but had a tightness around her mouth and cheeks that meant pleasure and excitement, commingled, in anticipation of seeing him.

Hermione followed his gaze. “I suppose I’d better go and find my parents,” she said.

“Yes. Rather. If you like.”

Then he added, “My mother’s already seen you. It wouldn’t be out of order, you know, to go and say hello.”

It didn’t mean anything. But there had been a moment under the Whomping Willow, with a werewolf and a murderer and a horde of dementors, where he’d really thought he was going to die beside her, and that had been harrowing enough; and, having done that, it seemed embarrassing to be skittish about introducing her to his mother.

Things were simpler than you thought they’d be, sometimes. Sometimes things were so easy they felt like cheating. You wouldn’t

think that good things could be simple, it wasn't intuitive. But it was true. Sometimes good things could simply happen to a person, for no reason at all, like they'd walked into your compartment on a train.

Without waiting for an answer, he took Hermione by the arm and led her, half-pulling, through the crowds to his mother. Hermione tried to fluff out her hair and hissed: "Wait — I'm wearing muggle clothes. Will that matter?"

"Yes, she'll hate you from sight. The muggle bit is fine, but she hates polyester."

"Really! Do you think I should change? She *does* know I'm a witch, doesn't she?"

"Of course she'll know you're a witch, you're with me. Keep them on, pink's your color."

"What?"

"Draco!"

He submitted to a brief, crushing embrace. His mother smelled the same way she always did. There was something wonderfully constant about that, like a perennial flower.

She was shorter than she'd been when he left, though. Odd.

It took her only a moment to notice Hermione waiting. "Well, hello!" she said. "Aren't you darling? Do you know Draco?"

Hermione, who had gone owlish with fright, was obviously reevaluating her answer.

He felt sort of bad about being amused, but it *was* a bit funny. He'd thought the only people who intimidated Hermione were teachers and historians.

And, apparently, his mother.

He interjected before the awkwardness became scalding. “Mother, this is Hermione Granger. She’s the one who keeps ruining the class ranks. Dreadful conversationalist, too, I’ve been talking to her for three years and I still can’t get her to see reason on anything.”

Hermione stood up so straight it looked like she was straining for flight.

“It’s perfectly lovely to meet you, Mrs. Malfoy,” she said stonily. She extended her hand at a forty-five degree angle to her body. At the same time, she gave a trembling bob at the knee, like an abortive curtsy. Draco placed a hand tactfully over his mouth.

Narcissa’s face glowed. “You’re a *girl,”* she said.

Draco felt his own doom flower deep and darkly in his breast.

Hermione blinked. “Of course I’m a girl,” she said. Her intimidation melted seamlessly into indignation. “What do you mean? Is that so surprising?”

Narcissa hurried to take Hermione’s hands. “No! Not at all surprising! But — oh, he never said you were a *girl!”*

“He mentioned me before?” said Hermione, in frankly injurious tones of surprise.

“Of course he does, only I’d thought — I thought Granger was a boy in his dorm — you spoke about her so—”

“That’s enough,” said Draco immediately.

“He never *mentioned* I was a girl?” Hermione’s voice was dangerous.

Narcissa heard it, and hesitated. “Perhaps he did, and I only missed it,” she lied. He loved his mother for that lie, even if it was the worst one he’d ever heard. “Don’t be cross with him, you lovely creature, I’m madly delighted and I shouldn’t want to get him in trouble; only

he does love to keep secrets from me! *Hermione* Granger, what a beautiful name. Is that Shakespeare?"

He had mislocated the danger. The danger lay not with his mother. The danger lay in the conspiracy of women everywhere to ruin his life. He should have suspected and avoided this. In fact good things were never simple, nor did they ever happen to him, and he had been a fool for suspecting otherwise.

"Er, yes, actually. My parents thought I'd never have to worry about being the… er, second Hermione."

"Oh, but I'm sure I have a fourth cousin named Hermione, somewhere," said Narcissa blithely. "What does your family do, dear heart?"

There was a silence like a record scratch. His design had been to avoid that bit of the conversation, perhaps permanently, or until he could maneuver his mother into a private place and explain. However—

"They're muggles," said Hermione bluntly, because her idea of 'hedging' was running headfirst at the bush with an ax.

Narcissa's head inclined several querulous degrees on its axis. His stomach flipped. He felt like he were watching gunmen load a cannon, only he hadn't any idea what they were loading it with.

"Ah," she said. "Muggles. Both of them?"

"Yes," said Hermione fiercely.

"And you…" She looked at Draco.

"They're dentists," he said, after a moment. "In London. They like to read. And go to the theater."

"Oh," said Narcissa.

“And they have a cat. Well, Granger does. The younger Granger. My — this one.”

“I see.”

The heat in the platform seemed to rise. Hermione’s hair floated in a shimmery sun-coated radius around her head. Her face was sort of shiny from sweat. He kept glancing at her to see if he was getting something wrong.

Narcissa drew her hands away from Hermione and smiled. It was a slow, gradual coalescence of kindness, as though she had to work up to it.

“I’m sorry,” she said breathily. “I’m afraid I don’t know — what a dentist is.”

Each word might have cost her a thousand galleons. Draco was proud of her.

“That’s alright,” said Hermione, in a very small voice. “They fix teeth.”

Narcissa nodded quickly. “And is… that business… good?” She glanced furtively at Draco. “Do muggle teeth… require much fixing?”

“I… a normal amount, I’d say.”

“But you don’t… I don’t suppose *you* want to be a dentist, do you?”

“No,” said Hermione firmly. “It’s a good business, but you see, I’m a witch.”

“...Ah. Of course.”

“But I’m interested in a career in Transfiguration,” she blurted. “With a focus on human Transfiguration. And I’m also interested in civil rights issues concerning magical creatures. There’s such a dreadful amount of work to be done.”

“My dear, that sounds terribly strenuous for you,” said Narcissa. She said *for you* just a bit too emphatically, to Draco’s ear, for the purposes of innocence; there was a more than passing implication that it might not have been quite so strenuous for someone else — but thank God, Hermione, for whom work was the reason to get out of bed in the morning, never even conceived that possibility.

“But it’s only work,” she said, mystified.

Narcissa blinked.

“Granger’s going to be Minister before she’s thirty,” said Draco. “It’s bad luck for us, because she’ll likely have us out on the street, sweeping trash and holding the door for goblins. Nevertheless, I’m getting in with the administration on the ground floor, so perhaps we’ll land one of the kinder goblin overlords as reward for my troubles.”

“He’s joking, really, I swear. I don’t even know if I want to work for the Ministry. There’s an awful lot I have to do before then, and I don’t even have my O.W.L.s yet. And Draco’s more of a bureaucrat than I am, honestly. If either of us will be Minister—”

“It won’t bloody well be me, will it? I’d have *you* owling my office at all hours of the night nagging me to fix things.”

“It’d never get done, otherwise!”

“Oh, I’m sure, but they invented this thing called sleep, and those of us who indulge find it does wonders for the temperament. You might try it out, see what happens.”

“You’re one to talk about temperament — *you* nearly bit Harry’s head off for spilling ink on your Potions essay.”

“And he should count himself lucky he didn’t spill it on yours, because there wouldn’t have been any ‘nearly’ about it. Mother, you’re going to let her talk to me like this?”

Narcissa made the surprised sound of one who had not expected to speak. She was watching them — when talking to Hermione it was strategically unsound to pause for breath or interruption, though he realized belatedly that it might be taken as quite rude if you weren't in the rhythm of it, which people usually weren't — and he was embarrassed, though he didn't think his mother was of a mind to scold. Her eyes swept over them and left nothing but a trail of tingling embarrassment in their wake. Her irises were like small gray pearls, smooth and glassy with a composure that did not appear terribly sound.

"What?" he said hotly.

Narcissa frightened him further by not answering. To Hermione, she said stiffly: "I apologize so very much for my lack of manners. You must visit over the summer, so that we might — so as to allow us to offer our hospitality."

"That's entirely alright," said Hermione, deeply embarrassed. "I wouldn't dream of intruding."

"It wouldn't be an intrusion. I could make up a guest room for you. She'd sleep in the east wing, of course, in the girls' suite."

"Mother!"

"I'm only being clear. You're of an age—"

"Oh, look, my parents," cried Hermione. Draco could have embraced her. "They look really impatient, I have to run."

She hauled her trolley into place, and he realized only then that it was the last time he would see her for several months.

"Wait — hang on. Granger."

She turned around expectantly. The evening sun threw a strain of gold through her hair, like a stripe of pure gilt. He sort of stumbled

over his next words, which wasn't like himself at all, and he blamed his mother for disarraying him.

"I'll send you that journal," he said.

"I'll write," she said.

"Alright, then."

"Alright."

He did not know quite how one went about the business of starting a hug; he had never initiated one with anyone besides his mother. He did recall holding out his hand, sort of indeliberately, as if to say: *If you absolutely must bring yourself into my space, I will not jinx you for it,* and she seemed to understand — being brilliant, naturally — what he was trying to do, and, smiling, took the burden of it off his shoulders.

She put her arms around his chest and squeezed him. He lifted his chin clear of her altitudinous hair and closed his eyes, pretending to tolerate it, when in fact he did not mind it really at all. Her grip was like a warm band of sunlight concentrated around his chest, pressing inward.

"Alright. Good. That's enough, then. You'll wrinkle my shirt."

She let go, perhaps hurriedly — he might have been projecting.

"Well," she said awkwardly, "goodbye!"

"Right. Goodbye," he said, and found himself terribly distracted by the idea that he wanted to keep talking to her. Obviously, he quashed this feeling and sniffed and turned his head, to ignore it.

"Yes. Er… have a good summer."

She turned away to leave again. He called out, more or less without thinking: "Race you through the Runes textbook."

Her nose wrinkled when she grinned. It rearranged all the freckles on her face into new constellations.

“You’ll owe me a book when I win.”

“You’ll owe *me* a new cassette when I do.”

“Joke’s on you — I’ve already done the first hundred pages.”

“Only the first hundred? I’m sorry, I can slow down if you’d like to catch up.”

“I want the first volume of Chroniculus Punnett,” she called, walking backwards. “Or something by Magdalen Manchurian on the goblin revolts! First edition!”

“So? *I* want something by that one group Finnegan wouldn’t shut up about. The Moving Stones.”

She laughed. He knew what the real name was.

The crowds closed over her while she was laughing, and she vanished into the sunlit peals of smoke.

Narcissa took his arm.

“So,” she began.

“Yes, Mother. Your hair looks splendid, by the way.”

“Don’t even try,” she said absently. “She’s — I mean, she’s… quite something.”

“Muggle-born.”

“Muggle-born,” said Narcissa, like it was an exotic species of plant.

“Yes. Listen, Mother, it’s like this—”

She put her hand on his wrist.

“I don’t suppose you have… many friends, like her, do you?”

He considered.

“No,” he said, for a given interpretation of what the question meant. He didn’t have many friends, full stop, anyway.

“Well,” she said. “Well.” She nodded. Apropos of nothing, she announced, “Your Great-Uncle Ignatius had a pub in Edinburgh that he liked. On vacations, he would go drinking with the local muggles. We thought he was quite odd, but he said that they had better ale in the muggle pubs. I doubt I could ever tell the difference, but it was his own business, and I imagine that he had — people, there, that he was fond of. Even considering his circumstances.”

“...Mother?”

“You know your Great Aunt Cedrella married a Weasley, of course. We couldn’t see her after the disinheritance, naturally, but I was given to understand, as a child, that sometimes my grandfather would — disappear, for an afternoon. And that there were certain offshore accounts, listed under my grandfather’s name, that found themselves routinely depleted, though they weren’t tied to any of the family vaults. It was an open secret.”

“I have no idea what you mean to imply, and frankly doubt that I would like to.”

“My Great Aunt Cassiopeia played gobstones with a muggle-born partner. A woman. She never married, you know. Of course, no one would have suggested anything improper about her, she conducted herself immaculately in public. And so we agreed that what was done privately, out of sight, was her affair.”

“Mother, I really would prefer you cut to the quick and gouge my ears off. This is cruelty.”

“But you understand, darling, don’t you? And you will be careful?”

“I’m always careful,” he said, stung, “and — anyway, I’m a Malfoy. I can do as I like.”

“I’m sure you can,” she said quietly.

This had the effect of a bludger to the back of the head, when he had been expecting one to come from the front.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you’re tall,” she said. “I forgot how tall boys get, at your age. We have to get you new robes, your ankles are showing, it’s an affront to the family. I’m sure the tailor is still open. What do you think? A quick run to Diagon Alley, and then dinner in London? We can even catch a show, afterward, if you’d like.”

“I’m flattered that you bother to ask me, as if you didn’t buy out a box last week.”

“Aha! You caught me. I wanted an evening with my special boy. You must escort me to Azkaban, for my terrible crimes.”

He sighed and let her take his arm. “Just the first act.”

She patted his wrist. “Oh, the first two, darling. The first two, surely. Everyone knows the first act is only setting the stage for Act Two.”

“Just *two,* then, and no more. I’m dead tired from the train, and I haven’t the patience for yodeling men in tights.”

“Yes, two, of course. Goodness gracious, will any of these bellhops deign to take your trolley, or shall I have to Summon one from the States? I hardly recognize this place, it’s so overrun. Hello? Yes, you, there — do you imagine my son ought to carry this himself?”

They would be there through the very last note, for certain, but his mother would manage it slowly, in increments — “Oh, darling, just

ten more minutes, until this progression resolves" — and he would be dead on his feet by the time the last one finished. Narcissa could be neither outwitted nor outlasted in a contest of wills. That was alright, though. The intermission would give him time to catch up on Runes. And if he finished that, he could get started on his first letter: *Dear Granger. It's a lovely evening, here at the Royal Wizarding Opera, and I regret to inform you of your impending defeat. I will accept tribute by way of praise, tears, and long-form odes to my brilliance, which you may submit by owl post with your next letter…*

It was a mild, soft blue evening, and Wizarding London lay under a silver film of smoke and industrial blear. The streetlamps blazed like the flare of *Lumos* on the rows of a hundred black wand-tips. Somewhere out in that long dark forest of chimneys, there was a girl with her Runes textbook balanced open on her lap, reading furiously. And somewhere in the Scottish highlands, there was a castle waiting for him to come home.

END OF VOLUME ONE

Hey! You! Thank you for reading!

By now, you probably know what's coming: I'll be taking a short hiatus while I finish writing the fourth book. I don't think it'll last too long, because I have a good bank of chapters built up, I just need some time for edits and formatting. Fourth year marks the start of Volume Two, where the books get longer, the plots get darker, and both rating and tags will change. It's also going to be longer than the first three. (For perspective, GoF is about 30% longer than PoA.) Will the difference be that stark for me? I hope not, but if we've learned anything so far, it's that I treat word counts as a pole-vaulting challenge, not a limbo stick.

I can't express how much sincere affection and love I feel for everyone who's stuck with me this far. Every writer has days when they wake up and feel the urge to scrap everything and run away

from their project, because they're scared it's not perfect or as brilliant as it was in their head. Those days are the enemy, and if it weren't for your comments, I don't know who'd win. It's such an incredible privilege to be able to go to my inbox and have people there cheering for these characters. If I could, I would thank you all by name.

Love,

GT

Narcissa

Chapter 31: Narcissa

[img: https://i.imgur.com/pz8iefP.png]

Outside in the cold distance

A wildcat did growl

Two riders were approaching

And the wind began to howl.

—Jimi Hendrix, “All Along the Watchtower”

It was always the same dream.

Andy was a poet. Not a very good one, but then, good teenage poets were so rare as to be a contradiction in terms. She told Narcissa about a half-blood American poetess who married a British muggle and written a lot of lovely poetry and a novel, and Narcissa, assuming that this witch was in the way of an aspirational figure to Andy, asked politely how her career was going now; and Andy said that she had gone mad and killed herself. And Narcissa had said, perhaps less sensitively than she could have done, *I daresay I should too, if I had to marry a muggle,* and Andy had burst into tears — which would have alarmed her more had it not been a daily occurrence — and said she didn’t *get* it, Cissa, it was about *freedom,* and Narcissa said what freedom, the bint was mad and then she was dead, and the muggle who killed her is alive and selling her books, do you call that freedom? I call that evil.

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

When she ran away, Andy left them presents. For Bella, she left a copy of *Wuthering Heights* that Bella touched but once, to deposit it in the fireplace, and Narcissa received a poetry collection. She hid it from Bella to spare it from the flames.

I lift my lids and all is born again.

She had never told this to anyone — not even Severus — but it was always the same dream. She was in Malfoy Manor, and she was holding her son, and the world was falling, her sister and her husband swept away at once in a bath of green lights that shone from every window.

When the dreams began, she recorded them in a little journal in her bedside table, but once Draco was old enough to snoop — which was quite young, he was such a clever boy — she burned them. She screamed when she was asleep, she knew that. She had made Dobby swear to cut out his tongue if he ever told, and she Obliviated the maid. But when it came to her son, there was nothing left for her but denials, and now Draco rejected even those, with the curl of his lip that had once been his father's.

Narcissa woke up and sighed. The sky above her was the phosphorescent darkness of the English country.

She sat up and found her feet were wet. They were sunk ankle-deep in the waters of the lake, and her toes had taken on an undesirable blue pallor. She tried to move them. They did not comply.

She lifted her arm and read from the bars of ink that lanced her forearm.

10 August, 1994. Lucius is dead. Draco is alive. Trust Severus Snape.

When none of these things surprised her, she congratulated herself, and erased them with her wand. Then she rose and made her way home.

She dressed in the dark, without bothering to light a candle, in clothes she could part with willingly: culottes, an old blouse, and a double-breasted overcoat of black satin with only a little silver embroidering around the collar, a thin speckled ruff of fur. A modest showing, for her taste. She tied her hair up with a silver claw and pulled a black glove over her left hand, leaving her wand-hand free and her signet ring uncovered. Her finger brushed over the jewel, a bone-white band of petrified stone studded with a black diamond like a sightless eye.

“You’re taking chances.”

“A mask is cowardice,” she said.

“You sound like Bella.”

“Bella isn’t as foolish as you thought,” she told him. “She was always smarter than you all gave her credit for.”

She glanced in the vanity mirror. The room was empty.

“I still love you,” she said.

No one answered her.

A silver chain hung by her bedside. When pulled, it made no sound, but a minute later there came a tap on the door.

“Good morning, Lady Malfoy.”

Briselda looked tired. She carried a tray with eggs and coffee, and a small vial of lavender potion.

“Good, you’re awake. I’m going out. Feed that to whatever creature wants it, I don’t.”

She took the potion and uncorked it. It smelled of sulfur and indignity. She drank deeply. It tasted worse.

“You would think,” she said, replacing the vial carefully, “that the greatest potioneer of his age would be able to ensorcel his concoctions so as to delimit the flavor of mouse droppings. Don’t you agree?”

“Surely, m’lady.”

“Or, if the droppings are intractable, might one cut them with a more pleasant flavor, such as chalk? I suppose such trifling ruminations have kept me from being a great potioneer. Thank you, Briselda, that will be all.”

“Does m’lady want her coffee?”

“No, m’lady doesn’t. In fact m’lady is contemplating a finger of bleach.”

“...Does m’lady like for me to fetch some?”

There was much to be said for Briselda, but none of it about her brains.

“No, thank you. Go light the fires. I shan’t be back until this evening, so don’t bother with a place for me.”

The Clarifying Potion worked quickly. The world came into focus as if a grain or tinted lens had been removed, and she could detect much more clearly the note of sourness in Briselda’s tone when she said, “As m’lady likes,” and trudged out of the room.

Getting a bit mouthy, was Briselda. Narcissa wasn’t of a mind to take much of any tone from a witch who hadn’t even finished her O.W.L.s. *Andy* had finished her O.W.L.s, and Andy hadn’t enough sense to fill a thimble.

It was a quarter-mile walk to the Manor gates.

No one could Apparate onto Malfoy Manor. The enchantments would splinch anyone who tried. That had been Abraxas’ idea, since he’d

built the place, and she had to admire the nastiness. Now, there was a man who understood the importance of property.

A vile human being, of course, but vile human beings could be useful in all sorts of ways. Albus Dumbledore had proven himself tremendously.

With the gates secured safely behind her, she Apparated.

The villagers of Little Hangleton still called it “the Riddle House,” though she did not know why, or what the riddle was, if it had ever existed. It stood on a hill overlooking the village, its windows punctured, its roof thinned of shingles, veiled in ivy as if ashamed to show its broken face. The gate hung loose from a twisted hinge and parted at the touch of her boot.

So it went. A family had lived here, once, and then it had died, and no one had come to take care of it. *Sic transit gloria mundis.*

A wave of her wand revealed nothing in the way of wards or protective charms. He was gone, then.

Movement in the shadows by the door, a rippling of air. She twirled her wand through her fingers, waiting.

A black shape melted out of the shade. It resolved into a ghostly candle-wick of a person, with contemptible hair and the shabby robes of an academic, a high-collared cossack wrinkled from wear and shrouded in patches, which no amount of cruel badgering had ever convinced him to part with. He dressed like a poor boy who was ashamed of it, and rather than ever dressing differently, he persisted in it with pathological stubbornness, as if he could bully the world into not caring.

“Severus.”

“Narcissa,” he said, and bowed, slightly.

What she felt was not comfort — it would be inappropriate for the sight of any man not her husband to bring her comfort — but she would admit to a certain relief at the sight of her son's godfather, in the same way she was relieved to close the deadbolt on a door, and relieved to watch a man collapse at the end of her wand. Somehow that ghostly little man, with his homely sneer and his middle-class frocks, had become the only sincere assurance in the world that danger had passed.

Another sound came from the shadows, this time a honking sneeze. Something small and dark moved in the grass by her foot.

She pointed her wand at it. Electricity crackled over the tip.

The rat scurried out of her way and transformed into a balding man in brown rags.

"Merlin's sake, Wormtail. I nearly cursed you."

"Sorry," said Pettigrew, who was clearly not. "I've been hiding out in the gamekeeper's house."

"Why."

He kneaded his own fleshy hands like dough. "D-D-Dumbledore is after me. He wants me dead, I know it. I think he's sent s-spies to follow me…"

Narcissa glanced at Severus, who did not find this nearly amusing as she did.

She pressed her lips together and folded her hands behind her back.

"...I overheard one asking about *rat catchers* at the Hanged Man…"

"Albus Dumbledore has far more important concerns than the whereabouts of an impotent coward," said Severus. "It is humiliating to hear you ideate your own significance. I am far more likely to kill you than he."

“Yes, I know that,” said Pettigrew peevishly. “You’ve only offered half a dozen times since you came back. Though I never thought you’d have the nerve to call me a coward, *Snivellus.”*

Severus’ wand was flush against his throat before he could so much as twitch. The lines in Severus’ neck were white and rigid as bone, sculpted by the sort of rage that burned so hot it crossed back into cool serenity.

Narcissa twitched. They were useless. *Children.* She could have killed them both, and done the job her bloody self, if the madman only trusted her.

“I beg your pardon, gentlemen. Shall I return home? I can pop back in when you’re ready to work, if time is what you require. I don’t mean to be rude, but schoolboy quibbling bores me tremendously, and if neither of you are going to kill each other, then this is a waste of my time.”

Severus’ glare could have flayed a layer of skin off an animal; but Narcissa had stared down Walburga Black and lied about her son’s smoking habit. Twice. She lifted her eyebrows.

He lowered his wand. They stepped apart.

Pettigrew, massaging his neck resentfully, spat: “We should have let Remus have you.”

“Pettigrew, find your dignity, if you can’t find your sense,” she said.

“What? I don’t know where he gets off blaming me — I got *tortured* because of him, you know.”

“For nine minutes,” said Severus quietly.

“Yes! So what, nine minutes? Under the Cruciatus Curse? I should have been welcomed as a conquering hero for *five!* And he didn’t

have to torture *you* at all.” Pettigrew’s leer was remarkably nasty. “You ran your mouth like you were paid to.”

“Pettigrew, honestly.”

“I mean, here’s a thought, you miserable greasetrap: if *I* was in love with a girl, and *I* knew she had a baby, *I* wouldn’t go nattering to the Dark Lord about any newborns, prophesied or otherwise! D’you wonder how he even knew the Potters had a kid? I don’t see how he would, unless one of his *dear* lieutenants happened to be obsessed with Lil—”

Severus lunged, and Narcissa didn’t stop him. At that point, he had a right to it.

His wand lashed a line across Pettigrew’s mouth. Nothing changed, but Pettigrew staggered as though he had taken a heavyweight’s knuckles to the nose. He choked, clamped a hand over his mouth, and dropped to his knees. Several convulsions rocked him, and then he vomited a string of teeth into the lawn, pattering like pearls into the earth. When he was finished he sat down hard, and gagged around a soft, bloody maw of a mouth.

His tongue slipped ineffectually against his gums, and he let out panicked grunts and squeals as he realized that he could not speak.

She lifted her eyebrow. “Is that a new one?”

Severus held his wand tightly enough to snap it, breathing hard. Pettigrew wailed, dribbling blood down his chin.

“Well, either way, kill him or fix it. I’m not going to look at that while we work.”

Severus gave an inarticulate snarl — “Eloquent,” she said — and stabbed his wand at Pettigrew. The man hunched over, groaning, and when he rose again he sported a row of fresh, if bloody, incisors.

“I *hate* you,” he wailed.

Severus turned to Narcissa. “It is inside,” he said.

Neither of them spared a glance for Pettigrew as they went in.

The smell of decay laid thick as the snowfall of dust on each surface. A row of mullioned windows on either side of the front cast the sickly gray light of morning through a cosmos of spiderwebs. The door to the kitchen was unlocked and un-warded. It must have been a muggle house, then — but she could not imagine what the Dark Lord would want with a muggle house.

On the landing, at the end of a dim passage, a dim light poked its finger under the far door. From behind it came the sounds of a crackling fire, the first evidence of life to be found in the old place. She hesitated, and let Severus move first into the room, but he pushed open the door and revealed it empty.

Perhaps it had once been a very nice room, but such a time, if it ever existed, could not be recalled by looking. A deep stone fireplace sat into a wall of dark bookshelves, and floors of black wood scraped clean of lacquer now chipped and threaded splinters through threadbare carpets. The ashes in the grate had cooled from gold to dead white, and the room smelled foul. The reason for the room’s smell was in part its want of cleaning, and in part the dead body on the floor.

The corpse had been a plump woman with sandy hair, dressed in a frilly peasant frock of camel brown, a garment which could hardly look worse for being torn open at the neck. Two puncture marks drove deep into her throat, perfectly symmetrical.

She rolled the woman onto her back with a shove from her boot. “Vampirism?”

It was one way of staying alive, though not one the Dark Lord would favor. He loathed half-breeds. They’d cleaned out a nest of them

from Transylvania, back in the good days of the war; Constance lost her husband in the fight.

“His familiar,” said Severus quietly. “A snake.”

“The Dark Lord doesn’t have a familiar.”

“Now he does.”

He had very dark irises — so deep brown they were black in all but the keenest lights. It made it easy for him to hide what he was feeling. Fear, however, had a way of making itself known.

Perhaps she was only projecting.

“You’ve seen him, then?” she said quietly.

“No.”

“Then how do you know? Because we’ve seen hoaxes before.”

He nodded towards Pettigrew, who was sulking by the door.

She rounded on him.

“You’re his new handservant?”

“Oh, you’re surprised? Did you think it would be either of you?” he snapped. “After you’d forsaken him? The only people he can trust are in Azkaban. I’m the only one who’s free and alive—”

“For now,” said Severus stonily.

Pettigrew swallowed. “I will be rewarded for my loyalty in this, his time of need.”

“The same promise was made to you fourteen years ago. Have you been rewarded?”

“The first time, you mucked it up! You squealed! And now you’ll come crawling for forgiveness, and I — I will receive boons. He promised.”

“You poor, insipid wretch.” She wondered what would be left of his dull mind, after the Dark Lord finished with him. *Death first to cowards and traitors.* “You will never be a Death Eater.”

“Oh? Oh, I won’t, will I?” He wrenched back his sleeve. “What’s this, then?”

A knot of black scarring marred his forearm. Her breath was driven out of her lungs in one cold blow.

His head swung between them, grinning savagely — courting horror, shock, impressment. Like it was another one of his old boys’ club’s pranks. Peter Pettigrew had never taken himself seriously; even when his friends became men and then soldiers, he remained a boy, desperate for a safe harbor, incapable of looking darkness in the face. Narcissa turned back to the body on the floor.

Did he think he was the first stupid boy to wear a death sentence on his arm? Did he think he would impress her, waving it around, like a flag?

“Bury it in the garden, do you think?” she said, twitching up her sleeves.

“It must be unrecognizable,” said Severus. “She cannot be found.”

“Burn it first, then.”

“Quite.”

A sweep of her wand lifted the corpse into the air. It floated along beside her like it was buoyed on a stretcher, and in this way she carried it back down the stairs, out to the garden, where the first rays of sunlight were splintering over the hills.

Severus gouged a small dirt pit from the lawn with his wand. She lowered the body into it.

“I don’t suppose she has a wand to dispose of,” she said. When Severus had no answer, she turned to Pettigrew, who hunkered down on the porch steps. “Do you know?”

“The Dark Lord took it,” muttered Pettigrew.

“She’s not a muggle?”

Pettigrew shrugged.

“Answer me.”

“Some stupid bint named Bertha Jorkins. Ran into her in a pub. She almost hexed my nose off before I knocked her out. I was sneezing blood for weeks.”

“A crime for which she surely deserved to die,” said Severus.

“Where you get your piety, I certainly don’t know,” said Pettigrew. “Talked to Barty lately?”

“Barty’s dead,” Narcissa interrupted, relishing the flicker of shock on his piglike face. Severus did not even have the decency to look grateful for the change of subject, and it was his fault the bastard had been in Azkaban. “So is Evan. You’ve been gone a long time. You’d do well to remember.”

She snapped her wrist and tossed a jet of blue flames into the pit. They caught the edge of the witch’s dress and licked hungrily up her body, twining around her neck, and erupting in a crackling fire when they touched her hair. Rancid smoke guttered from the fire pit in thick black gnarls of miasma.

She pressed her hand over her mouth. The smell of fire reminded her of Draco’s birth.

A son was a terrible thing. She had wanted a daughter; she would have liked a daughter more, but loved her less. A daughter would betray her. She couldn't help it. She would grow up clever and beautiful and hungry, and when the time came, she would forsake her family, and leap into the arms of the first passing man who promised her the galaxy. That was what the Black daughters did: they lied and dreamed and betrayed each other and moved on. It was easy to love one; they were loving, too, in their own way.

But sons— no one wise ever loved a son of the House of Black. It wasn't because they were unworthy. With few exceptions, the Black sons were noble as they came, and every bit as beautiful as their sisters. But the Black boys had stars for names and they lived like it, high and bright and best worshiped at a distance, for they broke every heart they ever touched, whether they meant to or not.

So she would have preferred a girl. But Narcissa Black would never bear a daughter.

What she bore instead was nine pounds and two ounces of the only thing she had ever done that was good: a tiny Lucius with her nose and her smirk and hair like snow, and that fine proud conqueror's laugh that had been Bella's before it was his, the Black laugh, the vixen's laugh, that enchanting, deathless sound. Nobody heard that laugh without falling in love, just a little, even if only while it lasted. She could see it in the way people listened, when Draco spoke to them — attentive, mindful, as they should be — and when he laughed, the world held its breath. He was so beautiful when he was laughing he was hardly human, like something made from marble wandered off its plinth.

When enough time had passed that the corpse was charred beyond recognition, Severus rolled his wand over the pit in a slow arc. The earth folded over itself like a coverlet, cloaking the body in a thick tongue of dirt, and suffocated the fire. Black coils billowed from the earth and stung at her eyes, turning the air sour.

“Finally,” grunted Pettigrew, lumbering to his feet. “Well. Toodle-oo, you twats. I have to go see a man about a wand.”

He raked up his sleeve.

“Severus,” she warned, but Severus didn’t need prompting: his hand had flickered as soon as Pettigrew stood, and a red bolt caught him in the chest. He toppled over.

Once he fell still, she stepped over him and snatched up his wrist.

“It’s real. That horrid fool,” she said. “I thought perhaps he’d done it himself.” She threw down his wrist with a disgusted noise and rose to her feet. “He should have stayed dead.”

“And so he would have, if not for Sirius Black.”

“Don’t say that name to me.”

“I shall say whatever pleases me, for one, I am not a Black, and for two, if I were, your practice of familial shunning still strikes me as jejune.”

“You wouldn’t understand it.”

“Forgive my presumption, Lady Malfoy,” he murmured. “When one’s blood bears such an indelible taint—”

“No one cares about your father, Severus.”

“So you say.”

The house creaked riotously, resettling on its foundations.

Severus drew his wand casually over the smoking grave, casting a Siphoning Charm on some of the smoke. “Is my godson alive?”

“Draco is quite well, thank you for asking. He’s read his way through half the summer and flown the rest. I’m pleased to say he got his

father’s taste for academia, not mine.”

“A house-elf could say as much.”

“I detest whoever allowed you to believe yourself funny,” she said. “For the record, I was a prefect.”

“How the years have matured you. Has Draco liberated any more of the staff?”

The upturned lilt in the end of the sentence was Severus’ version of a smile.

“We’ve had words about that,” she said.

“I expect so. What would Lucius have said, I wonder?”

Lucius would never have allowed it. But Lucius had never raised a son alone, and never had to worry about losing his trust.

There were things more important than one helpful vermin.

“One of my aunts made a hobby of hunting house-elves on horseback in her teenage years,” she said. “Her parents had to borrow help from the neighboring barons. Freeing one elf is hardly the end of the world.”

“Does he know of your activities?”

“No. He’s away for the rest of August.”

“The Cup?”

“With the Weasleys.”

Severus’s cheek twitched.

“You listen to me.”

“I don’t care.”

“At least they’re wizards. One of his friends doesn’t even come from wizardry.”

“It is astonishing,” said Severus, mostly to himself, “how many things people presume I care about.”

“I’m sure *you’ve* seen her. Uppity little thing she is, too — and would you care to tell me why I had to hear about *that* development three years late? Were you ever planning to inform me, or did you intend to wait until he turned seventeen, snapped his wand, and ran off to muggle London? Don’t answer that. I’m furious with you.”

“As if I have nothing better to do. Do I seem like a man of leisure? I have never thought to ask.”

“Why am I here?” she demanded. “You’re more than capable of burying a body.”

He finished siphoning smoke, and the last trails dissipated into the lusterless morning.

“I am a messenger.”

“Obviously,” she said impatiently.

“He wants to know if you will still honor the terms of the agreement.”

Sometimes she wondered if it was too long since she’d last hexed him. His hesitation rankled even more than his audacity. “Then you’ve wasted my time,” she said coldly. “Our accord remains in force. So long as he understands—”

“It is perfectly understood.”

“Good. What on earth does he want, then?” She tried not to sound plaintive. “A mark on my arm?”

“Harry Potter is in danger.”

Personally, she did not think this was any sort of revelation. But it seemed to trouble him, and she understood why.

She’d known Lily Evans only a little. For a mudblood, she was clever enough. Like most of her cohort, she’d been brave and stupid from it, quick to ask questions, furious about all the wrong things, and never smart enough to keep her mouth shut when it mattered. A remarkable talent at Runes, it was said, though Narcissa had never bothered with all that. For a while she had lurked around in the Slytherin common room, where Severus trailed her like a lost niffler, until one day she stopped, and that was the end of that.

It had given her a minor heart attack to see her spawn at King’s Cross, grinning at Draco and Molly Prewett’s umpteenth brat — the very grin that James Potter had worn the last time she ever saw his face. The one they plastered on every newspaper in Britain, the night he died.

The grin for which Severus’s life had been ruined.

She didn’t understand most things about her son’s godfather. How you could love anyone who didn’t love you back, for instance, even for a moment, let alone thirteen years.

A brisk wind raked up from the valley. They were far from Wiltshire, and even the encroachment of daybreak failed to shed any warmth on the cold shadow of Riddle House. She folded her arms against the chill. “Does he have a plan?” she asked.

“Doubtlessly. He intends to infiltrate Hogwarts. Pettigrew claims there is a rat in the Ministry, and after what happened to the Greengrass girl, Dumbledore has been forced to make compromises with the Board to retain control of the school. Events are happening this year which he would not otherwise permit. The wheels are turning far faster than we anticipated.”

It had happened this way in the first war, too: there was a moment before everything broke open, when everyone knew what was coming, but nobody knew what it would look like. And life moved on, in its slow, normal way, full of its trivial pleasures, as they frittered away the little time they knew they had left. Dark Marks went up in the news, parents went missing, aurors disappeared, and still, the seventeen-year-old braves of Slytherin House drank martinis in broom cabinets and smoked the overpriced cigarettes Sirius smuggled in, as if no one would ever die, and as if nothing could ever fall.

That was the world she came of age in. She felt as though the past thirteen years had been merely a long summer abroad, and now, as the winds turned, she was finally coming home.

“I didn’t mean him, Severus. Tell me what Albus Dumbledore wants from me.”

The Burrow

Chapter 32: The Burrow

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Draco stood alone at the gate to Malfoy Manor. He held his trunk. He knew he would regret this.

He checked his wristwatch, sighed, rubbed his eyes, and checked it again. It was dawn. He really should have just thrown etiquette to the wind and Flooed.

Moments later, a house-elf popped into existence beside him. A floral bucket hat balanced on his wide ears.

“Mister Draco! Dobby is so glad to be seeing you! Dobby has been to *such* places!”

For Dobby, *such places* could mean the Hogwarts wine cellars, or the moon.

“He has been to wizard cities! Poorto! And Barceloona! His friends are going on without him today to Majorca. He will join them tonight! But Dobby is sorry for rambling and for being late also. If Mister Draco is not needing anything else, is he ready?”

“I’m not sure Mister Draco gets a say in the matter.”

“Sir?”

“Never mind,” he said. “Geronimo, or what-have-you.”

He permitted Dobby to take his hand. With a *crack,* the house-elf Apparated, and they appeared in a broad field of golden grass, tinged pink by the growing light of dawn.

A forested valley opened up on either side of them like a rose of crumpled green velvet. Full-bodied trees, pussywillows and elm and birch, feathered the horizon, while a yellow ribbon of country rode ribboned back and forth through the verdant hills and embroidered the hem of a gleaming white river. On a bit of wood hammered up clumsily to a post, there was a sign that read: THE BURROW.

“This is most charming!” said Dobby, who would have said as much of a tar pit.

It was not an utter circle of hell, but he reserved judgment until he saw the house. He hefted his wand to cast a Levitating Charm on his trunk — stopped himself — and sighed. Rolling out an ache in his shoulder, he hauled it up the uneven dirt path. He thought longingly of the porters at the Ritz-Carlton.

A quarter-mile down the drive, they came upon a house. He had never seen a house sustaining so much weight on so little structural integrity. It looked like someone had taken a perfectly good Tudor cottage and squashed it under a stack of several other, smaller Tudor cottages, smelted them together with some stilts and bulging brickwork, and peppered some chimneys on top as a garnish. It lay in the nestled arm of the riverbank, a towering patch job of timber and whitewash, whistling smoke from one of its flotilla of chimneys.

It was actually not an unpleasant place, until you remembered that nine people lived in it, and then it became downright terrifying.

One of the upper-level windows swung open, and a crop of bright red hair sprouted from it like a fast-blooming carnation. “Oi! It’s Malfoy! Least, I think it is,” he added. “The last weaselly blond git who came around wanted to sell insurance.”

“That you, Weasley?”

“You’re gonna have to be more specific! There’s more than one of us!”

“Lord help me. It’s like I’m back in Gryffindor.”

“Worse!” said another voice brightly. A second window on the floor above Ron’s popped open, and out came another redheaded young man with long thick ringlets bound up in a ponytail, wearing a leather duster. “We’ve got a full house! Hello, there. Ignore my brother’s manners.”

“Two Wheezys!” said Dobby, greatly pleased.

“If only,” muttered Draco. He raised his voice. “Easily done, I’ve had years of practice. Introduce yourself, ginger ruffian.”

“Ha! I’m Bill! Hang for just a second, there, we’ll nip down and help.”

“Wot?” said Ron indignantly, but then something yanked him back from the window, and the shutters snapped closed. There was a small commotion inside the house, and then the front door burst open, and the pair of Weasley boys raced each other up the footpath. They were neck and neck until a Jelly-Legs Jinx snared Ron’s ankles, and he went pirouetting into a hedge.

“Bill! No fair! I can’t do magic!”

“Tough beat. Should’ve been born sooner.” Bill flicked his long hair out of his eyes and grinned at Draco. Upon closer inspection, the boy was built like his brothers — a frame like a stringbean with biceps — but he carried himself with all the confidence of his height and struck an impressive silhouette, besides. He wore an earring with a fang pendant and faded, washed-out denim pants in the muggle style, with rips slitting through the legs (were his parents in such dire straits they couldn’t afford thread?) and a pair of dragon-hide boots that lifted him another three inches off the ground. He looked like a fashion spread Katie Bell would hide in her nightstand.

“You’re the Malfoy kid,” he said.

“Was it the hair?”

“And the sneer,” he said, still grinning. “Ron says nice things about you, sometimes. Not often, but sometimes. Ow, kid.”

“He’s lying,” Ron said to Draco. “I’d never.”

He reached out as if to give him a hug, and then, perhaps seeing the hesitation on Draco’s face, lowered his arm for a handshake instead. They shook hands, and Ron slapped him on the back.

“Thank Merlin,” said Draco. “I should have gone straight home. Now, Weasley Senior, could I trouble you for a Levitation Charm? Any longer with this trunk, and I’m likely to lose an arm.”

“Anything for a guest. Also, hello,” he said to Dobby. “You’re not his, are you?”

“No, sir! Dobby is a free elf! Dobby is only here as a favor to Mister Draco! Hello, Wheezy!”

“Hullo, Dobby,” said Ron. “Nice hat.”

“Good,” said Bill. He jerked his thumb at the Burrow. “Either of you want some coffee or sausages? Mum’s cooking fit to feed the RAF.”

“Dobby must be going,” said Dobby reluctantly, as though the loss of sausages would cause him anguish in the nights to come. “Dobby has promised his friends he is to join them again, and Dobby is only seeing Draco as far as the Wheezy’s house. But he is ever so happy to see Mister Draco’s friends, and to make your acquaintance, Mister Wizard!”

Bill bit his lip, his eyes twinkling. “Yeah, for sure,” he said. “Nice meeting you, little man. Safe travels.”

“Thank you, Dobby,” said Draco.

It wasn’t quite a dismissal, but it wasn’t *not,* either. Some habits died slow.

Dobby seemed not to notice. He cradled Draco's shinbone in a loving embrace, and then performed the same on Ron's kneecaps, and Bill's. Then he snapped his fingers, and disappeared.

"Alright, Mister Wizard," said Ron. He pointed at Draco's trunk. "Chop chop."

The entrance to the Burrow did not inspire confidence. Above the doorframe the wall had sagged under the weight of the brick atop it, and been reinforced with a hastily applied listing pillar. A pigpen was tucked under one gabled window, and a herd of swine grunted contentedly in the sun-baked mud. A clamor of voices cut through the clear August morning.

"Mum's in good form today," yawned Bill. "Fair warning, if she yells, it means she likes you. Could mean she doesn't like you, of course, but that's not as common. She likes most people, does Mum."

"Grand," said Draco tightly. He wondered, not for the first time, why the hell his mother couldn't have delayed her trip until he was at school. "Just how I'd like to start my vacation. Are those your animals?"

"Nah, they're our neighbors," said Ron carelessly. He slung open the door. "Came around at the wrong time, caught Mum in a bad mood, you know how it is. But I think we've got enough for Christmas hams, so I wouldn't worry about it, if I was you."

"Though she *was* complaining about not having enough chickens," said Bill thoughtfully.

Then the two bastions of mirth, pleased with their own hilarity, laughed their way into the house.

The inside of the Burrow was bigger than the outside. This shouldn't have surprised him, but it did, perhaps because it still wasn't all that large anyway, considering the number of people trying to fit inside it. The first floor was composed of a tiny wood kitchen, most surfaces

of which were covered in bubbling cast-iron pots and pans, emitting the wonderful smell of fresh bread and bacon grease. There was a scrubbed-wood dining table, a small cast-iron stove in lieu of a fireplace, and enough clutter to fill several collectors' homes: secondhand books, old magazines, frayed ragdolls and chipped wooden toys, houseplants, photographs, and post that spilled over the side table and into the nearby wastebasket, which overflowed. An owl roosted on one of the upper shelves, above an old grandfather clock that had not two but seven hands, each crowned with a freckled face. Draco did not get to inspect it any further, however, because he was accosted by a howl that made him reach for his wand.

"GEORGE AND FREDERICK WEASLEY! "

One of the twins — moving too quickly to say which — skidded around the corner and vaulted the table in a practiced leap. "Sorry, Mum!"

His counterpart was right behind him, clearing the table with an identical jump. He grasped a fistful of white papers. "Yeah, sorry, Mum! Gonna just go take care of these—"

"YOU COME BACK THERE THIS INSTANT—"

A spell came arcing out of the kitchen; the twins seized each other and dropped behind the chairs, where it sailed over their heads. It was here that they caught sight of Draco.

"Well, if it isn't Blondie!"

"A houseguest! What timing! What serendipity!"

"What a *perfect* occasion to welcome this upstanding young man into our house!"

"Now don't be disturbed by the ruckus, Malfoy—"

“—it’s about to die down rather quickly, if I’m not mistaken—”

“Bit of a domestic, you know how it is—”

“—suppose he doesn’t, though, Freddie, you think his mum ever yells at him?”

“Why, no, Georgie, I don’t,” said Fred, ecstatically. “I think *his* mum never gets mad at all.”

“Quite right, quite right. Together, then?”

“There’s no other way.”

They shouted together: *“Hey, Mum!”*

“WHAT!”

Molly Weasley swung around the corner, her face red and shiny from the understandable exertion of breaking the sound barrier, clenching a wooden spoon in one hand and her wand in the other.

There was a long, meaningful beat.

“Good morning, Mrs. Weasley,” said Draco politely. George kissed his fingertips. Fred was miming a round of opera applause.

“Hello, Draco, dear,” she said, breaking into a beatific smile. “Welcome to the Burrow. Would you like some coffee?”

“Who is that? Molly?” Arthur Weasley poked his head around the corner, spotted Draco, and gave a cheerful wave. “Oh, hello, there! Glad you got in alright! No trouble?”

“None at all.”

“That’s splendid. Ron, why don’t you show Draco where he’s sleeping?”

“Great,” said Ron. “Sure. Where *is* he sleeping?”

Molly huffed. “For the *hundredth* time, we’re putting the younger boys in *Ron’s* room, with Fred and George, and the older boys are in the twins’ room, and Hermione is with Ginny. It’s perfectly simple.”

“Except for the part where we don’t keep our room,” piped up Fred.

“Never was too clear on that part,” added George.

Molly turned her head slowly to look at them. They fell silent.

“Right, up we go, then,” said Ron quickly. “You can manage your bags, can’t you, Ma—”

The spoon swung around to accuse him. *“Ronald!* He is a *guest!”*

“George and I can carry it,” Fred piped up. “We’re bigger than Ron is —”

“You stay where you are.”

The twins slumped, rooted to the spot. Bill gave a soft laugh and slipped past his mother, dropping a kiss on her temple as he sidled into the kitchen. On the way, he traded places with Ginny, who was wearing an oversized Chudley cannons t-shirt and the whitewashed muggle denim pants that the whole clan of them seemed to favor.

“Let me at it, why don’tcha,” she said cheerfully to Draco. “Today’s bicep day.” Her t-shirt laid bare the best muscles a thirteen-year-old could ask for, i.e., none, albeit with the promise of impending volume once she could tip a scale at five stone.

Together with Draco and Ron, she edged out of the kitchen and climbed a rickety staircase that zigzagged through the house to the upper stories. Ladders lanced together platforms that didn’t gel right onto the stairs, and narrow passageways cut off to thin doors. The Weasleys scampered up and down these many ladders and

staircases like lemurs, which helped to abate the fear that one wrong step would send him plummeting through the plywood floor.

“Their O.W.L.s came in today,” confided Ron. He rounded the banister and hopped over a jagged hole in the stairs. Draco warily circumnavigated it. “Bad news.”

“They’ve been having this one out for an hour already,” said Ginny. “Mum wants them to go into the Ministry of Magic like Dad, and all they want to do is open a joke shop. Which, with their grades, might be about the best they can ask for.”

“She was expecting more?” For the mother of Fred and George Weasley to have any ambitions beyond their immediate short-term survival struck Draco as rank delusion. He was personally impressed that they had given thought to anything past graduation.

“Nah, not really,” said Ron, “but it stings a bit, since Percy went and got seven. Lucky me, though, they’ve set the bar nice and low. Oh, speak of the boggart.”

They rounded the second landing, and at the top of the staircase above them stood two people locked in a passionate conversation about cauldron thickness. One of them was a stocky redhead with horn-rimmed glasses and the fuzzy threatenings of a deeply ill-advised mustache. The other was a girl with voluminous brown hair in natty curls and a heart-shaped face that was just starting to lose its babyish shape: the cheeks thinning out, the chin forming a delicate sharp point atop a thin neck. She was wearing a pair of muggle jeans, these ones much tighter than their school trousers, and the thin fabric of her white tee shirt stretched taut across her shoulders. The neat triangles of her shoulder blades pressed shadows into the cotton. It looked very soft.

“Draco! We didn’t hear you come in!”

Summer always turned Hermione’s hair lighter, and this was no exception. A number of sandy gold strands laced her normal curtain

of fringe, though she'd grown it out. When she smiled, her teeth were white and clear of metal.

He opened his mouth to say something snide about Molly Weasley's crusade, but what came out was: "You got your bracers off."

Her smile grew wider. *"Braces,* and yes, I did! Isn't it so much better?"

"I'm not falling for this again."

She laughed, tripped down the stairs, and hugged him. He rocked back precariously from the sudden weight.

Her shirt smelled of fresh sterile detergent. Underneath that was sweat and salt from her skin, and her shampoo. It reminded him of Hogwarts, in the odd way that certain smells always could. Her hair buried his face in soft warm curls, and she was hot — physically, filmed with sweat, like she'd been working outside, searing in all the places she touched him — but soft, too, softer than she'd been the last time he'd hugged her. Two months was a long time.

He had thought about doing this.

When she drew back his hand lingered on her waist, for balance. Under the thin shirt he could feel the V-shaped place where her ribcage met her hip. The fabric was as soft as it looked.

He removed his hands and buried them in his pockets.

"Oh, Draco," said Percy. "This might interest you. Hermione and I were just discussing a report I've got to finish for the office — we're trying to standardize cauldron thickness. Some of these foreign imports are just a shade too thin — leakages have been increasing at a rate of almost three percent a year."

"Three percent!" gasped Ron. "Does the Minister know about this?"

“I was telling him that we should be brewing with silver, instead,” said Hermione seriously. “But pewter is much more common, and it encourages people to cut all sorts of corners.”

He frowned. “The issue with silver isn’t that it’s not preferred, it's too expensive. The market favors pewter, except in cases with exacting purity requirements, but then you’re dealing with niche sales for specialists.”

Percy was nodding with his whole body. “Which is just what I was saying to Mr. Crouch,” he insisted. “Exactly. Which is why people like us have to intervene and create quality regulations in order to prevent shoddy products from endangering witches and wizards everywhere. Really, when you think about it, we’re saving lives—”

“None of you deserve a summer vacation,” said Ron doggedly, and with Ginny nodding in agreement, they peeled off upstairs. Draco touched Hermione’s arm, and she followed them, after promising Percy that they would circle back to the question of tariff regulations later.

The room at the top of the house obviously belonged to a teenage boy. Under a miasmic carpet of dirty laundry, a twin bed lay, sloppily made, the bed sheets patterned with Cleansweeps. The room itself was a gabled wood attic, its slanted roof plastered with ruddy orange Chudley Cannons posters that moved and whirled across the walls, the players weaving in between canvases. A fish tank on the windowsill held an extremely robust frog, which ribbited with dignity as they entered, and its fellow pet, a small gray owl with yellow eyes, fluttered around a small steel cage beside it, bleating loudly.

The whole place smelled of Ronald, which was not a compliment.

Two sets of bunk beds had been wedged into the corners. When Ginny dumped his trunk on one of them, Draco realized with grave foreboding that it was his.

Ron hopped onto his bed, dislodging a flurry of pillows. “That bed’s Harry’s,” he said. “He’s coming later this week.”

“Wasn’t he staying with you for the summer?”

“Oh, he is. But he and Charlie went to watch the quidditch semifinal. Ireland versus Peru. Peru got demolished.”

“Of course they did, have you seen Ireland’s chasers?” said Ginny eagerly. “Moran’s got biceps the size of quaffles. She’s *hardcore.”*

She said it as if it were the finest compliment it lay in her power to bestow.

“No, but I wish I had. Charlie said they pure savaged them.”

“Unsurprising, for Peru,” sighed Draco, “but the Irish seeker is still mediocre at best. If they can’t get a hundred and fifty up before Krum —”

Ron shook his head. “See, there you go again, mate, overvaluing the seeker—”

Hermione cleared her throat. “About Harry,” she said pointedly. Her fatal flaw was, of course, a total disinterest in quidditch. “Has he heard from Padfoot?”

“Who’s Padfoot?” said Ginny.

“This weird bloke at school,” said Ron, waving his hand. “Bit of a recluse, you wouldn’t know him. I think he wrote once or twice, but he’s gone quiet since Harry’s birthday. Same for Moony.”

Draco, who was habitually suspicious of overfamiliar vagrants and Sirius Black in particular, put a mental flag on the subject.

Harry Potter was a case study in what would happen if you took just about the quietest, politest, most innocent child you could possibly imagine and dropped him to simmer with three or four of the least

qualified parental figures you could find on short notice, let steep for fourteen years, and give him a quidditch habit. He treated Remus Lupin and Sirius Black like demigods because they honored him with even a scrap of paternal affection. Being abandoned or forgotten by them probably wouldn't surprise Harry, but it would probably kill something inside him stone dead, and for that crime Draco would have very little mercy or forgiveness, if the time came.

"They're busy, I expect," said Hermione carefully. "It's possible they haven't had a moment to sit down and write. Unless—"

Draco cleared his throat subtly. What she meant was obvious — *unless they've been caught* — but Ginny was still in the room, and increasingly indignant at being cut out of the conversation. Besides, they'd have heard something if the two were arrested. The Ministry would plaster it on every flat surface in Britain.

Speaking of which. "Weasley, what the devil is your brother doing working for the Ministry?"

Ron groaned. "Oh, Percy? Don't get me started. I don't reckon he'd come home if Dad didn't make him. He got a job with Crouch in the DIMC, and he's not shut up about it since."

"According to Mr. Crouch, Ginevra," singsonged Ginny. *"As I was saying to Mr. Crouch, Ginevra… Mr. Crouch is of the opinion, Ginevra, that I should lodge a meter of birchwood directly up my saggy white arse. And he's quite right, too…"*

"Obviously I know that," said Draco shortly. "What's he doing working for Crouch?"

"What do you mean?" Ron rolled himself upright. "He's in the Pops party, like Dad. Dad says they might even run him for Minister in '97, if they can get the votes."

"First of all, if your party's best candidate is the disgraced Bartemius Crouch, you might as well just hand Runcorn the pulpit with a red

bow on top. Second of all, International Magical Cooperation was overhauled after the last election, it's teeming with Cavs. You can't spit in that department without hitting a conservative. Crouch only kept his position by the skin of his teeth."

Ginny gave a pointed yawn. "If I have to hear any more about Fart-y Crouch, I'll puke," she said. "Anyone feeling brave enough to check on breakfast? Hope she hasn't burnt anything, the last time she cooked angry I had to get out a chisel for the pancakes."

"Oh, we should help," said Hemione, and sprang up. "Cooking for eleven must be terrible."

Draco raised his eyebrows. His idea of 'helping' in the kitchen consisted of drinking a freshly squeezed glass of grapefruit juice and describing what consistency he'd like his eggs.

Hermione gave an entreating pout — which failed to compel him at all, but to avoid embarrassing both of them, he jerked his head in assent. They clambered down the stairs, causing a small thunder on the creaky floorboards.

Mrs. Weasley was alone in the kitchen, muttering to herself.

"...though they haven't got brains… be in real trouble. I've had more owls… carry on… Improper Use of Magic Office..."

A vigorous jab of her wand sent a pile of potatoes whirling out of their skins. She flicked it again at the fire under a saucepan, lit it, and gave the vegetables inside a judicious shake, billowing flame.

"Hey, Mum," said Ginny cheerfully, reaching past her to snag a piece of bacon. "We're here to help, or whatever — whoa!"

Molly had flicked her wand at the cutlery drawer, and knives and forks exploded from it like a swarm of silver insects. Ron hauled Draco down in time to spare him an impromptu haircut by way of an

expeditious airborne steak knife. Instead, it buried itself safely in the pile of potatoes by the sink, and began chopping.

“...know where we went wrong… same for years, one thing after… listen to — *FRED!”*

She had picked up a fake wand, and it had turned into a rubber mouse, which squeaked and scampered into a hole beneath the cupboards.

“Think that one’s George’s, actually,” Ron mumbled. “Fred’s are smaller.” He started unstacking plates along the table, while Hermione followed him, distributing forks. Ginny ferried heaping platters of pancakes and roast potatoes out of the kitchen, assisted by her mother’s floating saucepans.

Draco lingered in the stairwell with his hands in his pockets, stalled not so much by the feeling that such work was beneath him — which it was, though he considered it also beneath anyone with, well, *wizards* in the house — but because he lacked an understanding of how it worked. He had never been in a household without help before, and was unsettled by the way everyone else seemed to understand what to do.

Fred and George came thumping down the stairs and snagged plates from a floating stack over the stove. “Oh, yum, pancakes,” said George loudly. “I love pancakes. My favorite.”

“I’m ever so grateful to mum for making them,” said Fred, even more loudly.

If they had hoped their mother would be softened with praise, they were mistaken. Mrs. Weasley came veering out of the kitchen like a vengeful hawk, orbited by a small solar system of saucepans. “Why don’t you make yourselves useful, for once, and go find your father?” she snapped. “And your brothers, too. I don’t know *where* everyone in this house gets off to the *minute* there’s work to be done.”

On cue, Bill and his father bustled in from the garden. “Sorry we’re late, Mum,” said Bill breathlessly. “Just fixing some stuff in the shed.”

“Arthur Weasley, I *swear,* if it’s that car—”

“What car?” said Arthur, with deeply unconvincing innocence. “Bill and I were getting some patches for the roof.”

Molly made a sound of supreme un-convincement, and pointed to the table. They sat.

Draco discreetly deposited himself in a seat between Hermione and Bill, where he seemed safely buttressed from Mrs. Weasley’s line of fire.

Breakfast was served melee style, a violent clash of venturing spoons for the high-ticket items on the table. Bowls of crisp roast potatoes and fragrant sauteéd mushrooms made quick rounds, often snatched or Summoned out of slow hands, while a mountain of glistening beef sausages vanished under rapid-fire erosion. George and Ginny formed a quick allegiance and raided the platter of ham steaks, piling up fat ziggurats of glazed pork under a burnished crust of brown sugar, while Bill and Fred had a spirited bout of fork-fencing when both grasped the ladle to the baked beans. Ron stuffed two wedges of white toast in his mouth and piled four more onto his plate before Mrs. Weasley noticed, and shrilled at him to save some for Hermione, who had nearly lost a hand when reaching for the pumpkin juice; Percy wandered in late, made himself a cup of coffee, and went back upstairs after complaining about the noise.

But after five minutes of pure combat, the table settled, and the clamor settled into a cheerful burble of conversation, undercut by the sound of vigorous eating. Draco tentatively speared a pancake and, when no retribution was forthcoming, snatched it onto his plate. He sectioned off a triangle, swiped it in whipped cream, and lowered it timidly into his mouth.

It was heartbreakingly good: fluffy and chewy and sweet with a salty finish, like eating a pan-fried cloud. He had assumed, based on Ron's eating habits, that the food in his house would be so scant or so inedible as to render him desperate for nourishment by the time he got to Hogwarts. But Mrs. Weasley's talent was undeniable. He cut off a larger piece and felt much less miserable about his living prospects for the next two weeks.

"Coffee, Draco?" said Mr. Weasley jovially, hefting a tall silver pot. "There's plenty."

"Arthur! He's fourteen!"

"Oh! Er, never mind, my boy! Tea?"

"Please, and thank you," said Draco stiffly, and a chipped brown mug levitated down the table at him. He sniffed it surreptitiously before drinking it. It was dense, black, and so over-brewed it made his eyes water. He schooled his expression into perfect neutrality before setting it down.

"Now, Hermione," said Mr. Weasley, sawing into his black pudding with vigor. "You promised to tell me how your father's fruit canal went."

"...Root canal?"

"Yes! That's the one!"

"He'll be pleased you remembered," said Hermione, a bit surprised. "It went well, I suppose, though he hasn't written to me yet. I'm not sure they feel altogether comfortable with owl post."

Draco snorted.

"Oh! Draco, you mightn't know — Hermione's parents do the most *marvelously* complex Healer work imaginable," said Mr. Weasley earnestly, gesturing at Hermione with his knife. "I had the privilege to

speak to Dr. Granger about it briefly, and my goodness! The education of a lifetime. Do you know that muggle Healers have to go to school for *eight years* just to get a license for teeth?"

He didn't, nor, for that matter, that muggles had special schools for any kind of work at all. He simply hadn't given muggle professions altogether that much thought. In his mind Hermione's parents were blurry, bumbling, kindly figures in the background of their daughter's life, benignly ignorant, guilty of nothing better or worse than holding her back from the world to which she belonged.

He had not, admittedly, considered the possibility that they were as smart as she was, which in hindsight might have been an error.

"My dad really liked talking to you," said Hermione. "If you can get that telephone working, I can give you his number."

Mr. Weasley was ecstatic. "Really! Hermione, would you?"

"Don't threaten him with a good time," warned Ron, who was engineering an intricate forkful of sausage and beans on a plinth of pancake. "Keep talking that way, and your folks will wind up at the family reunion. That's what happened to the Jordans."

"I think they would like that very much," said Hermione shyly. Draco glanced sideways at her, and she was beaming. "Thank you, Mr. Weasley. They'd love to feel — included."

"Well, they're welcome at the Burrow just any old time, dear," said Mrs. Weasley briskly, liberating the fried tomatoes from Fred's grasp. "Just like their daughter. Aren't they, Ron?"

"Yersh," warbled Ron. He swallowed hard and grinned at Hermione. "Practically family, they are, anyway."

Hermione smiled back, radiant. Draco narrowed his eyes. Nothing was more embarrassing than undisguised pandering, and it wasn't

as though any of the Weasleys would know *subtlety* if it performed a highly ironic burlesque on the breakfast table.

He avoided the sickening, moon-eyed ogling taking place between Hermione and Ron's parents by reaching for the coffee pot, which bequeathed a stream of jet-black liquid, bitter as coal, but more tolerable than bad tea. His cup frothed beige when he doused it in cream, and he drank half of it at once.

The earthy smell of coffee rolled up from the mug in his hands, and sent him sliding back into memory: a year ago now, he had been at the summer house in France, with Theo and Pansy. Theo had boasted that he drank black coffee every morning when he was at home, and Pansy had called him a ridiculous liar, so he'd dug an old coffee press out of the pantry and proceeded to ravage the crimeless kitchen in his quest for validation. Somehow he had spilled the bag of grounds, discharging a waterfall of black grains on the white marble, and Draco and Pansy, after laughing themselves just about hoarse, had played Tag the Erkling to see who had to get the mop. Narcissa found them huddled over the sink, attempting in vain to extricate a gelatinous tar-like substance from the press. The kitchen had smelled like dark roast for weeks.

But that was a year distant, and leagues away. This place was too loud and far too crowded for him to mistake it for that quiet, airy house on the beach. He hadn't seen Theo or Pansy since June. They had traded letters — short, polite little things that never seemed to say all they could — but neither had come to visit, and in July, Theo had stopped answering. Pansy said he had gone on a business trip with his father. Draco wasn't sure if he would feel better if she was lying.

"Draco?"

He looked up, and found Hermione staring at him.

"What"

“I asked after your mother.”

“Oh. She’s quite well, thank you. Vacationing in Romania.”

“...with a horrible great fang on it,” Mrs. Weasley was insisting. “Really, Bill, what *do* they say at the bank?”

“...would be Ludo Bagman,” Mr. Weasley was saying to Fred, in crosstalk. “The *official* gambling ring always runs out of Magical Games and Sports. He was the one who got us such good tickets for the Cup, in fact. I did him a bit of a favor: His brother, Otto, got into a spot of trouble with a lawnmower with unnatural powers, and I smoothed the whole thing over. That family…”

“Charlie works in Romania,” said Ron brightly, to Draco. “There’s a dragon sanctuary there. He loves it. Says it’s the most powerfully magical place in Europe.”

“Charming, but I doubt she’ll have the chance to visit,” Draco said thinly. He dropped his silverware and pushed back his chair. “Excuse me.”

It was simply too much. Too many people doing too much at once, and all of it irritating. Why on earth hadn’t they eaten outside? At least there would be some fresh air.

He ferried his plate into the kitchen and dumped it in the sink. It didn’t take long for footsteps to follow him.

“That tea was inedible,” he said, by way of explanation. She ignored him. She was a wise girl.

Hermione dipped her plate in the sink beside his and ran the water. The babble of the faucet almost drowned out her murmur. “You left in a hurry.”

“I needed some air.”

She nodded. “It takes some getting used to,” she admitted. “When Harry and Charlie come back, it’s even worse. But you get used to it quickly, and then there’s something downright lovely about it. Having so many people in the house.”

“It explains a good deal about Ronald,” he said. Anyone who grew up knee-deep in people bigger and louder and stronger than oneself had to develop certain ways of coping. Perhaps for that reason, he found Ron was by far the most likable of the pack; he possessed a certain quiet and dignified sensitivity to other people’s feelings which even his nicer family members seemed to forget.

Hermione paused, revolving the dish this way and that, as if contemplating which way to attack it. “Ron is a good sport,” she said, barely moving her lips. “He puts up with a lot. I don’t think I gave him much credit for having such a good temper, until now.”

“Certainly he tolerates more than I would.”

Abruptly, he remembered something, a soggy vignette of memory, blurred by the years:

Bet you wish you had her brains. Then maybe your mummy would pay attention to you.

He closed his eyes.

When he opened them, the memory was gone, and he was back in the kitchen. There it was easier to breathe, and it smelled of dish soap instead of woodsmoke, with a verdant tendril of fresh air wafting in from the open window. Hermione’s arm brushed against his as she rinsed her dish and hung it up to drip-dry on some sort of metal rack.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you call him *Ronald,* before,” she said, half-teasing.

“And for preference, I should never do so again. But if I shout *Weasley* in here, I’ll bring down half the house on top of me.” He leaned his hip against the sink while she scrubbed out the inside of her glass with a dishcloth. “So. How was your summer?”

“Terribly unproductive, actually! I didn’t finish half the things I wanted to do. My mum and my uncle dragged the family on a big vacation to Lisbon, and I can’t read on planes or cars without getting sick. Then we toured these old monasteries and I kept wanting to ask the guide about the runic inscriptions, but my cousins were there, so I couldn’t mention it without sounding barmy.”

“I knew you had cousins,” he said, pleased. “One of them fancied a muggle rockstar.”

“Who? Oh, yes, that was ages ago, though. She’s got a boyfriend now, and she’s very mature.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “I think she writes to him daily.”

“You didn’t write to *me* daily, that’s for certain. The owls can find you in Portugal, you know.”

“Yes, but I can’t very well explain to my aunt and uncle why I’m mailing a letter by owl, can I? It was hard enough explaining why my parents let me keep one for a pet. They already think I’m some sort of nutter.”

He did not miss the way she tossed her hair back, shoulders steel-stiff, full of a defiant indifference. That was a fresh bruise, then.

He clucked his tongue and nudged her foot with his. Hermione always came back from her summers a little bit brittle, a little bit antsy, a little bit hungrier to prove herself. It wasn’t fair, and he could think of better ways for her to spend her summer than being dragged around and treated like the family loon — but it would probably offend her if he suggested them. He was careful with what he said about her muggles. He was never sure where the lines were. Hermione herself didn’t always seem to know.

“Pity them, that don’t know the half of it,” he said.

She gave a sideways smile. “I left some of my Astronomy homework out,” she whispered, conspiratorial. “I pretended I’d forgotten it. Nicole thought it was calculus, and she told her mum I was in advanced maths.”

“You madwoman. The Ministry will be at the door any minute. Also, *what* Astronomy homework, Sinestra doesn’t assign summer reading.”

“The back of the book has practice tests! You did finish the book, didn’t you?”

“Of course I finished the book,” he said, lying, “but—”

Ron poked his head in the kitchen door and rapped his knuckles on the doorframe. “What are you two whispering about?”

“Nothing,” said Draco.

“Homework,” said Hermione, promptly. “Speaking of which, Ron, have you done your essay for History of Magic? I thought the prompt this year was rather vague, so I’d like the three of us to compare our work, to see that we’ve all understood it correctly—”

“Blimey, never mind,” Ron said mildly, sauntering between them to drop his plates in the sink. “Teach me to interrupt a bloody meeting of the minds. Both of you should follow up with Percy, if you can stomach it, by the way; no one’s wanted to talk to him about cauldron bottoms all summer, and I think he’s depressed.”

“He’s not wrong, you know,” said Draco, who was more dismayed than anyone to find himself coming to Percy’s defense. “Cauldron thickness is highly relevant in advanced potion-making. If you read *Alchemy* magazine—”

“Oh, that’s bedtime reading, innit, keep a stack of them on my nightstand,” said Ron. “Really takes the edge off a long day, a copy of *Alchemy* magazine.”

“You’ve made your point.”

Ron clattered his dish into the rack and wiped his hands on a yellowing, highly-questionable towel. “House is a bit unbearable, when it’s this full,” he said frankly, surprising Draco. He had assumed the natives were immune to the Burrow’s tribulations. “Most of the time it’s roomier. Bill floats around, and Percy’s due to move out at the end of the summer, once he finds a flat. And Mum always gets stressed when there’s company over. She’ll calm down once she gets used to you. Best thing to do in the meantime is get out of the house.” He jerked his head at the door. “Fancy seeing the shed? Dad’s working on a car.”

“Does it drive?” said Hermione curiously.

Ron grinned. “No,” he said.

Admittedly, when his mother had told him to take a vacation, he had not given much thought as to what a week at the Burrow would exactly entail. Vaguely, he envisioned Ron’s routine at home to be the same as Draco’s, only in shabbier rooms: breakfast in bed, four hours of quidditch practice at the top of the morning, followed by several more hours of reading in the library, or perhaps brewing practice in the alchemy room, preferably scored by Hermione’s cassettes; then a three-course tea setting, served by Briselda; an afternoon constitutional around the lake; a game of tennis or chess with his mother; and dinner on the veranda, with a nightcap waiting in the drawing room. Finish with nine hours of blissful sleep in a king-sized bed, wake, and repeat, for results exceptional in health and mental fitness.

The delusion that this would continue at the Burrow was dragged out behind the shed and butchered within mere hours.

For one, summers at the Burrow appeared to involve a diabolical amount of *work.* The consequence of having no hired help, Draco realized in horror, was that one's children became the only local source of free labor; and Mrs. Weasley showed no compunction about treating them as such. Moreover, he began to understand why she had so many, for there was a seemingly inexhaustible amount of work to be done: the massif of soiled dishware erected by each meal had to be scrubbed, dried, and put away, *thrice daily,* or else the kitchen would disappear into filth; no sooner had the last of these been dealt with than Mrs. Weasley would start cooking again, hauling out the same pots and pans and cutting-boards they had just painstakingly wiped clean, and someone was required to chop vegetables or peel potatoes or monitor simmering saucepans; meanwhile, the meal scraps would be carted out to feed the livestock, leaden bagfuls of fruit rinds and potato skins to be hauled into the pigs' trough, or handfuls of corn and wheat scattered around the chicken coop, while jogging at a steady clip, lest the battle-hardened hens identify one's fingers as a more promising source of nutrients (a fact that one's hosts were happy to let one discover, quite meanly, without any prior warning); and, at the very moment the sun reached its blistering zenith, one could be dispatched to climb up on a molten-hot tin roof and fix a drainpipe: an exercise in endurance that meant hauling around an toolbox of ungodly size while clinging to the sun-baked wall and sweating out half his body weight in fluids, while Ron stripped off his shirt and scampered up and down the roof, hammering things, his back brilliantly white with sweat, like an albino primate.

"At the risk of rudeness," said Draco through gritted teeth, "your parents *are* wizards, aren't they, Ronald?"

Ron caught a splinter in his finger, swore, and popped it in his mouth. "Course they are," he agreed, too distracted by his injury to take offense. "What's your point?"

"That I have been made to execute at least six tasks today, not including this one, which would have been faster and better-suited to

magical means."

"Oh, yeah," said Ron easily. "I'm sure they could do most of this stuff, if they had the time. But Dad's got to work, and Mum's only one woman." He swung the hammer down hard on the nail, missed it, and Draco's reflexes alone prevented him from rendering Draco's thumb two-dimensional.

"Watch it. What about ancestral magic?"

"Sorry, sorry. What d'you mean?" Ron lined up another strike of the hammer.

"The Laws of Blood. Your parents are both of-age, and this is your family seat. Don't they have any sort of sway over the house?"

"Eh, maybe a little. We haven't lived here that long," he said. "The Burrow's not some old Wiltshire castle with generations of magic buildup. The best Dad can do is nudge the foundations around a little, prop up some walls, keep it from toppling over."

"It's a manor, not a castle."

"Mate, you can't just say stuff like that when I'm holding a hammer. It's too much temptation."

Against the odds, Ron seemed at peace in a way he never was at school. He was competent, cool-headed, and he knew things like which cupboard the teacups went in and how to replace a mortar joint, when it was safe to ask Mrs. Weasley for something, and when it was best to clean out for a while. Sometimes he would stop in the middle of whatever they were doing, cock one ear to the wind, and then say, "Come on," and lead Draco and Hermione down to the living room, where they would discover a burgeoning game of Exploding Snap, or a fresh batch of doughnuts, or a group about to depart for the local village of Ottery St. Catchpole; and though he couldn't explain how he knew these things were happening, he was so rarely wrong about them it soon became clear he had a sixth

sense for it — as if there was an invisible cord running all throughout the Burrow and its residents, vibrating at an inaudible frequency to which Ron had a special and private attunement. He was adept in the ways of this hardscrabble life, and whether it was practice or instinct or something magical, the effect was the same: for once in his life, Ron emerged as the captain of their little group, and Draco and Hermione found themselves following his instructions, not the other way around.

“I’m not used to it, either,” she confided to Draco quietly, when they were pinning up laundry on clotheslines in the garden. (Draco had conscripted her, out of a point-blank refusal to place his digits anywhere near Ginevra Weasley’s bloomers, and she had gladly taken refuge from a third hour of chopping carrots.) “At home, we use technology to do most of this — we have a washer and dryer for laundry, and a dishwasher, a lawnmower, et cetera.”

He gingerly lifted a sodden blue dress shirt between two fingers. “They live even rougher than muggles do, is that what you’re saying?”

“Not *all* muggles. There’s a variety.”

“If that’s supposed to make me feel better, it doesn’t.”

She pursed her lips. “I thought for wizards, having money wouldn’t make so much of a difference,” she said. “There’s so much you can do for free with magic—”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“I just assumed — when he said his family was poor, I thought he meant compared to *you*. But earlier I walked in on Arthur and Molly talking about where they’ll get the money for textbooks this year— I don’t know how they manage.”

This made him vaguely uncomfortable. “Why the devil does Arthur stay at the Ministry, then? Clearly it doesn’t pay enough.”

“I don’t know. He seems to love the work.”

He snorted. “In Muggle Artifacts?”

“He does,” she said, warningly, and he rolled his eyes but dropped the point. Virtually nothing was said about muggles in the Burrow unless it was adulation. It was a bizarre inversion on the rest of the world, where even in the depths of an ill mood, Draco could take comfort in the fact that he had magic, while some people did not. Here, it was hard to feel like a wizard at all.

In the evening, they played a quidditch skirmish in the makeshift pitch behind the shed, with the sun low and orange in the sky. With six players they broke into teams of three — Draco, Ginny, and George against Ron, Fred, and Bill — and rotated players every point, a fast and surprisingly brutal workout that wore him out far more quickly than flying drills at home. Draco had the best broom-handling of anyone, and a better touch on the quaffle, all hairpin turns and elegant underhand passes; but the Weasleys played hard and reckless, and he lost the ball more than once to a dive-bomb from someone who didn’t appear to care whether or not either of them stayed on their broomstick. Ginny in particular played with naked aggression, elbows and headers and last-minute swerves, and she laughed when he knocked her off her broom. She flew like she’d never played with a ref before, which he supposed she hadn’t.

Bill hadn’t played quidditch in school, and he flew like it: slow underhand passes that were intercepted more often than not, and shots on goal that bounced off the wicker goalposts as often as not. He was bad, but good-natured about it, and was the first to laugh when he scored accidentally on his own hoop.

Ron flew keeper, and was strikingly good at it, for someone Draco had never seen on a broom. He kept his eye on the quaffle and both hands loose for a catch, steering with his knees. Years of being forced to play keeper for his brothers’ games had built up his skills, and in another world, Draco would have liked to see Ron try for the team.

After the game they lay in the shade of the elm trees, sweaty and winded and trading trash talk lazily in the warm evening light, until Hermione came out to gather them for dinner.

When they had cleared the table of fried fish and fresh lemonade, they hiked down to the river. Draco at first feared this meant more work, but he was relieved to discover it did not.

At the foot of the garden the river bent into a small bowl in the earth became a shallow, domesticated thing, lapping over a bed of muddy pebbles, trussed with cattails and feathery branches of weeping willows. A small wooden dock listed into the water like a ramp, and when the sun went down a caravan of fireflies moved over the water like a river of airborne stars, their reflection doubled in the water. Said water was cold as hag's blood, not to mention, which didn't stop any of the boys from whipping off their shirts and stampeding in. Ginny, only a heartbeat behind them, wriggled out of her shirt and trousers in an instant — ignoring Mrs. Weasley's screech of dismay — and streaked after her brothers, a slip of pale skin cutting through the froth like a white eel. Hermione rolled up her pants to her knees and sat on the end of the dock, her legs trailing in the water. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley shucked their socks and shoes and waded up to their ankles, holding hands. Every so often Mrs. Weasley tugged on her husband's arm, and he bent down to give her a kiss. It could give a man a toothache, it really could.

Draco leaned against the willow trunk, watching from a safe and waterproof distance. Ginny and Bill got into a chicken fight between Fred and George, slapping at each other until they toppled into the water with great rowdy splashes and squawking. Ron, after lapping a neat circuit around the swimming hole, swam up to the dock and rested his folded arms on the wood, chatting to Hermione. They were both smiling, cast in ethereal light from the moon and the fireflies; something he said made Hermione throw back her head and laugh with her whole chest. Ron beamed like she'd given him a new house or something.

There was something cozy and balanced about the picture: everyone paired up, two by two. He scowled.

His footsteps creaked on the dock, and Hermione and Ron both looked up.

“About time, mate,” said Ron genially. If being interrupted bothered him, he didn’t show it. “Wondered when you’d get tired of creeping around back there.”

Draco slipped off his shoes and socks and arranged them neatly beside Hermione’s. Gingerly, he lowered himself onto the dock beside her, dipping his feet into the frigid waters.

“You’re not coming in?”

“No, thank you.”

“That’s alright, I’m no good at it, either,” Hermione reassured him.

He sniffed. “I’ll have you know I’m a champion swimmer, Granger. But I only indulge in water that’s been cleaned.”

“It’s moving freshwater,” said Ron reasonably. “We’ve been swimming here for ages, and nothing’s happened.”

“I rest my case.”

Ignoring this, Ron flopped belly-up and drifted into a starfish float. “I wish Harry were here,” he said. “Then everything would be perfect.”

Draco blinked. He had not remotely conflated any of the day’s activities with perfection. A glance at Hermione was expected to reveal similar confusion, but her expression was soft with affection for Ron, which was no less disconcerting.

“You’ve got a really beautiful home, Ron,” she said — which rankled Draco even more. Hadn’t she been saying to him just earlier that her

own home was much nicer? Was she lying to make Ron feel better? That wasn't at all like Hermione.

Ron flushed and rolled onto his front, hiding a blush that crept all the way down his chest. "S' not bad, I guess," he said, with obvious pleasure. "I know it's not, you know, as fancy as you two probably like."

"No, it's really lovely," said Hermione earnestly, while Draco ogled her in disgruntlement. "It is. It feels so homey, and welcoming, and your whole family works together. I always — I always wished I had a bigger family."

"You did?" said Draco, blindsided. He couldn't imagine having to share the Manor with someone else.

Ron nodded, like he understood. "They're annoying buggers, each to each," he said, "but if I had to take all or none, I guess I'd take them."

One of his brothers hollered his name.

"Ah, gotta go. We're gonna play sharks and grindylows. Mione, you can always join, if you want to swim in your clothes. Ginny's got spares up at the house. You, too, Malfoy."

Hermione demurred.

"Just jump, if you change your mind," said Ron, and then struck out to join his brothers.

A trifecta of tiny red fish swarmed Draco's foot. He flinched and kicked at them.

"Mione is an insipid name," he said, apropos of nothing.

"I don't think nicknames are meant to be serious," she said. "And you still call me 'Granger.'"

"Yes, because it's your name."

“It’s my last name,” she amended, not without amusement. “You have to admit it’s a little odd, isn’t it? We’ve known each other for years.”

That, he felt, was altogether beside the point. He didn’t remember choosing consciously to call her one thing or another; he’d just started off that way, stuck to it, and after a while it was awkward to stop. Anyway, it was useful: if he needed to get her attention, especially across a crowded Gryffindor common room, a full-throated *Granger* would make it immediately clear who was calling, i.e., why she should drop what she was doing and attend.

He doubted she would find this compelling, however.

“Would you prefer *Mione?”*

“Oh, don’t do that, you sound affected.”

A doe and her fawn tiptoed out of the shaded underbrush on the other side of the river, dipping their long necks low to drink from the freshwater. In the crepuscular light, they were almost invisible, and when they finished, they slipped silently back into the woods.

“Do you want me to call you Hermione?” he said suddenly.

She gave a little twitch, as if she’d brushed a hot pan. “No,” she said. “I don’t know. You can. But I feel as if you’re about to give me terrible news. You really can use Granger if you want, I didn’t mean to complain.”

“You never said it bothered you.”

“It doesn’t. You still call Harry ‘Potter,’ even though you’ve nearly died for him at least twice. I know it doesn’t mean anything.”

“That’s different,” he said. “It’s *Potter.* I’m not going to call him ‘Harry,’ that would be outrageous.”

“It would probably level a city,” she agreed.

“You’re joking, I’m not. But you could have said something earlier, if you minded. I don’t *have* to call you Granger, it’s not a compunction. I’m perfectly capable of pronouncing ‘Hermione.’”

“Evidently so,” she said, wryly. She kicked some water at him, and he skittered out of the way, giving an involuntary yelp. “I told you, I don’t care. Ron calls me one thing, and you call me another. They're just nicknames.”

“It’s not the same,” he insisted, though he could not articulate what the difference was, when pressed; and then Mrs. Weasley made a loud health proclamation about the sleep needs of growing boys, and the whole troupe lumbered dripping back up the hill. The Burrow filled with the thunder of footsteps on the staircase; doors slammed, goodnights were shouted, and spare pillows were distributed among the guests; and at last, Draco folded himself warily into his tiny barrack in Ron’s bedroom, while Fred and George whispered to each other in the double-bunk, and Ron issued peal after peal of glass-shattering snores.

In any other place, after any other kind of day, such a cacophony would have kept him awake for hours, and left him murderously bad-tempered in the morning. But the vigorous routine of work and sport had left his whole body achy and limp and unfathomably exhausted, and before his head touched the pillow he had plummeted into a deep, perfect sleep.

Thank you for hanging with me through the hiatus! I appreciate your enthusiasm for this next volume! Here's a double-chapter post to celebrate the beginning of Year 4 and Volume 2. As always, let me know what you think, and with my absolute love to everyone who's commented so far.

A Boot on Stoatshead Hill

Chapter 33: A Boot on Stoatshead Hill

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

He woke to something heavy colliding with his stomach.

He shot upright and lashed out with his foot, connected with something warm and moving, and kicked it again. There was a shout, a *thump,* and an explosion of laughter as the thing fell off him. Draco tore out of bed, whipped out his wand, and when he blinked the dizziness out of his eyes, he found himself staring down the line of his wand at Harry Potter, who was sprawled on the floor in his pajamas, cackling like a goddamn hyena.

“For God’s *sake!* What was that for?”

Ron, Fred, and George were clutching each other to stay upright. Harry was chortling. “Blame Ron,” he said, a bit hoarsely. “Bet me five galleons I wouldn’t. Hullo, Draco.”

“I could have cursed you!”

“Yeah, but you’d feel real sorry afterwards,” said Harry with a grin, and he held up his hand. Draco huffed and hauled him to his feet, refusing to feel even an ounce of sympathy when Harry winced.

“When did you get here, then?”

“Just now. We were due yesterday, but we decided to fly back instead of Apparating, and we got to see the whole countryside. Camped in the woods last night, got in about an hour ago. You’ve got to try flying cross-country, Draco, it’s brilliant.”

“You lost me at ‘camped.’”

Harry ignored this. He was wearing an oversized Bulgaria jersey with Ron's old jeans, the cuffs rolled up, and his hair had grown nearly to his neck. If he had brushed it once since Draco had last seen him, it gave no evidence of it. "Charlie is wicked cool," he breathed. "You've got to meet him, Draco. We talked the whole way back — he told me about dragon-taming in Romania and magizoological expeditions in Albania and Turkey, and he knew more about creatures than even Hagrid—"

"As does anyone who can tell the difference between a kitten and a cockatrice, continue."

"He said he'd ridden on the back of a dragon, once!"

"And won a staring contest with a basilisk, I imagine?"

"I kind of thought he was telling the truth, though," said Harry, the lovable naif, "because he had all these tips for how to steer it. Anyway, get dressed, lazy bum, I want to say hello to Hermione. Mrs. Weasley says she's going to let us de-gnome the garden!"

"Let us?"

"Right? If we get the dishes done quick enough, that is. C'mon! It's already seven thirty!"

"Yeah, the day's basically over," managed Ron, wiping tears. "Oh, Merlin, look at his *face.* Harry, I love you. I really, really do."

"Which makes one of us!" said Draco sharply, and stalked off to dress.

Days at the Burrow were somehow both endless and breathlessly fast, as if time there spun on a quick closed circuit. Each day started to the rooster's cry and the groan of water through old pipes as Percy claimed the first shower, followed by breakfast, served in buffet while people trickled down with drowsy eyes and messy hair, half of them still in pajamas. Then dishes, chores, and more chores,

working merciless hours under the August sun, until his hands were calloused like sandpaper and new ridges of muscle sprouted along his arms and legs in the places quidditch had never touched. His skin darkened from near translucence to a warm shade of tallow, and he wore his shirtsleeves rolled up, the top buttons open, for fear of heatstroke. He had never dressed this casually in his life. He was still mocked for wearing oxfords around the house, but some things he refused to let slide.

The evenings, too, had a breathless rhythm. There were games of Wands and Exploding Snap and exhibitions of Percy's fiendish talent at Euchre, and drinking games — minors played with butterbeer — designed to unearth every kind of disreputable secret known to man, which left Draco with far more knowledge of Bill Weasley's nocturnal exploits than he had ever desired. There were quidditch matches nightly, four on four, three on five, four teams of two, or just Draco and Harry flying head to head in a battle of the seekers, playing until someone's arms gave out, while Hermione read her way through the complete works of Henry James in the garden below. Sometimes she would laugh at something in the book, irritatingly, because at least once Draco's resulting distraction caught him a bludger in the head.

He pitched a fit and had the score reset, but then Hermione left to help Arthur with the car, and then it wasn't as fun to show off anymore, either.

Hermione was an ideal houseguest — Draco quite consciously was not — but Harry was hardly a guest at all. If it weren't for the hair, he could have been a Weasley. In that tower of tiny rooms, the Boy Who Lived scrubbed dishes and sawed lumber and caked dirt up to his wrists weeding vegetables, happy as a house-elf. He helped untangle Molly's knitting yarn and taught Arthur how to use a vacuum cleaner. Sometimes, while he was busy at some chore or activity in her proximity, Molly would reach out absently and kiss him on the head, as she did with all her children; though she never seemed to notice the slip-up until Harry looked at her and smiled.

He and Ron erected a baroque pillow fort over Ron's bed and retreated to it for whispered conferences long into the night, until Draco hurled a pillow at them or stomped down to sleep on the couch. Once or twice he woke up and found they'd fallen asleep that way, sprawled side by side in the fort, like a pair of littermates curled against their mother's belly.

The worst thing was the lack of space, not physically, but emotionally. It was impossible to stay out of anyone's business. The day began with a great sardine press in one of the house's two bathrooms, a hydra of six heads and at least forty elbows, all wrestling for not enough toothpaste and hair gel, Charlie whining whenever someone jostled his eyeliner, Ginny and Bill bickering over who left the hairball in the shower, and Ron bellowing for everyone to get out before he peed himself. And yet this kind of forced intimacy was still quite dignified compared to, for example, the cataclysm of hearing Percy dictate a breakup letter to Penelope Clearwater through the wall; walking in on Arthur Weasley's excruciatingly earnest kitchen table heart-to-heart with the twins about their O.W.L.s; or opening a broom cabinet in search of window cleaning fluid and instead finding Ginny, crying, because Ron had snapped at her when she tried to join his game of draughts with Bill. Because in a house so small, people grew crabby and sharp-tongued and thoughtless at least a dozen times a day, and there was nothing to do except retreat as far as you could, which was never very far, until someone found you, which was never very long.

He never knew what to do when that happened, except to close the door and flee as fast as he could, his face burning.

Once the humiliation of it all receded, it was astonishing how easy it was to live with. True, he was lucky to get a five-minute shower without someone hammering on the bathroom door; true, no matter how early he woke up, he was always too late for the hot water; true, he saw more naked gingers in a week than an Irish nude beach; but trespasses were quickly forgiven, bruises soon faded, and quarrels at breakfast were forgotten by lunch. *Malfoy* meant nothing here; he

wasn’t heir to anything in particular, just the poor cosseted lout who didn’t know what a pipe wrench was, and had to be shown how to peel a potato.

He was aware of things happening that appalled him, but some internal sensor for dismay appeared to have broken under strain. The stakes were too low. Slights that would have purebloods reaching for dueling gloves could be defused with a punchline. So at any rate, just as often as not, when Fred hip-checked him on the way out of the kitchen, or Ron stole a dinner roll from his plate, he threw an elbow and a lazy insult and forgot about it.

He was usually too tired to be fussy, anyway. Sometimes he went to sleep suspecting the Weasleys were wringing the piss and vinegar out of him like bilge from a wet sponge.

“Have you heard anything from Daphne, then?” said Ron one day.

They were in the garden, he and Draco and Harry, de-gnoming the peonies. It was dull work, one of those chores — Draco had only recently started recognizing them — meant mostly to get them out of the house, which was a dispiriting thing to think about when a leathery little creature had its teeth two inches deep in your fingers. He didn’t realize at first that Ron was speaking to him, and had to extricate the gnome from his hand before he remembered.

“No,” he said, “and I didn’t hold my breath, either. Nott says he lives in hope for the day she figures out you’ve got to attach the letter to the owl.” He peered at Ron. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason. I just hadn’t heard anything.”

“Why would you?” This seemed uncharacteristically audacious. “You don’t know her.”

Ron’s forefinger delayed a verdict. “One, we went to a party together. Two, I watched her whole situation get torn up by a werewolf, which is pretty damn personal. And three—”

“Shh,” whispered Harry, nodding back up at the house. Voices carried from the garden.

Ron lowered his voice. “And three, she told me about her secret you-know-what thing. And she said she liked my hair.”

“Which casts into question her eyesight, if not her judgment, but doesn’t—”

“Come off it, I just wanted to know if you’d heard anything about the W-O-L-F situation.”

Draco stared at him.

“I understand having doubts,” he said, “but I assure you, all of your siblings can spell.”

“No news is good news, though, right?” said Harry hopefully, speaking over the whispered squabble that broke out between Draco and Ron. “We’d know something about it if she got sicker, or wasn’t going to come back to school. Remember that letter McGonagall sent when Petrovsky transferred?”

Draco did not want to backslide into a conversation about Daphne Greengrass, her various maladies, or the likelihood that one of them would remove her from their lives forever. In fact he hadn’t heard anything from her, and he had worried about it more than he liked to say. On full moons, he found himself thinking about her, and wondering how difficult it would be to make a Wolfsbane Potion.

They were interrupted by Arthur Weasley coming out of the house with a tray of lemonade, bearing a porkpie hat and a grin.

“Hello, boys!” he called. “Molly had me bring this out! Said you could use a break.”

“Quite,” said Draco emphatically, and seized the opportunity to vault his gnome carelessly into the grasses. Harry and Ron punted theirs

far over the hedge and shuffled in to take tall frosted glasses of lemonade so sweet it stung.

“Not working too hard, are you?” chirped Arthur. “It’s summer, after all! I’m nipping into the shops later today, if you fancy a change of scenery.”

“I’d love to, Mr. Weasley,” said Harry at once.

Ron shrugged. “Might as well,” he said to Draco. “Best shot to get out of chores. Dad, can we invite Hermione? I think she wanted to buy muggle sunblocker, or something.”

“Certainly! But fair warning: I will insist she explain what it is,” said Arthur. “Sunblocker! Cavities! Light bolbos! She’s *invaluable.* I may ask her to come in to the office.”

“Surely there are muggle-borns in the Muggle Artifacts office,” said Draco, with a slight curl to his lip.

“Not as many as you’d think! In fact most of them don’t find it all that interesting, so they end up elsewhere. Or they haven’t a clue what we’re talking about — they’ll be the first to tell you that being muggle-born doesn’t mean you understand muggle technology. Not many of them know as much as Hermione.”

“Understatement of your life.”

“Anyway,” he said, rubbing his hands together, “how’s this sound: we’ll nip round to the grocer’s, get some staples — pop in at the auto shop, of course, just to look — then what say we get ice creams on the way back? My treat? And, er — there’s no need for your mother to know about this.”

Draco, who enjoyed a good bribe as much as the next Malfoy, agreed. Molly had forbade them all from any visits the auto shop, that den of autovehicular temptations, but there had been no promises of ice cream with *her* orders.

“Know about what, Mr. Weasley?” said Harry, a perfect cherub. “We’re only getting groceries.”

“Good lads!” Arthur ruffled Harry’s and Ron’s hair. Draco frayed half the nerves in his body with fear he would try the same with Draco, but what happened was far worse: he turned to Draco, put a hand on his shoulder, and said, “You’ve done some fine work today, too, son,” and whatever happened in Draco’s chest fell somewhere between a gag reflex and a stroke.

By the thinnest skin of his teeth he did not flinch away, never mind if he cracked a molar, and when Arthur’s mind caught up to whatever was happening on Draco’s face, his obvious disappointment was enough to make him crack another.

“Oh,” he said. “I’m sorry about that, Draco. That was… careless phrasing.”

And *that,* of all things, was what choked him — not the days of hard labor and exhaustion, the probable influence of heatstroke, and the mind-wrenching desire to shuck his own skin like a cornhusk and run away — but the fact that an adult man had recognized his discomfort, and tried, however fumblingly, to make it better.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, “and I don’t care. One of you go tell Granger we’re going, if she’s still alive; she started a load of laundry two days ago and hasn’t been heard from since.”

The afternoon melted into a clear summer’s night, with a floral breeze, and the slim claw of the moon cutting open its wide bed of blue satin. Mrs. Weasley served dinner in the garden. Bill and Charlie levitated the chairs out of the house, letting Ginny and Ron and Harry cling to the seats while they wheeled them wildly through the air — Hermione hovered by the door, nearly levitating herself with anxiety — and Percy shouted out his window to complain of the noise. Molly produced deep platters of chicken cacciatore and salted potato wedges and garden salad with cucumbers and peas, laid up

the table, and they ate all twelve of them together, passing plates in the same game of strategy and reflexes that all mealtimes became.

“Of course, I’ll have to work while we’re there,” Percy was saying, gesturing more emphatically than usual with his elderflower wine. “It’ll be my first chance to see Mr. Crouch since June. As you know, we’ve got another big event to organize right after the World Cup — *you* know the one I’m talking about, Father? The top-secret one?”

Ron muttered to Draco, “He’s desperate for us to ask what that is. Probably an exhibition of thick-bottomed cauldrons.”

In the middle of the table, Molly was interrogating a fidgeting Charlie about his work. Charlie was a loud, belligerently optimistic man of twenty-one, who took after his father both in build (spindly) and cadence (enthusiastic). He wore a double-ring of eyeliner and purple shading around his eyes, and enough bangles on his black jacket that he could hardly reach for the wine without jingling. Despite the gothic affect, he was rather pleasant to talk to, or would have been, had he not been undergoing an inquest.

“...do keep a *safe* distance from them, don’t you?”

“Can't keep ’em tame from a safe distance, Mum!” he said cheerfully. “Wouldn’t be paying me for much, if I did! Anyway, s’ not so bad — only been chomped two or three times—”

"Two or three!"

“Besides, I’m skipping the hardest job all year! Ministry just placed a he-yuge order into Britain. Feel a bit bad about it, to be honest, I left Witty and Midge to handle Berta all on their own, even though I'm the only one who can get her to take her nighty-time potion—”

“And the, er… makeup, dear? Do any of the other men do that?”

“Mum, don’t be prejudiced,” said Ginny at once. “You offered to buy *me* makeup last year.”

“It’s different with girls,” said Molly primly. “I’m not telling Charlie not to, I’m only asking whether a lot of other men do it. It’s been a while since I was your age.”

“Sure, loads of boys wear it,” interrupted Bill, reaching for the peas. “My flatmate does a full face every night.”

“He does! But why—?”

“Who cares? It’s none of my business,” said Bill firmly, in a way that meant he did know, but thought it was none of hers. Then he ruffled Charlie’s hair and gave him another helping of peas.

Dessert was homemade strawberry ice cream, with fresh blackberries and whipped cream. By the time they had finished, there was a host of moths congregated around the candles, and the air sparkled with fireflies. Crookshanks darted underfoot, chasing gnomes, happier than Draco had ever seen him. Draco had eaten more than he meant to and felt warm and sluggish, ready to keel over and sleep for a month, but instead he was bullied to his feet to help clear plates.

Ron caught him and Hermione on their way inside. “Me and Harry are going to check out the shed,” he muttered. “C’mon.”

“It’s just a car,” said Draco, mostly to prove he knew what a car was, but they still followed Ron into the whitewashed old barn.

Ron hauled the door open, and it ratcheted back on rusty tracks, groaning. A single round light blazed to life overhead, illuminating a thatched floor and an old baby blue car. Car parts were scattered around it like a sacrificial ring, most of them defunct or broken, some of them menacing. It smelled of dead grass and wood.

He shut the door and slid the deadbolt into place with a grunt. “There,” said Ron. “Figure we’ve got about five minutes before Ginny comes nosing, but that’ll have to do.”

“Your dad’s got a Ford Anglia?” said Harry curiously, circling the car. “My Aunt Marge has one of these. This is in better condition than hers, though.”

“What? Oh, yeah. Who cares?” said Ron. “I wanted to ask if you’d heard from Sirius.”

Hermione stood at attention. It was the first time they’d brought up Sirius or Lupin since Draco arrived, and he was curious, too: even more curious when Harry folded his arms around his chest, quickly, like there was a bird in his chest he didn’t want to set free.

“Yeah,” he said softly, “twice. He sounds okay. I wrote to him yesterday.”

“That’s great! What’s he say?”

“Er. Not much,” said Harry. “They’re somewhere far south, way out of the country. Somewhere warm. Hard for the dementors to travel. They’re camping a lot, since they can’t get too close to any towns.”

“Why not?”

“Because they haven’t got any Wolfsbane Potion, obviously,” said Draco. Hermione nodded silently, chewing her thumbnail.

Ron shuddered. “So he’s hacking it raw every full moon?”

Harry shifted uncomfortably. “Sirius says he helps him through it, some, the way they did when they were kids, but it’s not easy… makes it hard to hide, too. They can’t stay anywhere, too long.”

Hermione had abandoned her thumbnail to start fussing at her sleeves, whaling on a loose thread as if it had done something to her.

“What’s wrong?” said Ron, noticing it.

“No — nothing, nothing.”

“Nah, c’mon, let’s have it.”

She cringed. “I don’t want to sound insensitive,” she said, a phrase usually belied by what followed it, “but is it *really* wise for him to be traveling abroad without any potion? He could run into someone. And there’s no way of being sure—”

“It’s not his fault,” Harry said hotly. “It’s not like he can pick some up at the grocer’s—”

“I know that! I do!” Her hands flew up. “I don’t think it’s his fault! He needs help, but we can’t just say that, ‘It’s not his fault,’ like that makes it less dangerous—”

Harry’s hackles sprang up so quickly they ought to have achieved liftoff. “What do you suggest, Hermione? You want to call the Ministry? Ring up Macnair, tell him to get cracking?”

“No!”

“Heel, Potter,” snapped Draco. “She’s the reason your godfather’s not gathering mold in Azkaban.”

“Oi—”

“And another thing. If you’re going to jump down somebody’s throat for the revolutionary suggestion that a *werewolf* is a creature we should *treat carefully,* then for God’s sake, jump down mine, because I happen to agree with her.”

Harry was still bristling, as if he had a few more insults in him to trade; Draco, feeling unusually sharp, was more than glad to barter with him. But Ron raised his voice over them all.

“All of you, shut up, would you *please,”* he said. “Hermione, Lupin went thirteen years without Wolfsbane Potion, and he didn’t hurt anybody—”

“That we know of,” muttered Draco.

“—and Harry, Hermione’s only being cautious. You can’t honestly say he’s not dangerous, alright? Lupin’s a mate, and I like him, but what happened to Daphne was the worst thing I’d ever seen.” He folded his arms. “I still get nightmares, sometimes.”

“So do I,” Hermione said quietly.

Draco stepped forward from instinct, realized that he had no idea what to do, and stopped.

He had nightmares, too. None that he’d ever uttered a word about to anybody. But for a long time after the end of third year, he had taken fright of dreaming, because he knew it would take him back to the Whomping Willow, dementors above and werewolf ahead, only in his dreams, his godfather never came, and the Patronus never worked, and he woke expecting to find a pair of jaws to clamp around his throat.

He hadn’t had the dream since coming to the Burrow. Perhaps his subconscious was so exhausted it had no room left for nightmares, and that was a kind of bliss in itself, because he didn’t know how he would explain cold sweat and tear tracks to the boys he shared a room with.

Hermione was looking at him, waiting for him to say the same, but he couldn’t find the words to admit it. He didn’t want to keep it from her. But he couldn’t make himself say it. The words grew cold on his tongue.

What could he say, anyway? *I had a nightmare?* Like a child confessing to bedwetting? Ridiculous.

Harry’s anger snuffed out at once, suffocated by concern. “I’m — I’m really sorry. I didn’t think — I didn’t know,” he said. “I didn’t think. I’m sorry. How long? All summer?”

“It’s alright,” she said stiffly. “I had trouble sleeping for a while, but my parents got me some sleeping medication. I can mostly do without it,

now.”

“Wish I’d had some of that,” said Ron. “I don’t think I slept a wink, that first full moon at home.”

“You, too?” said Hermione softly.

He ground his heel into the hay. “Some.”

Harry became a blur of motion. Before anyone could react he had flung his arms around Hermione and hauled her into a rib-cracking hug. She stifled a squeak into his shoulder and then relaxed, her face squashed into his chest, while he held on as if she was about to float into space without him.

“I’m sorry,” he said miserably. “Ron, Draco, you too — I never wanted — it’s my fault, I’m sorry—”

“If you don’t shut up, I’ll wallop you so hard it’ll make the Willow look like a pat on the bum,” said Ron. “How many times have we got to tell you we’re here because we want to be? It’s been three years. You think any of us would have stuck around if we didn’t think you were worth all the rubbish?”

Harry took a sharp breath.

“Ron,” said Hermione, tremulous with emotion — but *tremulous* was nothing compared to Harry, who made a sound like a wounded hippogriff, and let go of Hermione to reach for Ron. Ron grabbed him and knocked their heads together, hard, like he was trying to impress the idea through Harry’s stubborn skull with telepathy.

Hermione stepped away from them, blinking suspiciously, and Draco offered his handkerchief. He was not displeased that Harry had seen fit to let go of her; the embrace had been thoughtlessly tight and possibly risked asphyxiation.

“I’m fine,” she said fiercely. “I’ve got terrible allergies.”

“To sentimentality?”

“Yes.”

“One we share,” he said. Then, “While you’ve been at the Burrow—”

“I haven’t had any.” She folded the handkerchief carefully. “Not here. It’s only when I’m alone, that I… and Ginny snores.”

“Yes. Rather.” He paused. “I have some Dreamless Sleep with my effects,” he said. “If you need it, you know where Ronald’s room is.” He didn’t know how else to help. But he was good at potion-making. It was one of the things he could do well, and one of the precious few he could do better than her.

“Thank you,” she said, so softly that it made his stomach curdle nearly inside-out with discomfort, and he ducked his head, muttering that it was only a potion, not a vault of gold.

Then she blew her nose horribly into his handkerchief, and the moment was thankfully over.

When they emerged from the shed, the Weasleys were packing up the tables and chairs and putting out the lights. Tables and chairs drifted through the air like a strange flock of chestnut birds. Molly extinguished all the lanterns in the garden with one swish of her wand, plunging the paddock into soft darkness. Percy and Arthur sat on deck chairs near the stoop, smoking pipes and talking in low voices. The throaty croons of frogs breathed life into the still night air.

“There you are,” cried Molly, catching sight of them. “You really should be in bed, the whole lot of you — you’ll be up at the crack of dawn. Goodness, are any of you packed?”

“I told you we’d do it in the morning,” groused Ron.

“I’ve heard *that* before,” she said, with exhausted fondness. She ushered them inside, one hand apiece on Ron and Harry’s backs.

As they ducked back into the house, Harry gasped and smacked his hand to his forehead. At first Draco thought he had hit his head on the doorframe, and he snickered at him, but when he saw Harry's face it was crumpled like a wet dishcloth.

"What, Potter?"

"No bloody idea," Harry muttered. "It's been happening all summer, it's really annoying. I'll be standing around doing nothing, and suddenly my scar will hurt like hell."

Which would have tripped something in the back of Draco's mind, if he had a moment to think about it; but then Molly clucked at them again, and they were being herded upstairs, into that dark warm attic where nothing, from headaches to werewolves, seemed capable of reaching them.

Draco could have sworn he had only been asleep for five minutes when he woke to a soft chime in his ear.

He lifted his head, scrubbing his knuckles into his eyes, and found himself staring into the kindly face of Molly Weasley. The window was dark, and she was lit only by her glowing wand-tip.

"I didn't want to shake you awake, dear," she whispered, "since Ron said it gave you a bad reaction."

Appreciative, embarrassed, and still half-asleep, he coughed and swung his feet off the bed. "I'm up," he said gruffly.

Around them, dark shapes fumbled around for their clothes. Fred had fallen asleep on George's shoulder while the other tied his shoes. Harry had his glasses on upside-down.

"Never does that for me," muttered Ron. "No one asks if *I* have a bad reaction."

“That’s because you don’t, Ron, dear. Don’t forget your wellies.”

Downstairs, Mr. Weasley stirred a pot of porridge the size of his ribcage, while Bill pored over a sheaf of parchment tickets at the kitchen table. He was wearing a leather jacket and a brown flannel tied around his waist. He smiled lazily and absently used his wand to stir his coffee-cup as the others stomped in; he shared his father’s remarkable talent for retaining a good temper even in uncomfortable circumstances, e.g., hauling out of bed at the very perineum of dawn.

“Where’re Perce and Ch-a-a-arlie?” said George, failing to stifle a yawn.

“Apparating later today,” said Bill. “All the big kids are.”

“So what are you doing up, then?”

“There’s an all-hands for the Curse Breaking Unit at seven,” he said. “A flag came in last night on a frozen account. Probably nothing. I’m popping in, then Apparating to the campgrounds.”

There were footsteps down the stairs and Hermione and Ginny came into the kitchen, pale and drowsy.

“Sleep well, all of you?” said Arthur, with offensive good cheer, despite the hour. “Ready for a walk? Only a short one — just two miles. Well, two and a half miles, maybe. Between two and three. Four miles, at most.”

“Over-under on six?” Fred mumbled to George.

“Over.”

“Done.”

“Are we going to use that muggle thing in the shed?” Draco said hopefully. “The car?”

“No,” said Arthur hurriedly.

“No,” said Molly, making Arthur jump. She repossessed the spoon and ladled porridge with a dictatorial bent. “All of you, eat quickly. You’ll miss the Portkey.”

Excellent. How he had longed to start his morning off with a crippling bent of nausea.

They scarfed down scalding bowls of porridge and set off through the dark chilly morning. Molly and Bill waved them goodbye from the stoop. Daybreak was a distant blush of green on the horizon.

“So how does everyone get there without muggles noticing?” Hermione wondered, her voice cushioned by the velvety silence of the bullfrogs.

Arthur rubbed his hands. “Good question!” he said, and though Hermione must have heard this at least a dozen times a day, it still made her smirk, a little, in a way that made Draco roll his eyes. “The trouble is, about a hundred thousand wizards turn up at the World Cup. Which is far too many for muggles not to notice! So we have to stagger the arrivals. The tickets come with time gateways and rendezvous points. Some Apparate, of course, but for those who don’t want to, or can’t — that’s you lot — we use Portkeys. There’s about, oh, two hundred of them placed at strategic points around Britain, and ours is on Stoatshead Hill.”

“Why couldn’t we Apparate, too?” complained Ron.

“Side-along! With six people!” Arthur chuckled. “I’d be lucky if I didn’t splinch myself through a wall.”

They trudged down the dark cobbled lane through the village, under the dusty glow of gas lamps. The sky flushed from the color of bottled blue ink to a jeweled indigo, still dusted with stars. Draco kneaded his hands like dough to keep them warm.

Hermione fell back to walk with him. “What goes into making a Portkey?” she whispered.

“No idea, but hang back a moment, I’ll get out my pocket encyclopedia and check — ah, no, it doesn’t say. How the devil should I know?”

“Because you pretend to know everything, up until someone actually asks! You’ll make fun of me for not knowing what a ‘snidgeon’ is, like St. Mungo’s gives you a pamphlet at birth, but other times you’ll act like I’m Merlin's cursed idiot for supposing an oh-so-superior *pureblood wizard* would know his way around the world—”

“Alright, alright,” he said, because it was that or break out laughing, and he couldn’t afford to lose the body heat. “Ask your questions, inquisitrix.”

“I just don’t understand what a Portkey is for,” she said in breathy bursts, as they started to climb a long, sloping hill. “If it’s easy as Apparating, why use the Hogwarts Express?”

“Apart from comfort, atmosphere, tradition, and the miscellaneous advantages of not introducing a score of eleven-year-olds to their magical education with a crippling bout of nausea?”

“Quite.”

“The same reason they don’t use Floo powder. Because of you.” He poked her arm, a little meanly.

“Wh— you mean muggle-borns.”

“Yes. You’ve got to have a rendezvous point that muggle parents can find, and you can hardly do better than a big train station smack in the middle of London.”

“That’s… thoughtful.”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I suspect it predates the use of Portkeys, anyway.”

“Is it hard to make a Portkey?” she said thoughtfully. Her head was tipped at the precise angle that meant maximum cognitive activity was taking place; by now, he could have plotted it with a sextant. “Are they very common?”

Any irritation at being treated like an appendix was quelled by a twinge of pleasure that she wanted to ask him instead of anyone else, and in particular Mr. Weasley, who by all rights stood a better chance of knowing. “They’re a poor man’s way to travel,” he said, in a low voice. “They’re one-use objects, cheap to make — how couldn’t they be, it’s only the cost of the object and an enchantment — but not terribly useful, and it takes about an age to set them up. Floo powder is miles better, but it’s expensive.”

“So your family travels by Floo?”

“I side-along Apparate with my mother, seeing as there’s only two of us. But no, we wouldn’t use Portkeys unless there were truly no other options. Dashed uncomfortable things.”

Someone cleared his throat aggressively behind them. Before either could look, Ron brushed past, taking a bruising pace up the steep hill, scowling like someone had canceled his birthday.

“Oh, drat,” sighed Hermione. “I should have thought—”

“Don’t feel badly. I was the one who said it, not you,” said Draco, who was trying not to feel badly about it, either, and finding little success. Which was a damned perplexing feeling, because he’d only said what was true.

All the same, he would have felt more comfortable saying it had he not been living on the Weasleys’ generosity for a week.

At the top of the hill, two tall figures stood silhouetted against the rising sun.

“Amos!” called Arthur gladly. He clasped hands with the older of the two, a ruddy-faced wizard with a receding hairline of brown curls, who was wearing a Hufflepuff varsity jacket.

“Arty! My God, you’ve gotten fat!” This pot, having heartily observed the kettle’s color, proceeded to hug him.

“Easier to do when you’re not eating from the Ministry cafeteria! Children, this is Amos Diggory. Worst chaser Hufflepuff ever had—”

“Least I *was* a chaser, Arthur ‘Four Strikes’ Weasley—”

“—and my old coworker, used to run with me in Muggle Artifacts. Now he’s in Control of Magical Creatures. And I think you know his son, Cedric?”

“Yes,” said Ginny, at once. Fred smacked her.

Cedric Diggory was the Hufflepuff seeker, several years older, and a pureblood, though his family didn’t run in the Malfoy circles. Up close, he was six feet of lanky quidditch muscle, one of those boys who had shot up so fast he was still growing into his height, with a square face and jaw, waves of tousled toffee-brown hair, and soft brown eyes ringed in long lashes. When he smiled his eyes crinkled and friendly dimples split open his whole face, and it gave the impression that there was no one he would rather be smiling at.

“Hello,” said Ginny, tucking her hair behind her ear.

“Hi,” said Cedric, smiling back. Draco, who had been beginning to think Ginny’s taste in boys was an intricate mechanism of self-sabotage, begrudgingly admitted this was improvement.

Amos Diggory peered around at the assembled children: three Weasley boys, Draco, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny. “Great Scott!” he

cried, adjusting his glasses. “And you’re still missing some from the Christmas card! You might leave Molly alone, one of these nights, Artie!”

“No, no! Just these ones.” Arthur gestured at Fred, George, and Ron. Draco did not fail to notice that his gesture could have plausibly swept Harry, who was beside Ron, into its ambit. “This is Hermione Granger, friend of Ron’s; Draco Malfoy, another friend; and this is Harry Potter.”

“Harry *Potter?”* Mr. Diggory’s mouth fell open. “It’s really you?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, reluctantly, “I am. It’s… me.”

“Why, you’re the Gryffindor seeker!”

Harry blinked. “Yeah, I am,” he said, much more eagerly.

“Ced’s told me all about you! He said you were the best seeker in a century! Now, Hufflepuff *did* beat you last year, I’ll not forget—”

Cedric glanced away, scratching his neck. “Harry was in the Hospital Wing for that match, Dad,” he mumbled. “I told you that.”

“Yes, but you were the man on the broomstick! That’s life, isn’t it, Artie? Just showing up, being there, that’s ninety percent of everything. Ced’s too modest, he takes after his mother — so I’ve got to brag for all three of us!”

“Must be nearly time,” said Arthur quickly. “We’d better get ready… oh. Harry. Hermione. You just need to touch the Portkey, that’s all, a finger will do—”

“Yes, but what is it?” said Draco peevishly. He wasn’t inclined to do much of anything with Amos Diggory, just now, at least until he heard the half-dozen other stories where Gryffindor whomped Hufflepuff flat.

Grinning, Mr. Diggory held out a moldy boot.

Draco sighed. These sorts of developments were starting not to surprise him.

The ten of them crowded around the boot, backpacks jostling. Draco eased out a hand and hooked his pinky around one soggy shoelace.

“Three…” muttered Mr. Weasley, one eye still on his watch.

Draco leaned into Hermione’s ear. “You’re going to want to keep your feet under you, if you can,” he said. “These things generally dump you a few feet in the air.”

She shivered. Any reference to heights or flying was a Granger sleeper-phrase, and triggered her voice to pitch up an octave. “In the *air?* Why?”

“Two…”

“So you don’t end up teleporting your ankle four feet into solid rock, if their calculations are off.”

She seized his arm. “How far is a few?”

“You’ll soon find out.”

“Draco!”

“One!”

A hook behind his navel wrenched forward, and Draco was moving. Traveling by Portkey was like getting strapped to a giant’s fist and whirled around in a shotput. The boot whirled though a flickering liminal space of flashing colors, moving too fast for him to breathe, centrifugal force straining his arm to its very limit— and then it was over.

He dropped to the ground and landed in a crouch, rolling fluidly to his feet. Harry did the same, looked much cheered by it, and promptly hit the ground when Ron landed on top of him. Hermione dropped

out of the air and immediately lurched over, burying her unreasonably sharp nails in Draco’s arm.

“Ow. I said *ow,* witch. Hello?”

Giving up, he took stock of the other travelers. Mr. Weasley, Mr. Diggory, and Cedric had all landed easily. Fred and George lay in starfish position on the grass.

“Seven past five from Stoatshead Hill,” said a cool, amplified voice. “Welcome to the Quidditch World Cup.”

-Happy St. Patrick's Day! And just in time to tee up the Cup final. A big quidditch-heavy chapter up next, naturally. Fun fact: I actually did some reading-up on sports journalism to try and nail the writing of the Cup.

-Poor Harry. Also, poor Hermione. I think of Book 4 as the emotional hinge of the series, as conflicts start to flare up — puberty will do that for you, eh — and Feelings become more complicated. (The author wrote, eagerly.)

-BIGGEST shoutout to the comments on the debut chapters, oh my God! Thank you terribly for the warmest of warm welcomes. I can't wait to share what's coming.

-Next chapter title: "Ireland vs. Bulgaria."

Ireland vs. Bulgaria

Chapter 34: Ireland vs. Bulgaria

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The valley below them sloped gently into a plateau at the middle, like a massive sculptor had pressed her palm into a loaf of emerald clay. Purple flowers spilled across the slope in a crust of amethyst, waving in the salty breeze that wafted off the shell-white cliffs behind them. The most populous foliage in the valley, however, was not flowers but tents: big tents, small tents, square tents, round tents, tents the size of houses, tents the size of tables, neon tents, pastel tents, tents in city blocks and tents in tangled circles like pages of runes, tents with chimneys and bellpulls and weather vanes, tents with gardens and wells and wisteria running up the sides, two-story, three-story, four-story tents, and tents which, one finally had to admit, were not really tents at all.

“Looks like we’re Section T-394,” exclaimed Arthur, brandishing an enormous foldable map. “Think that’s just down there, by that charming fellow with the alligator moat.”

“Shame, we’re T-611,” said Amos. “That’s us. Well! Pleasure to see you, Artie; you and your boys come over any time you’d like your arse handed to you on a broomstick!”

“Or just tea,” said Cedric, pained. “Like normal people, Dad.”

“Ha!” bellowed Amos, and with an arm around his son’s shoulders, they parted ways.

They waded down through the early-morning mist. They passed a tent with a garden of pink puffball mushrooms the size of sunflowers, a tent surrounded by eight-foot lavender peacocks that made Draco

miss the Manor terribly, and a tent with a lopsided stone turret covered in ivy.

“That’s the Lovegoods,” said Arthur, “it has Xenophilius written all over it. I wonder if they’ve come alone…? Ah, here we are.”

Their space, marked with a sign that read WEEZLY, was the size of a carpet. And not a big carpet.

Arthur emptied a bag of poles and pegs onto the ground and proudly announced that they were going to do it the muggle way. (Draco started to walk away in protest, only for Hermione to tug him back.) Practically, this meant Arthur fumbled away with the mallet and ropes while Hermione (the only one there who had ever actually been camping), ordered everyone around, an arrangement that left them both happy, and nobody else.

By the end of an hour, they had two shabby but serviceable tents, and only two posts had been hammered in upside down.

Hermione wiped some sweat from her forehead and put her hands on her hips. “There,” she said. “That’ll do for… er… the gnomes, I suppose.”

“Well, it’s no palace, but after the Burrow, it’s hardly unlivable,” said Draco, puzzled by her not unwelcome bout of snobbishness.

She glanced at him, then surreptitiously crooked her finger, and he ducked his ear.

It was getting harder and harder to do that. She seemed to be shrinking every summer.

“We can barely fit four people in there,” she whispered.

“Four? This will fit twelve. Unless you need your own bedroom.”

She opened her mouth, and then pressed her finger to her lips.

“Magic,” she said, after a moment.

“I always like watching you remember you’re a witch,” he said. “It must be such a relief.”

Arthur drew back the tent flap grandly. “Ah! Paradise!” he declared. “Come have a look.”

Draco ducked under the flap, and was pleasantly un-disappointed. Paradise, it was not, but it *was* an airy cabin, with a kitchenette finished in cherry wood, a small living room stuffed full of musty antique furniture in atrocious florals, and a spiral staircase that led up to the loft, where all the cots were. The whole place smelled musty and sweet, like mothballs and wood varnish.

“Is this yours?” he said curiously. It was almost as big as the Weasleys’ real living room. He’d have thought it was out of their price range.

“Not for long. Borrowed it from Perkins at the office. Doesn’t camp much anymore, poor fellow, he’s got lumbago — how shall we do it, then? Girls in one tent, boys in another?”

“That’s not fair,” said Ron indignantly, “there’s only two of them!”

“And one of them’s Ginny,” added Fred. “She doesn’t count. OW!”

Ginny had punched his arm.

“It’s up to you, dear,” Arthur reassured Hermione, ignoring his sons. Draco imagined he must be rather practiced at it by now. “Whatever makes you comfortable. If you need your own bathroom…”

“Thank you, Mr. Weasley, but I don’t mind sharing. Maybe we could break it up by age? That would keep the four of us together, since we’re here as Ron’s guests.”

“I want to stay with Ron,” said Ginny.

“With Harry, you mean,” said Ron, and snickered when she tried to punch him, too. Harry rubbed his arm uncomfortably.

“Let’s put you with Fred and George,” decided Mr. Weasley. “The four of you go in the other tent — I’ll put Bill in with you, so you’ve got an adult — Ginny and the other boys will stay with me.”

“Why’ve we got to share with Perce?” said George. “He snores like he’s trying for the opera.”

“It’s not bad as all that,” said Arthur, lying valiantly. “You’ll sleep well after the match. Now! Time to make camp. Ron, why don’t you take your friends and fetch us some water? The rest of us will chop firewood.”

“With an ax?” said Ginny, eager at the prospect to hone her young biceps.

“We’ve got an oven,” whined Fred, who was not.

“Authenticity, boys!” said Arthur, with relish. “Muggles camp around outdoor fires, don’t they, Hermione?”

Hermione found herself the sudden target of a few resentful stares. “Yes, but I suppose they only do it because they can’t make their own,” she said haltingly, “so there’s really no need…”

“Nonsense! You heard the girl! Off, off! Now, where did I put the tools…?”

“You should’ve kept your mouth shut,” mumbled Ron. “Hope the twins don’t distract him, or he’ll lop off his own toes.”

The sun had come soaring over the sea-cliffs and peeled back the curtains of mist. Their path through the tent city was circuitous, doing zigzags and loops that doubled back or terminated entirely, forcing them to hop gates or duck under archways, a route defying space and reason in ways that made perfect sense to Draco and Ron, and

utterly distressed Harry and Hermione. Campers had crept out and were starting to make breakfast over tiny cookstoves. The smell of sizzling fry-up filled the air, but for every British wizard shaking a pan of sausages, there were a dozen others making breakfast quite differently: a witch in a blue *yukata* with white flowers and a pixie cut spooned dollops of something pungent and sticky onto her childrens' bowls of rice; a man in an embroidered red skirt and beaded locs was frying some kind of flat square doughnuts, with some difficulty, as his young daughter levitated one into her mouth whenever his back was turned; a woman in a queenly full-body covering of scarlet red and gilt nibbled from a platter of olives and herbed butter with flatbread, while her husband read to her from a newspaper in Arabic. Two little girls in festive green-and-pink shawls shot past, riding tandem on a toy broom, while their older sister hurtled after them on foot, crying: *"Basta! Basta!"*

Closer to the pitch, there were booths for tabling: one for the Salem Witches' Institute, decked out with so much red, white, and blue you'd think the Americans were playing in the final; the Ministry of Magic Wizarding Union had a considerable crowd, and several bedraggled interns were handing out flyers; the Divinus Haruspex Association of Clairvoyants sat under a glittering fringed canopy, surrounded by floating candles and wreathed in blue smoke; even the Snallygaster Protection League had a little table of its own. They had brought biscuits.

They lost Hermione somewhere in the crowd, and spent a harrowing twenty minutes searching only to find her, predictably, glued to the table for the Allegiance of Muggle-Born Wizards. She had cornered one of the frazzled representatives, talking like they were about to outlaw the practice of English, and got in one last cry of: "—send a reading list — I'll owl you!" before Draco hauled her away.

"Wait, wait, I didn't give them my address!"

"Good. They can thank me later."

The grass under their feet gave way to shamrocks, and into a pocket of the city where every tent was green from ground to roof. All the wizards here wore green robes, or scarves, or jerseys, and some had even dyed their hair and faces green, too.

“Hey, you lot! Harry! Ron!”

It was Seamus Finnigan, waving them over. Beside him sat a sandy-haired woman and Dean Thomas, who was wearing an Ireland jersey and a knit-wool cap. Muggle rock music pounded from a speaker he’d affixed over the door of his green tent, a snarl of gritty, gloating guitars and smugly nasal vocals: he recognized a few, like “Sabotage,” from the Gryffindor end-of-year party.

“Great to see you!” he said, pumping Harry’s hand. “Ready to watch us punt those manky Slavs back to the Black Sea?”

“Pure keen on it,” said Harry, grinning. “Good summer?”

“Corking. Oh, Ron, by the way, are Fred and George ever coming out with those order forms? Wouldn’t bother you over it, mate,” he said, with a glance at his mother, “but I asked them to hold some of the fireworks for me, and they never wrote back, so I dunno if they got the message.”

After assuring Seamus they would pass it on, and declaring vocally in support of Ireland, they set off again. Occasionally someone stopped them and offered them a free shamrock, or an Ireland flag pin, which Hermione took and almost put on, before Draco summarily removed it.

“What’s wrong with it? I like Ireland,” she defended.

“Yes, but we’re about to go into the Bulgarian tents, and I’d prefer you didn’t get us mugged.”

The Bulgarians had not the decorative eye that the Irish did, but lacked nothing in spirit. Tall banners in red and black fluttered over

the rows of dark tents, each one bearing a surly, muscular young man with a sour mouth and hirsute eyebrows. He folded his arms and scowled at them as they passed.

“Krum,” murmured Ron, like it was the name of a saint.

“Who’s Crumb?” said Hermione.

Ron and Harry chorused in sighs of pain.

“Viktor Krum is the Bulgarian seeker,” said Harry. “He’s a genius.”

“An *artist,”* said Ron.

“He’s already being called the greatest seeker of all time. And he’s only seventeen!”

Hermione squinted at the poster. The poster squinted back. “Why does he look like he’s got a cramp?”

“Who cares? He’s a prodigy!” Ron’s hands implored the heavens for patience. “He’s got the world record for fastest snitch-catch in a World Cup game! He’s been on the cover of every quidditch magazine in print! He can scowl as much as he wants.”

“Maybe so,” she said primly, “but I wouldn’t like to be stuck at a dinner table with him.”

“Well, call me to swap, if you ever get the chance,” said Ron incredulously.

They had to wait in a queue to pump water. Several other familiar faces swam out of the crowd to greet them: Oliver Wood, who had graduated that spring, came galloping up in a Bulgaria jersey. Draco hadn’t seen him stop smiling since they’d won the Quidditch Cup.

“Potter! Malfoy! Good show, isn’t it?” He planted his hands on his hips, beaming. “You’ll never guess who I just spoke to.”

“Don’t tell me. It’s Ireland,” said Draco. “They want you to sub in.”

The irony floated harmlessly over Oliver’s dreamlike face. “Better! I just spoke to Eggers Eccleston! Of Puddlemere United! He wants to sign me!”

“Oliver, that’s wicked!” cried Harry. Draco, being much cheered about Puddlemere’s prospects in the League, told him so, and Oliver pumped all their hands.

“If you want to know another thing, the seeker’s getting old,” he said confidentially. “She’s nearly thirty-four, and expected to retire after next season. If you want a tryout, Harry, all you need to do is call…”

“He’s fourteen!” said Hermione, appalled, but Harry took Oliver’s card when she wasn’t looking.

Further down, getting her own water at the pump, was Cho Chang, her long hair pinned up in its usual ponytail, wearing an Ireland bomber jacket and black jeans. When she saw the four of them, she stood up and waved; when she saw Harry, she waved harder.

Harry fumbled about half the kettle of water down his shirt waving back.

“Good Lord,” snapped Draco, stepping clear of the splash. It was a good thing Ginny hadn’t come.

As the sun edged closer to a blinding peak, salesmen prowled up and down the lanes of tents, pushing carts and yowling their wares. Harry gasped and dragged them all over at the sight of a tiny Firebolt replica that flew wherever you threw it and returned, and bought two, even as Draco’s groused that it was overpriced junk. There were a forest of Christmas-colored rosettes that pumped sparks when spun, stovepipe hats that opened up to issue green smoke, sparklers that spelled ‘IRELAND’ or ‘BULGARIA’ when lit, shirts and jerseys of every conceivable design, including one that represented Krum merely with a blank face and eyebrows — Hermione thought that

one was funny, and bought it — and a special-edition Quidditch World Cup chess set, where the pieces were all represented by real players. When he saw it, Ron gasped in longing.

“Fan of chess, are you?” said the saleswizard, with a glint in his eye. “Lucky you, it’s on sale. Only five hundred galleons! Special price! What? No, where are you going? Hey — alright, four fifty! I’ll throw in a Krum jersey, too!”

Draco had dragged them all away from the vendor. “Don’t stare like that if you want to buy it,” he muttered to Ron. “It was probably two hundred before we showed up.”

“Yeah, and that would’ve been a real steal, at two hundred,” said Ron, rolling his eyes.

They stopped in at a different cart, where the vendors were less pushy, and where Draco relented to let Ron buy a green rosette for a galleon. He refused, however, to let Ron pay the fifteen sickles the vendor wanted for a dancing shamrock hat, and haggled him expertly down to six and a half, along with a free Bulgaria poster and a set of commemorative 1994 World Cup pins.

“I’ll be expecting a splendid Christmas present this year,” Draco informed him, as Ron happily mashed the shamrock hat on his head. “And I want to see you *wearing that,* since you were so desperate for it. Your father didn’t bring omnioculars, by chance…? What am I saying? Never mind. Wait here.” He stepped over to the nearest cart.

“What will a pair of omnioculars cost me?” he said boredly.

“Our omnioculars aren’t like *any* omnioculars,” said the saleswizard. “Ours have rapid replay *and* a built-in autofocus— I couldn’t part with them for less than fifteen galleons.”

“The fellow down the block said nine.”

“Well maybe *his* omnioculars don’t have built-in autofocus,” said the saleswizard haughtily. “But I might be able to part with them for twelve.”

“It’s a short block,” said Draco.

“I can’t do less than twelve, really, I can’t. I have to make a profit somehow.”

“Of course. And so does the fellow down the block.”

“You might as well rob me. Eleven.”

“Ten,” he said, “and I’ll take four.”

Ron said nothing when he got his pair. His cheeks were distinctly red. Harry, however, chirped “Thanks!” and bought them all cinnamon fritters.

Down the lane, a witch sold books, maps, and pamphlets from a newsstand on the corner, and Hermione predictably dragged them into its orbit. Draco waited indulgently while she inspected the offerings, leaning against the wall. Harry stole and ate her fritter while she was distracted.

“See, *this* is actually useful,” she crowed, flipping through a pocket-sized English-Bulgarian dictionary. “I’ve seen at least three Bulgarian food carts where I can’t read a thing.”

“Get it, then.”

“I would, but I spent the last of my galleons on that shirt. I have money, but the rest is in pounds—”

“I’ll buy it for you,” said Ron abruptly. He held out his hand. “How much is it?”

Draco’s head twitched up. He eyed Ron, who had just earlier balked at buying a bag of popcorn because of the price.

There was something not altogether wholesome in his eagerness, he thought. He didn’t like it. Of course, Ron could be generous, if he wanted to; but he hadn’t been generous to Harry, or Draco, when they’d passed the snack carts, and he hadn’t offered to buy anything for *them.*

He didn’t know what to make of it, except that it made him uneasy. Hermione didn’t seem to know what to make of it, either, because she stuttered: “Oh — er, thanks. I’ll pay you back when I get to Gringotts. It’s eleven sickles."

Ron plumbed his pockets for change and came up with not half that. “Here,” he said awkwardly, “I’m pretty sure I’ve got more in my bag, I’ll just run back to the tent—”

Draco stepped forward and dropped a galleon in front of the saleswitch.

What followed was a beat of silence as ugly and naked as a newborn rat. Hermione handled it the worst, swinging her head between them as if she were following a very fast, very heated telepathic exchange; Ron turned the color of bruised beets, and Draco said nothing, refusing to speak first.

“Nice of you, mate,” said Ron neutrally.

“Don’t fret, I’m sure you’ll get your good deed for the day elsewhere,” said Draco.

Hermione shoved the contentious article into her pack and buried it under her teeshirt. “Lunch!” she declared. “Lunch? Anyone? I think we should all have lunch. I think we’re all hungry. Aren’t you hungry? I’m starving. It’s almost two, we haven’t eaten anything but doughnuts in seven hours. And someone should really convince Mr. Weasley to use magic for the firewood — oh, I hope he didn’t try to use the ax without us, I don’t know hardly any first aid.”

As the afternoon trailed into dusk, the volume of activity in the campsite had risen from a buzz to a clamor. The saleswizards made a last desperate press to empty their stores. Lanterns in green and red spread like twin rows of vertebrae towards the distant crown of the stadium, where searchlights swayed drunkenly across the lavender carpet of the sky. They ate cheese toasties and Mrs. Weasley's homemade tomato soup around the campfire, and as Bill and Charlie put out the embers with jets from their wand, a deep gong boomed over the campsite. The lanterns blazed white.

"Quarter past seven at Atherfield Green. Please proceed to the stadium."

Mr. Weasley sprang up and clapped his hands. "It's time! That's it! Alright, everyone, find a buddy — this crowd's about to be pure madness, don't want anyone getting separated — hold on to your buddy, let's go!"

Harry slung an arm around Ron's shoulders, and Ginny leapt piggyback onto Bill's back. Draco understood at once what Mr. Weasley had been afraid of. Amidst a feverish crowd of thousands, they were packed shoulder to shoulder in a mass of people that moved like a body of water, rippling this way and that, with cross-currents that threatened to wrench a distracted sod away from their group and drop them three blocks down. Magic crackled overhead, noise-making spells and showers of sparks, and the occasional flash-crack of a firework that left all those under it blinking away blindness. A crowd surge at his back nearly shoved him to the ground, to be trampled underfoot, but Hermione caught him at the last moment and hauled him up in no small show of strength. He clung to her shoulders and caught his breath, trying to ignore the lingering fear of being stomped to death.

In a heartbeat, the other Weasleys were swept away into the crowd.

"Stay together," Hermione shouted, hardly audible above the din. Then she grabbed his hand and laced their fingers tightly. "Doh— ge — parated."

“What?”

She lifted their joined hands and pointed at them. Then she turned and plunged into the crowd, steering him by the arm.

If you took Notre-Dame de Paris, stacked it on top of two other Notre-Dames, glued another pair of Notre-Dames on either side of it, and then gilded the whole goddamn thing, you would end up with an approximately 1:3 scale model of the Quidditch World Cup stadium. Stairs trailed up in dizzying flights up dozens of floors, and elevators wheeled up and down in constant motion, ferrying groups up and down the stands. Ministry ticketmasters in purple robes stood at each gate, checking tickets.

“I’m sorry,” shouted Hermione. “The person with our tickets went in already — our group’s on the other side—”

The witch shook her head. “No tickets, no entrance! Next, please!”

“No, we have them! We got separated, but if you let us in, we’ll come back—”

“Next, please,” shouted the witch, pretending not to see her.

Draco shouldered in front of Hermione. “Our names are in the registry,” he snapped. “Draco Malfoy. Hermione Granger. Look us up.” He flashed his signet ring.

The witch suddenly rediscovered her ability to see both of them.

“Malfoy, you said?” she squeaked. “The tickets are… they’re under Malfoy?”

“Will that get us out of this godforsaken line any faster?”

“I… well, I, er… maybe you can just… come back,” said the witch weakly. “When you do have them.”

She waved them through.

“That was absurd,” Hermione said, inexplicably irritated that things had worked out for them, while Draco towed her along into their good fortune. “You didn’t do anything. I bet there are loads of people in this line who don’t really have tickets—”

“And we do, so what’s your issue?”

“Because she didn’t know that! All she knew was that you had a famous name, and she let you break the rules!” Hermione sounded torn between finding their seats and turning back to give the witch a piece of her mind. “She’s not supposed to do that. In fact, *not* doing that is the one thing she’s there to *do.* I honestly can’t think of any way she could have failed further.”

“You’re right. You know what, you should file a complaint once the match is over. I won’t sleep so long as there’s a person like that working in government.”

“I just might!”

He laughed at her. She dropped her eyes to the floor, muttering something mutinous.

“Draco! Hermione! There you are!”

Arthur came hurtling down the stairs and wrestled through the crowds. “We thought we’d lost you!” he hollered. “Merlin’s bones, I had a heart attack!”

“Had a bit of trouble at the ticketstand,” said Draco. “I smoothed it over.”

“Yes, well! Glad you made it! Come on! Top box, straight up!”

They really weren’t good seats. The top box was so far up the nosebleed section that if your nose did indeed start dripping, it would reach terminal velocity before it hit anything. The others were already packed in, their faces painted with the glow of the giant

crystal ball that hung suspended over the field, where advertisements flickered: *Gladrags WizardWear… Sleekeazy's Hair Potion and Scalp Treatment… The Bluebottle: A Broom for the Family…*

Two seats were left near the back of the box. Hermione slipped her fingers free of his, which was obviously appropriate, since they were in no danger of getting lost anymore, and there was a moment of tingling sensitivity in his fingers as blood flow returned. He shook his hand out and put it in his pocket and sat down without looking at anyone.

“POPCORN! LEMON POPS! MEAT PIES!” A vendor staggered down the stairs, almost crushed by the weight of his own wares. He roared: “POPCORN! LEMON POPS! MEAT PIES!”

“Can I have a lemon pop, Dad?” said Ginny at once, twisting around in her seat. “They’ve got the ones that turn your tongue green! Have you ever had one, Harry?”

“Yeah, and I want popcorn,” said Fred. He and George were the only ones not wearing any gear; Draco had a suspicion as to where their galleons went. “Georgie and I can split a bag, we’re not greedy.”

“We’ll all have a lemon po,” said Mr. Weasley grandly. “How much will that be?”

The vendor told him. Mr. Weasley balked.

Draco, who still wanted a water in any case, reached for his pocket to buy his own; but hesitated. Fortunately, Harry shot up. “I’ve got it, Mr. Weasley,” he said hastily, scrambling over Ron and Charlie’s legs. “Here — I lost a bet with Ron.” He shoved a handful of galleons at the vendor before Mr. Weasley could call this falsehood what it was, and there were rounds of ice cream and embarrassed mumbling for all.

“Have we got everyone?” gasped Arthur, mopping his brow with a tattered handkerchief. “Are we ready? Oh, hell — where’s Percy?”

The redheads consulted each other, and it was determined that none of them were hiding Percy in their pockets.

“Damn. I *told* him to stay — alright. All of you stay here, I’ll go find him.”

“Dad! The anthems are about to start!”

A hundred-piece brass orchestra was marching onto the field, accompanied by scores of leaping and whirling colorguard.

“I’ll go,” said Hermione, standing up. “I don’t mind if I miss something — it’s only a bit of quidditch—”

The reaction was immediate.

“Not HERE!” roared Ron.

“Take it back!”

“Come on, Hermione—”

“Turn around three times and spit!”

“FINE! It’s only the noble and *very* serious game of quidditch, which *so* important it’s worth the hundreds of thousands of pounds the Ministry spent on a stadium that’s going to be abandoned in twenty-four hours, and *obviously* worth the tens of thousands of injuries it causes a year—”

“Yes it is, thank you,” said Draco. “Speaking as one of them.”

“—so I’ll be just *heartbroken* to miss even a minute of it!” said Hermione. Her hair, whose volume could be relied on to gauge her level of fury, clocked in at a Cat 3. It was both impressive and harrowing.

“Well, someone’s got to go with her,” said Arthur, who was in the fight of his life not to laugh. “She can’t go alone.”

Hermione looked at Draco. Draco looked at Hermione. She looked back, harder.

“They’re about to do the anthems.”

“Fine!” she said. “God forbid you miss your stupid anthems. Ron, how about you?”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t going. Give me a minute to stand up, witch, my legs are still numb from those stairs.”

“I can go,” mumbled Ron, but he was still watching the band. Harry shook his head subtly at him, warning him away from temptation.

“No,” said Draco, tragically. “I’ve already put my head to the sword. I’m a man of my word. Just remember me, when the match starts, and say a word in my honor: ‘In Adulating Memory of Draco Malfoy, who walked so that we might sit—’”

“Hurry up!” called Hermione, who was already two flights down the stairs. He dropped into a dignified soliloquy of muttering and slid down the railing after her.

Under the stands was a maze of narrow wooden scaffolding. Sawdust rained from above them whenever the stands cheered or thumped their feet, which was every few seconds, and the sounds of the stadium came to them muffled. The Bulgarian national anthem began with a thunderclap of fanfare and mournful brass, followed by an overture that sounded like it was written for a planet’s funeral.

“I don’t know how we’re supposed to find Weasley in all this,” he called, fighting to be heard over the rhythmic explosions of cymbals. “There’s a hundred thousand people here.”

“That’s easy, we’ll check the Ministry box,” she shouted back. There was a seizure of horns, and the stands swayed as the Bulgarians leapt to their feet, sending them both listing onto the rickety metal railing: Hermione’s rosette went spinning into the vertiginous floors below them. She yelped and jumped back into his chest, and he steadied her with a hand at her back.

“Easy.”

“I don’t know what it is with wizards and heights,” she breathed. Her head knocked against his collarbone, which was probably an accident; he didn’t think she realized he’d caught her. “Or self-preservation. Limitless magical power, and what do they do? Find a million different ways to break their neck, that’s what.”

“You lost any right to complain about that the day you told me about airplanes.”

“Airplanes are actually quite safe, thank y— oh, wait! Look!”

She crouched and pointed through the railing at the scaffolding below them, where a group of wizards in purple robes were talking. One of them was a stiff-backed old man with hair that could have been parted with a straight razor, and a walrus mustache the color and texture of steel wool. He reminded Draco slightly of his father, or at least pictures of him.

He took a knee and nudged Hermione. “That’s Bartemius Crouch.”

“I know,” she whispered, distracted, “Percy showed me a picture.”

“He did?”

“The Bulgarians want another twelve seats in the Top Box,” said Crouch. He spoke as though any movement of his lips was energy wasted.

“Oh is that what they’re after?” said someone cheerfully, out of sight. “Thought he wanted a pair of tweezers. Well, tell them they can bring their own chairs, and we’ll squeeze in as many as can fit.”

“Respectfully, Mr. Bagman, I think we ought to turn them down,” said a breathy voice. It was Percy’s. “We’ve already made quite enough concessions, and they *are* guests—”

“Thank you, Weatherby. Ludo, while you’re at it, ask Karkaroff if there’s been any movement on the visas. I spoke to Babanin in International Affairs, and he says there’s a standstill.”

“Karkaroff?” whispered Hermione.

“Durmstrang headmaster,” he murmured back.

“Isn’t Durmstrang the one where Neville’s grandmother is always threatening to send him? Don’t they treat their students horribly?”

“That’s a rumor. They beat us in test scores, we’ve got to make them look bad somehow. But it doesn’t make sense — Durmstrang’s under Russian jurisdiction, not Bulgarian, and Bagman is in Games and Sports. He hasn’t any business with Karkaroff.”

“I will,” said Bagman, “if I see him. You know, he is all the way down in the diplomats’ box—”

Crouch interrupted him. “Be sure to tell him that Scottish immigration services will expect EU passports from *all* of his students, quidditch stars or no.”

Bagman sighed and Disapparated. Percy said, “Masterfully done, sir,” but Crouch didn’t hear him. He had gone tense at the sight of someone down the stairwell.

“Minister,” he said. “Good evening.”

Percy spasmed and nearly dropped the clipboard he was holding.

The Minister of Magic wore clean gray pinstripes, and tied his black hair in a purple velvet bow. He stood with his hands in his pockets, his posture genial, and leaned against the railing.

“A great success, Barty,” he said kindly. “It was what, five hundred Portkeys? Six?”

“Five hundred and forty-four,” said Crouch stiffly.

“No small feat.” Runcorn turned to Percy, who whimpered. “Did you help him, lad?”

There was a moment of confused disconnect before Crouch remembered that Percy existed. “Hm? Oh. Yes. Percival Weatherby. Helpful chap.”

“Wsslee,” croaked Percy inaudibly.

“What?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“Nice to meet you, Percival,” said Runcorn, shaking his hand warmly. “There’s always a need for enterprising young men at the Ministry. What draws you to the work?”

Percy mouthed wordlessly. “Law and order,” he said hoarsely, at last. “I like — rules. Sir.”

“That’s very good,” said Runcorn easily. “There aren’t many young people who appreciate them. Everyone in my administration has an interest in the careers of promising young men. I’m sure you remember what that’s like, Barty?”

Whatever Runcorn had meant by that, it was obviously not praise, for Crouch’s shoulders crept up like a boxer’s.

“It appears we both do.”

“I like to keep tabs on my people,” said Runcorn pleasantly. “Speaking of which. If you catch any pickpockets, point them in my direction, would you? Nott’s wand’s gone missing, and it’s been a nightmare trying to make do without him. Like riding a broomstick without my own left hand.” He made a silly little gesture with his right, to illustrate. The whole effect was quite disarming, agreeable, and clever. He reminded Draco of some cheerful pureblood great-uncle who gave nice presents and thought he was funnier than he had any right to.

“Perhaps not a very dextrous one, if it has a tendency to misplace vital objects,” said Crouch.

Runcorn laughed. “Misplaced?” he said. “If you think so… of course, Nott thinks it’s stolen, but then, he is a suspicious old miser… that’s why I like him. It means I don’t have to be.”

“If only we all had such enterprising lieutenants.”

“Don’t fret. I’m sure young Percival here will be quite the bulldog, if you give him the opportunity. Isn’t that right, Percy — may I call you Percy?”

Percy did not reply: he had caught sight of Draco and Hermione, crouched on the railing above him, and was trying to shoo them away with tiny jerks of his jaw, which made him look like he had St. Vitus’s. Hermione shook her head and beckoned him furiously.

“No, sir. I mean *yes!* Sir! I’m sorry! I’m afraid I have to — you’ll excuse me, Mr. Crouch?”

“If you like,” said Crouch, still locked in a queerly charged stare-off with the Minister.

Percy grimaced, bowed to both of them, and scurried up the stairs to Draco and Hermione, where he swept them away from the railing with an ungentle hand on their collars.

“What are you two doing?” he snarled. “How long were you eavesdropping?”

“Take your hands off me, you wretched ingrate, or I’ll jinx your tongue into a tapeworm, and see how long it takes your Mr. Crouch to notice you can’t talk,” snapped Draco, wrenching himself free. “We came to get you. Your father was missing you.”

“Oh,” said Percy, deflating somewhat.

Hermione, trampling breezily over all pretenses of subtlety or discretion, demanded: “Percy, what did Mr. Crouch want with Karkaroff?”

“That’s none of your business, and I’ll thank you to pretend you didn’t hear it. You’ll find out soon enough.”

The words ‘none of your business’ were the only four not included in Hermione’s vocabulary. “Is it to do with that secret thing you were telling your father about? The one at Hogwarts? It is, isn’t it? It’s something to do with Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman, and there’s another school involved — is there a new exchange program?”

“I don’t know whether the Hogwarts curriculum has changed since I went through it,” said Percy, “but when I was there, I was taught that *none of your business* means *none of your nosy business,* and nothing more! Both of you, back to the box, and if you want to know anything more, you should go spy on someone else!”

“With pleasure, Weatherby,” said Draco coolly.

At that, Percy fumed in silence all the way to their seats.

The Irish anthem had tapered off, and they slipped back into the box just as Ludo Bagman’s amplified voice boomed out a loud welcome. Their entrance was swallowed by a rash of roars, but Harry noticed them, and waved. “You made it!” he shouted. “Corking! They’re about to do the mascots!”

“It hasn’t even started?”

“Not yet! They’ve got to get everyone excited!”

“I can barely hear myself think,” she said flatly. “How much more excited can they possibly be?”

“AND NOW — WITHOUT FURTHER ADO — ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE THE BULGARIAN NATIONAL TEAM MASCOTS — *THE VEELA!”*

“Oh, great,” muttered Ginny. She slumped low in her seat, arms folded, while her brothers erupted in cheers.

A hundred veela glided onto the field, their feet almost floating over the grass. They were in human form, which meant each had long, feathery white hair, spilling down their back like a crest of gilt, and legs so long it was almost unsettling. From a distance it was hard to see, but they were all between six and seven feet tall, and wore tutus of voluminous white tulle that fanned from their hips like a calla lilies. The male veela, of whom there were only two or three, wore silk tunics with low necklines instead.

“What’s a veela?” shouted Hermione.

“Dark creature,” said Bill, leaning over the back of her seat. “They’re from the same family as sirens. Nasty customers, I had to deal with a nest of them once. You wouldn’t believe how hard it is to fight something that wants to snog you and eat you at the same time.”

Draco shuddered.

“So they seduce men in order to kill them?”

“And women, to be fair,” said Bill. “They’ll be just as glad to eat you as Draco, here.”

He might have winked; it was hard to tell.

The music had started. A plaintive wail of strings melted into an exquisite fourteen-part harmony, and the veela swept into a breathless dance of hands and fluttering footwork. Their tutus spun out like blooming flowers, and a silvery glow began to radiate from the field. Everything else seemed to dim in comparison to that glow, from the stands to the floodlights, as if the rest of the world were softening into nothingness; there was only the music, and the exquisite dance… it was Tchaikovsky, he thought, something from *Romeo and Juliet,* but he couldn't concentrate on it. His mind drifted through a thick and gentle fog.

People were rising. Harry had wedged his foot on the railing. Ron was half risen from his chair, and Ginny, transfixed, had to be hauled back into her seat by a chuckling Bill. Hermione was staring at the field, her mouth parted, blinking very quickly, as if trying to wake up.

"They should… stop," she said, with palpable effort.

"What?" he said numbly. It was hard to focus on anything. He was very warm.

"They should… look at Harry… Ron… people are going to…"

There was a scream: someone in another box had actually jumped. The wizard went hurtling down the rows of boxes, and was caught in midair by someone's quick-handed Levitation Charm, where he thrashed fruitlessly, trying to swim toward the veela. He was reeled back into the stands and hustled away by security.

The veela's dance ended, to cries of disappointment. Hermione, her spell broken, leapt out of her chair and hauled Harry back from the railing, hissing at him. Ron eased himself into his seat, shell-shocked.

Draco, blinking the fog away, felt first embarrassed and then deeply wrathful: he *hated* mind magic. And he loathed being made a fool of.

“That was something,” breathed Hermione, flopping back into her seat. “Bill was right. I can see why they’re Dark creatures.”

“Whoever approved that should be sacked.”

“You really didn’t like it?”

“I can’t stand mind tricks,” he said stiffly.

“AND NOW, THE IRISH NATIONAL TEAM MASCOTS: THE LEPRECHAUNS!”

“Thank God,” muttered Draco. At this rate he’d take dementors, as long as it wasn’t anything else that would mess with his head.

A firework in the shape of a shamrock exploded in the air over the pitch, showering sparks that turned into twinkling trails of gold. The crowd surged to its feet, two hundred thousand hands extended in a vaguely religious show of supplication, to collect the bounty as it fell.

Ron let out a cry of delight and scraped up as many handfuls of the gold as he could, but when Hermione reached to pick up a piece under her seat, Draco caught her hand.

“Don’t bother. It’s leprechaun gold, it disappears.”

“...Does everyone else know that?”

A fistfight had broken out in the box behind them, and someone’s glasses went flying. Draco caught them before they jabbed her in the eye.

“No. Don’t tell them, though, it’s funnier to watch — see, there, Box Fourteen. I think that woman just got her wig pulled off at the scalp.”

“Horrible!”

“Very,” he said, peering through his omnioculars. *“Excellent* Bat-Bogey Hex on her though, goddamn.”

The leprechauns left the field, leaving the audience squabbling for the last of the gold. Bagman cleared his throat.

“IT IS TIME! GENTLEWITCHES AND GENTLEWIZARDS! FOR! THE MAIN! EVENT! KINDLY WELCOME THE IRISH NATIONAL QUIDDITCH TEAM! I GIVE YOU — CONNOLLY! MORAN! TROY! QUIGLEY!…”

Emerald blurs spat from the Irish box. The green half of the stands became irrepressibly loud.

“They’re flying so fast!”

“That’s the point, Granger.”

“AND NOW, GENTLEFOLK, KINDLY WELCOME — THE BULGARIAN NATIONAL QUIDDITCH TEAM! I GIVE YOU — DIMITROV! IVANOVA! ZOGRAF! LEVSKI…”

Viktor Krum erupted from the field in a blur of red and white. The camera clung to him as though it knew no other: a serious, sallow block of muscles and frown, dark hair buzzed low to his scalp, a short beard sprouting along his square jaw. He was nothing much to look at. But he flew like poetry.

The referee piped a short blast on her whistle. The keepers assumed their positions. The game began.

It was hard to describe, unless you had flown a broomstick, what Krum was doing, in part because he was doing things that didn’t have names before he thought of them. His barrel roll was a liquid swirl, his turn a snapped hairpin, his dive a clean drop — a drop he could finish with such grace that gravity appeared to avert its eyes in politeness. He had world-class broom handling and an understanding of space and balance that no one else on the field nearly approached; during one of the warmups he slipped his leg free of its foothold and leaned down to fix his bootstrap in midair, flying with just one hand and one leg, perfectly stable. His

anticipation and spacial awareness were nigh-prophetic — at one point he flew straight at a bludger, eliciting screams from the stands, only for the bludger itself to swerve away — and all of this was mere technique. What was incredible about Krum was that his flawless technique obscured what was actually impressive about him: his strategy. It wasn't even clear that he was executing moves, any more than he was channeling a deeper, more profound form of art into practice. Watching him gave you the feeling you were witnessing the invention of something new.

"TROY SCORES!" roared Bagman. "Ten zero to Ireland!"

Draco tore his omnioculars away from Krum and squinted at the crystal ball. It showed an Irish chaser pumping his fist in the air.

"Troy to Mullet! Mullet to Moran! Great Scott, they're flawless!"

Ireland wove the quaffle across the pitch with ease. It wasn't even that the Bulgarian chasers weren't playing well — they just couldn't lay a hand on the ball. Mullet and Moran found gaps for passes in the Bulgarians' guard where Draco would have sworn none existed.

"TWENTY ZERO TO IRELAND! Five minutes in and they're up two goals already, now, that's what I call luck of the Irish, everyone! *Classy* bit of ball-handling on Moran's part — OH? WHAT'S THIS? IT'S TROY COMING BACK FOR A REBOUND SHOT — NO, HE CAN'T — YES, HE CAN! IRELAND SCORES AGAIN!"

The Weasleys were on their feet. Draco applauded too, from his seat, because it had been damn near the neatest rebound he'd ever seen.

"This isn't much of a contest," shouted Hermione. "Why does anyone think Bulgaria's going to win?"

"Because Krum's only lost four matches in his life," said Draco. "Now, most of those matches have been snitch-forward, so he's

been able to cut the lights before his chasers get mauled too badly —”

“But that won’t help him here!” shouted Ron, leaning across Hermione. She sat back with a nonplussed expression. “Cup games are always quaffle-forward, snitch won’t be out before halftime at least. They need a show. Plus, Lynch is on a Firebolt this game, instead of his old Comet.”

“So? Krum disemboweled Mustafa in the semifinal, and he was on a Firebolt Two.”

“Mustafa? C’mon! In Mustafa’s *dreams* is he pulling some of the moves on Lynch! Besides, he’s hungry for it. Krum’s old news. It’s regicide, mate, he’s coming for the crown.”

“‘Hungry for it,’ are you joking? Look at him fly. Lynch will be prying the crown off his worm-eaten skull.”

Hermione, trapped uncomprehending between them, rolled her eyes and turned around to say something to Ginny, but Ginny was busy screaming at one of the chasers to pass.

The Bulgarian beaters managed to scatter the next Irish formation, and Bulgaria took possession for the first time in the game. “DIMITROV TO LEVSKI, intercepted by MORAN, Moran had a great semifinal, sure she’s hoping to carry that energy into today’s match, MORAN TO TROY, and — say, what’s Krum doing?”

Krum had entered the fray. Bent gracefully over his broomstick, steering with one hand, he was flanking Moran, who was swinging her arm ineffectually to shoo him away. This sandwiched Moran between Krum and Dimitrov, her guard, leaving Mullet unable to pass except to the double-guarded Troy. Moran leaned off her broomstick, shouting something angrily at Krum.

“Looks like a Scotch Pincer,” said Bagman doubtfully, “although to do it with the seeker is pretty unorthodox — not sure I’ve ever seen that

before — but if there's one thing about Krum, it's that he's always up to something… WAIT — look out look out LOOK OUT!"

Krum shot back, braking hard, and left Moran's side free — she turned around, surprised, to see where he had gone — and a bludger crashed into her face. Krum had been obscuring Volkov's approach on her left side.

Moran spun clumsily through the air, clutching her face. It was hard to see what happened, but when she pulled away one of her hands, it was dark red. Hermione cried out and grabbed Draco's arm. He was so sickly fascinated that he didn't even complain of her nails digging into his wrist.

"TIME OUT! That's a broken nose if I've ever seen one, and I *have* seen one," said Bagman, with jolly sympathy. "Mediwizards coming out… of course, they'll have her nose fixed in a heartbeat, but if she's got an eye injury, her game is toast… that was *very* nasty, head injuries at this level of play are incredibly rare…"

Hermione had found a reason to be invested in the game: she was screaming herself hoarse for a penalty. Several of the words she used he knew for a fact to be *verboten* in the Granger household; he grinned at her.

"Starting to enjoy yourself, Granger?"

"No! That wasn't *fun!* It was sneaky and duplicitous and reprehensible and *wrong—"*

"Keep going, maybe you can synonym them to death—"

"And Krum should be pulled out!" The holy flames of justice were burning in her cheeks. It was quite something. "She could have lost an eye!"

"That's what beaters are there for!" called Ron. "Anyway, she's been running a train through Zograf, they had to do something about her!"

“They didn’t have to pummel her!” she said, sounding genuinely upset. Draco elbowed her.

“She’s alright, look. They got her some health potion, and she’s back in the air. She’s probably cross she didn’t get to score.”

“TWO PENALTIES FOR IRELAND,” bellowed Bagman. “Ooh, Volkov and Vulchanov have landed — take it from me, boys, arguing with the ref is never a good idea… that’s right, back up you go, and take a scolding for your trouble! Ireland’s conferring over who’ll take the penalty shot… looks like it’s Troy, champion of the midfield punt, best arm on the pitch, maybe not my choice for a penalty though, I think you want Mullet’s backspin in a shootout with the keeper — oh, well, doesn’t matter — HE SCORES! And the next…”

Draco’s attention drifted, searching for Krum. He found him floating near the top of the stands, surveilling the violent skirmish beneath him with a blank expression. One of the Irish beaters noticed him, too.

But Krum saw the bludger coming, turned, and swept in an astonishingly slow bank towards the ground; the bludger, as bludgers tended to do, locked onto his tail and followed him. He arced a beautiful helix across centerfield, almost dragging the bludger along, and then flicked into a dive so sharp it couldn’t follow, sending it hurtling straight into the back of the beater who’d hit it at him.

Quigley, the beater, toppled forward and almost fell off his broom. The Bulgarian stands thundered in laughter and cheers.

“Did you see that?” Harry was jumping. “Did you see that? He’s the seeker, but he plays—”

“And he’s not even trying,” said Ron. “Look at him, he’s bloody bored. Bet he hasn’t even broken a sweat.”

“I still think they should card him,” said Hermione fiercely.

The Irish were up sixteen and in possession at the start of the third quarter. The clock drove Bulgaria to take more risks. Levski floated a soft pass high from midfield that landed only because it crossed Moran's blind side. Dimitrov shot a characteristic overhand whirling through Moran's legs, blurry with topspin, and Ivanova caught it, raced it twenty yards downfield, feinted, and flipped it back to Dimitrov.

Against anyone else, they would have taken the shot by now, but Ireland's keeper, Ryan, had arms like a baboon, and the only way he ever missed a shot was when he got psyched out; the Bulgarians had learned to toy with him first, winding him up for minutes on end, until he did something stupid, like try to dart out and take possession.

No such luck, this time. Ryan sat on his line like he meant to die there, stone-faced, while Dimitrov and Ivanova traded a flurry of taunting, lightning-quick passes practically in front of his face. The Irish chasers were caught in a battle with the Bulgarian beaters, who were slicing the bludgers back and forth with the Irish beaters as if it were a game of tennis, with Mullet and Troy trapped in the service boxes.

"Come on, Ryan," said Ron desperately, "stay put..."

"Why's everyone so quiet?" said Hermione, not quietly at all.

"If they get this point, the snitch will break the tie," breathed Ginny. "Bet you anything if that quaffle goes in, Krum's gonna do something wicked."

Dimitrov sent a hard, fast topspin pass, the kind that whistled, into Ivanova's left hand, and she feigned a shot on the goalhoop. Ryan twitched toward her, but didn't break his line. Then she passed it underhand to Dimitrov, and he surged forward with unmistakable intent, and Ryan, seeing it, surged towards him with arms outstretched, but at the last moment Dimitrov punched the quaffle backward and Ivanova caught it from the corner of the goalie box,

and there was a collective gasp as Ryan scrambled to get back to center as she lined up a shot for the nearest goal, but Ryan was fast, and he got there, skating into place in front of the leftmost hoop, and she dropped her arm and tossed it lightly in what Bagman identified, with impatience, as yet another underhand pass — until it slotted through the right goal-hoop.

Roars, cheers, and a host of Bulgarian yelling took several minutes to calm down. Fred and George were clinging to their seats with white knuckles.

“WHAT A POINT! 170-20 to Ireland, and that’s Ivanova and Dimitrov, from the same town if you can believe it, used to play together on their school team, and don’t they just show it, with that beautiful assist — they were setting up that goal four passes back, and with not a word to each other either, that’s real synchrony — WHAT’S HE DOING?”

Krum had taken a dive. Lynch followed right on his tail, so close they would have felt each other’s breathing if not for the wind that ripped back their robes. Hermione’s nails drove so deep into Draco’s arm they would soon fuse to it. Straight to the ground, they were jostling each other so hard that they started to bend the line of their dive, canting to the left in a perpetual spin, a deadly *pas de deux.* If it was a feint, it was a terrible one, because they were locked too close together to pull out. Any attempt to pull up might break their necks, but so would hitting the ground.

“Krum’s on it,” said Bagman, “but Lynch isn’t letting up… it’s either man’s game… oh! Oh, watch out for… they’d really better pull— OOH!”

A bludger crunched into Krum’s shoulder and sent both seekers whirling. Lynch was not unhurt, either: the momentum hurled him into the stands, narrowly avoiding a collision with a very excited group of fans. Krum swerved hard, clutching something in his neck, but steered back into his line. The crystal ball zoomed into his face: it was set and rigid with pain.

“I think the mediwizards are calling for him to land,” said Bagman nervously, “and I don’t blame him, that shoulder really doesn’t look right… oh, but there he goes again, right back into the dive! It’s Krum, all Krum, if he can just keep it together—”

Another bludger careened at Krum: he flipped under his broomstick and dodged it. The other beater smacked it right back at him, and but he was untouchable: another spin swept him effortlessly out of its path. His right hand spasmed where he cradled it to his chest, but steering with his knees, he reached out his left instead. Flecks of blood and sweat decorated his furrowed brow.

“No, no, no,” Fred moaned.

“Yes!” shouted Harry, his Ireland rosette forgotten. He was hanging off the railing. “He’s going to make it! He’s going to win anyway!”

But while the stadium had been absorbed in Krum’s two-on-one with the Irish beaters, the Irish chasers had repossessed the quaffle, and were descending on Zograf in a deadly arrow formation. Everyone had forgotten the other side of the game. Someone must have prodded Bagman about it, because he roared without preamble: “GREAT SCOTT! BUT IT’S MORAN TO MULLET, MULLET TO TROY, TROY TO MULLET, who takes it past Dimitrov, and sends it straight Tr— TO MORAN??”

It was the wrong pass. An amateur could have said so. Troy was in position for an overhand to the keeper’s left hoop, his Achilles’ heel, whereas Moran was floating out by the corner, and still had a bad eye, besides. But the quaffle dropped into her outstretched hands, and Mullet pulled back, driving hard into Levski, her guard. Moran took the shot.

But she couldn’t beat the angle. The quaffle sailed parallel to the end line, even curving out slightly *away* from the hoop. George wheezed like he’d been punched. Krum, who had slowed to watch the exchange, turned away and plunged back into his dive.

“That’s it,” said Ron, stunned. “Mullet just lost them the World Cup.”

Krum and Lynch had sunk into another racing dive, but Krum was so far ahead it might as well have been miles, his hand outstretched, his robes a bloody flag upon the wind.

But Moran’s shot hadn’t stopped moving. It slowed in midair, and Draco realized that what everyone had mistaken for a weak, slow shot was actually an incredible amount of backspin. And so he was the first one on his feet when the quaffle — unknown to Zograf, who was already cheering for Krum — bent back towards the goalpost.

It knocked against the side, spun for a heartrending second on the rim, and tipped through.

Krum lunged.

There was a moment, Draco thought, where exceptionally good quidditch trespassed into real aesthetic beauty. In the last moment of the Cup, Krum crossed that precipice. He had both hands free of the broom, hanging in midair like the descending divine in Michelangelo’s Creation of Adam. The snitch sat on the tip of his finger.

Then it didn’t, and the game was over.

The noise was so great Draco’s ears went deaf for a moment, and when they came back, the stands were still shuddering with aftershocks. An actual earthquake could not have drawn the audience’s attention away from the pitch, where Ireland had cast off their broomsticks and thronged together in a green knot of teary bellowing, lifting Moran atop their shoulders; the leprechauns stormed the field, pumping out shamrock after shamrock of fireworks. “IRELAND WINS!” roared Bagman. “IT’S IRELAND, 180-170, KRUM GETS THE SNITCH — BUT IRELAND WINS THE WORLD CUP!”

Another wave of cheering broke out. Harry toppled over the railing, and Ron had to reel him back by his shirt.

“What did he catch the snitch for?” he bellowed. “He sealed the game for Ireland! If he’d waited for Dimitrov to score again, he would’ve won!”

“Or Ireland could’ve got its lead back and thrashed them!” Harry shouted. “Or Lynch could’ve snatched it! He knew he had to act fast!”

“And think of it from his perspective,” added Draco. “Krum’s barely gotten started. He’s got at least ten more Cups in his career, and he’s sure to win some of them; but now, even if he doesn’t, he’ll always be the youngest seeker to ever catch the snitch in a World Cup Final.”

“He was very brave,” Hermione said softly. Krum had landed apart from his teammates and shrugged off the plying fingers of mediwizards, who were trying to see to his arm. “I think he dislocated his arm.”

“If he didn’t break his collarbone,” said Draco, faintly impressed. After some arguing, Krum allowed the mediwizards to pop his arm back in, but refused the healing potion that would have relieved him of pain.

The Irish players, meanwhile, were dancing a reel under a shower of gold coins and green streamers. Stovepipe hats and paper shamrocks showered down from the stands, and in a fit of spirit, Ron ripped his own off his head and tossed it, too. The orchestra kicked up, and the Irish team leapt on their brooms to lead a rendition of “Come Out, Ye Black and Tans,” in which no one sang louder than the soundly non-Irish Fred and George Weasley, who had formed a can-can line with Bill and Ginny in the back of the box.

A podium was hastily assembled by Ministry aides, and one by one, the Bulgarians clambered onto the second-place plinth. Krum, standing last in line, was in a bad way. He was holding his shoulder as if to keep the bones still, and the crest of what must have been a

massive bruise had sprouted up his neck. He still clutched the Snitch. Draco noticed that he seemed much less coordinated on the ground. He had round shoulders and had a shambling gait. But when Bagman called his name, the whole stadium answered with roaring approval, green or red or neither.

He tapped Hermione’s hand, politely, and with a gasp she unearthed her nails from his wrist.

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t realize! Did I hurt you?”

“No,” he lied. She fussed at his arm, the whole celebration forgotten, which was honestly a very nice feeling; there was a certain warmth to being the center of anyone’s attention, especially when the rest of the world was deaf and blind to it. He flexed his fingers while she rubbed at the dark indents in his wrist, massaging the blood back into the muscles. It might’ve felt good, if his flesh hadn’t been still numb from Granger’s Tourniquet. “I hardly noticed.”

-fun fact: the bulgarian national anthem

goes so much harder than it needs to that i became a bulgarian patriot listening to it

-Official Author's Note on the Bulgarian language, airing it out here, because it becomes a plot point later: Bulgarian is the national language of Bulgaria, so Krum speaks it, but Durmstrang supposedly exists in the far north of eastern Europe, and Bulgaria — in case you're a geographically challenged individual like myself, who did not realize this the first time I read the books — shares a border with *Greece.* In related problems, the block of countries that Durmstrang serves includes huge parts of the (as of 3 years ago, in this universe) post-Soviet bloc — also implies some fascinating wizard politics must have gone down during the Soviet Era, considering Koldovstoretz is the "Russian school," so, at what point did the block split? Did the Soviet Union's magical counterpart try to exert some sort of control over the movement of Soviet wizards, like the Soviets

did? Did Durmstrang just start accepting post-Soviet states again three years ago? What the hell happened to it during the invasion of Poland? Was everyone just fine with German students continuing to attend, even when All That Shit was going on in Europe?

-None of this matters to Lionheart, but I've been thinking about it, because it relates to what language Durmstrang uses. Because "eastern Europe" is a block that covers a huge number of different languages, none of which really predominate each other, and many of which are not mutually intelligible. (Sidebar: this is part of the Doylist reason that purebloods in Wizarding Europe take French as a mandatory second language — it solves this problem for Beauxbatons.) I guess you could just say it's the native language of the country where the school resides, which means Durmstrang is probably taught in... Norwegian? Swedish? At any rate, it's probably not taught in Bulgarian if the school's in Scandinavia, so Krum has to be trilingual at least just in order to communicate at the basic level we read in the books. No wonder he has trouble with pronunciation. We don't even know that he's taught English before he comes to Hogwarts, and Hogwarts doesn't provide translators for any of the tasks. Kind of starts to make you wonder about the motivations of the administrators, doesn't it.

-long-winded way of saying I'm putting Durmstrang in Norway and sticking to it. In fairness, I don't think it's too far to assume there might be some magical fix to the language barrier, like a Babel fish type of situation, or possibly an enchantment of mutual intelligibility on the castle itself. It's Harry Potter worldbuilding. "Magic does what the author (me) wants it to do" is like, a rule of physics.

-the song the veela dance to is Tchaikovsky's Fantasy Overture, from Romeo and Juliet, starting at 14:18.

and, if you haven't listened to it, it damn near perfectly captures the feeling of watching a heartbreakingly beautiful creature that may or may not try to kill you.

-UP NEXT: Slytherin guest appearances; a content warning, for a few things you'll recognize, as well as a few you won't. It's called "The Herald."

-All the love in the world to all readers, and bonus for all those who have already commented on chaps 31-33. the GOATS of commenting are in my comments section, it's really unbelievable. cheers!

The Herald

Chapter 35: The Herald

CW for depictions of torture (non-graphic, physical).

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Celebrations raged past midnight. Fireworks thundered overhead like they were camped on the beaches of Normandy. Music swelled from every tent, accompanied by roaming parties of witches and wizards, most of whom hardly knew each other at all, drinking and firing spells into the air. Ministry wizards raced after them with torches and haggard expressions. They had to fight their way through a conga line of step-dancing leprechauns that stretched across half the tent city, and Draco came close to an act of anti-Irish aggression.

“Well,” said Mr. Weasley, when they reached the tent, “if you can sleep in this, please do; but as for me, I’m going to make some hot cocoa.”

They piled onto the moth-eaten sofas, nursing cups of thick fragrant cocoa in chipped white mugs. The chocolate was so good it could have nominated him for sainthood and Draco had to wage a guerrilla war to keep Hermione from stealing his, which distracted him from Charlie and Ron’s argument about the Scotch Pincer, and Bill’s rhapsody on Moran’s final goal; Ginny sat between Fred and George, and after she had been silent for a while, Draco looked over and found her passed out on Fred’s lap. Then Fred picked her up and carried her to bed, which was a cue for the four of them to retreat to their own tent with Bill.

In the dull light of the camping lantern, he changed into pajamas and set about the business of falling asleep. It was hard going. He was on the bottom bunk, under Hermione, and lay staring at the bed frame above him as the music thumped from their neighbor's tent. Irritation at his inability to sleep kept him prickly and alert and uniquely ill-suited to sleeping, a compounding spiral of frustration. He had been up for almost twenty hours since daybreak and his face hurt with the desire to sleep, but between the ambience and the various breathy rustling of four other people sleeping in close quarters, he couldn't focus. Hermione kept wriggling in her sleep, creaking the bed frame.

It was impossible that he'd fallen asleep, but when he woke up, he knew he'd been dreaming. A blind swipe of his hand caught no enemy but air, and he flipped out of the bed in a pulse of unlucid adrenaline, answering a subliminal commandment to *run run run.* He felt like his brain had been dunked in cold water and he hadn't slept this badly since the Manor, when he'd grab a broomstick if he was out of Sleeping Draught and fly tight dizzy circles around the grounds until he woke the peacocks in their nests and got a honking rebuke.

A touch to his brow came away slippery, and his shirt was slicked to his chest. His heart clobbered his ribs. He grabbed his overcoat and his shoes and was out the door before anyone could wake to notice.

His watch read two o'clock. The air was cool and sweet and fresh like nights at the Burrow, the sea of lanterns issuing dreamy light, while residual smoke from the fireworks veiled the stars. He walked to the well and drank deep mouthfuls of ice-cold water that tasted faintly bitter but clean, rinsing the gummy bile-taste from his mouth, splashing his face in it. The shock purged the last of the tremors, and cleared his imagination of creatures in black cloaks creeping across his periphery. He wasn't sleeping again, not after that, but it was a nice night, and the celebrations had dwindled to just a few guttering loci of lights and music, including a high bonfire from the Irish tents that he doubted would fade before morning. Now that the dark didn't faze him, he ventured toward it.

A massive structure in the shape of a three-story log cabin — the outside alone was bigger than the Burrow — marked the end of a row of kingly tents. It was so big that it spilled over into the path, turning the lane into a cul-de-sac, which meant purebloods if it meant a thing at all: the lack of concern for campsite rules, or indeed anyone else's physical comfort, was as good as a beacon in the sky. He found his feet carrying him towards it.

Firelight flickered on the deck, enchanted blue flames inside a glass fire pit. Watery light spilled over Pansy Parkinson, sprawled on her side in a lounge chair, wearing satin lounge pants and a Slytherin jumper. She nursed a copper mug and a cigarette, which she flicked into the fire pit as Draco approached. Beside her, the nine-year-old Astoria Greengrass sat in a wheely-chair under a blanket of bear fur.

Pansy stood up when she heard him approach. Her wand was out. She held it overhand, its point angled out and slightly downward, levied threateningly away from her body — an archaic grip, Hogwarts taught the western underhand, it was better for charmwork and safer to boot — but also the one Theo used, however. He wondered when she'd started doing that.

"Who's there?" she snapped. Her eyes were a bloodshot rusty blue, like spots of oxidation on copper, and her sneer was startlingly cold. She looked like a feral cat.

He stepped into the firelight and felt a surprising amount of relief when she lowered her wand.

"I come to parlay."

"Ugh. Draco," she said, flopping back down in the lounge chair. "For Merlin's sake. Wear a bell."

"What's the matter? Worried about rogue leprechauns coming to steal your gold?"

"That's anti-Irish, prat."

“For one: that is an incredible move to hypocrisy, from you, I have never seen such shamelessness and I am impressed. For two: you’re English.”

“Partial credit, but lacking detail. My grandmother’s from Dublin. Normally I don’t give a damn, except it means the whole family’s got to schlep out to this wretched den of anarchy to represent the Motherland. Thank God we didn’t lose to the Slavs, I think Granny Shea would’ve killed herself. Melon spritz?" She passed him her copper mug. He sniffed it, detected honeydew, citrus, and no major poisons, and sipped.

“And for your information, these sorts of things are hives of crime,” she said. “It’s inevitable, when you pack thousands of excitable wizards in a confined space and lubricate them with liquor.”

“I lost my mother-of-pearl pocket watch,” said Astoria sadly. “It was my great-gran’s. She got it from a mermaid.”

“Mermaids don’t use pocket watches, Tori, don’t be dumb.”

“No, it’s true! A mermaid fell in love with her and made her a bridal gift of a hundred pearls, and sewed her a fishskin that let her breathe under the sea, and they were gonna get married and live in a palace underwater with lots of pretty fishes but my great gran didn’t like the fishskin because it smelled stinky, so she left the mermaid at the altar and ran away to marry my great grandad and had a *buuuuunch* of babies, but she could never go to the beach because she was scared the mermaid would come back and demand her bride price.”

“Dummy,” said Pansy, tweaking Astoria’s nose. Astoria squealed. “You’re a big dumb dummy, Tori, you know that? That story didn’t happen to your great gran, it’s a fairytale. Besides, mermaids are hideous, no witch would ever want to marry them.”

“Yeah *durr,”* said Astoria sulkily. “That’s prolly why she didn’t. *You’re* a dummy.”

“My God, you’ve got me. Draco, quick, help. Avenge my honor with your keen witticisms. I must burn my clothes and don mourning blacks for shame.”

He laughed. He had missed Pansy. She was such an awful unrepentant brat.

“Did the family come?” he asked Astoria casually. Pansy’s snort informed him that it was not casual enough.

Astoria puffed out her cheeks and whistled through the pucker of her mouth. “Um,” she said, “Mummy came with me. And Daddy, um… he doesn’t like quidditch? Because he says it’s super boring and um not good for your brain…?”

“Tori, you can tell him.”

The truth wheezed out of Astoria in a flurry of relief. “No. Daffy’s at home and they’re not letting her out and I don’t know why, she says she’s alright but there are always healers around and some nights they lock the doors to her room but they don’t lock the one in the back of my closet so I can sneak in and honestly she’s like *fine,* she just eats a lot and throws up and throws furniture around but I do that sometimes when *I’m* mad and my magic acts up so I think she’s just really really lonely.”

Her voice strangled out for want of air. Pansy patted her knee.

Draco gripped the mug between his fingers. Did that mean Daphne wasn’t coming back to school? Would they let her? It was actually hard to tell, based on Astoria’s testimony, whether she was well or not. She probably wouldn’t tell her younger sister if the answer was no.

“Relax,” said Pansy. She was smirking like his despair was her favorite ice cream flavor. “Daphne’s not keeling over dead anytime soon. She’ll be back at Hogwarts in September — now, whether

Theo will have to stage a heist to get her out of that place, I wouldn't wager, but she means to continue her education."

"You've spoken to her?"

"Sparsely. I'm allowed to visit the Greengrasses if I say I'm seeing Tori here," said Pansy, nodding at Astoria. "It's a connection my parents are anxious to foster; they're worried I don't have enough friends that are girls. I told them Blaise is only a man every third Tuesday, but what do you know, they didn't find *that* funny at all. So Tori supposedly keeps me out of trouble. Don't you?"

"I'm not very good at it," said Tori cheerfully, without a drop of remorse.

"No, you're not, you perfect little gremlin," said Pansy, showing unprecedented reserves of fondness. She reached into her pocket. "Toffee?"

"Yes, please!"

The gremlin was paid.

Draco leaned back in his chair, relieved. "Why isn't Nott with us, anyway? I heard his father was around."

Tori looked at Pansy, who merely shrugged. "Search me," she said. "He's barely been around the whole Cup. We've been abandoned."

"He thays he'th buthy with hith dad," said Astoria. The toffee had plastered her teeth together. "He'th alwayth buthy."

"Yes, dear Prince Theodore has become the new darling of the British bureaucracy," said Pansy dryly. "You'd think he's the only reason the Ministry's still standing, to hear him tell it. As if his dad would let him do more than carry paperwork and lick arses."

Draco wrinkled his nose. "I thought he hated his father."

“And I, for one, loathe Transfiguration,” said Pansy. “Yet somehow, I keep finding myself in the presence of Professor McGonagall. Striking, how that happens.”

“Professor McGonagall never hit you, did she?”

Pansy grimaced and plucked the mug out of his hands, her silence a tacit concession. “She’s not my mother, either.”

“If your mother hit you, Theo would have her boxed and ready for the undertaker by noon.”

“What makes you think she hasn’t?” said Pansy, with a cool awful little smile, which he was sure would have sent someone who knew her less into paroxysms of awkward. But she wasn’t half as good at bluffing as she thought she was.

“Don’t be crass. You’re mother’s a woman of class and dignity,” he said. “She’d have the help do it.”

Pansy gave a surprised and unbeautiful snort of laughter. “Ass,” she said. “Why didn’t you come visit me?”

He was startled and touched by the offer. “Why didn’t you come visit me?” he said, after a moment. “The Manor’s bigger than Parkinson Court. And my mother misses having a girl around.”

“Certainly. If you don’t mind my mother tagging along.”

“She’s worried about your virtue?”

“No, she’s *worried* about appearances. In fact I think she’d take heart if a few more people showed interest in my virtue,” said Pansy flatly, fishing a shred of mint from the mug and flicking it into the fire. “She was my age when she received her first marriage proposal.”

“I can take a hint, but I’m afraid my heart belongs to potions.”

“Not *you,* prat. Good Lord, can you imagine it? I’d rather marry a toad.”

“Unnecessarily harsh,” he said. Astoria, making a pitiful noise through her teeth, agreed.

“No, no. You’re perfectly good-looking,” she said, flapping a hand at him, “especially now you’re coming into your cheekbones, well done; but a marriage only works if both spouses agree who’s funnier, and you and I would never concede. Our dinner parties would be unendurable.”

“Thoughtful of you. What about Theo?”

“What about him?” she said, aghast. “He’s not said anything to you, has he?”

He smirked and kicked his feet up on the firepit. She rolled her eyes.

“The toad remains the frontrunner,” she said. “I can’t marry a man who’s seen me in diapers. Anyway, now you’re starting to sound like my mother. ‘What about the Crabbe boy? You know him, don’t you?’ Vince! Vincent Crabbe! Like Vince would know a girl if one bit him on the arse. His family’s angling for an arranged marriage with the Bulstrodes, anyway.”

“How do you know?” said Astoria rapturously, as if having access to Slytherin house gossip was the fount of all knowledge.

“Millie’s opposed,” said Pansy, sanguine. “She has a crush on the Hufflepuff seeker. I told her I could help her stage a scandal to get out of it, if she wanted, but she wasn’t interested.”

“I’d stage a scandal with you, Pansy,” said Astoria desperately.

“Thank you, my dear. I invoke the ancient law of ‘no takesies backsies.’”

Astoria fervently crossed her heart. Draco was quiet for a while. His pulse had gone steady and slow, eased by the fire and the idle chat, but residual tension still bunched in his hands and hamstrings. The creases under Pansy's eyes made him wonder how much she'd slept. If at all. When her dreams woke her in the middle of the night, what did she reach for? What did she do?

Once, he would have hazarded a guess; but then, Theo wasn't here, and maybe that was part of the problem.

There was a faint *boom* somewhere in the distance. Screams followed it. He didn't stir. Sometimes a firework went off wrong, and accidents were commonplace with this much magic running around.

The second *boom* made them all turn their heads. It was closer, and the screams were clearer. A pillar of black smoke rose from the campsite in the distance.

Draco stood up and took out his wand. Pansy did the same.

"Did you—"

"Yes," she said, her eyes sharp and sweeping the darkness. "Tori, go inside."

"No! What's wrong?" said Astoria, craning her neck. "You're blocking me! I can't see."

"Doesn't matter. Inside, lock the door, and get my dad," she said. "Now."

"I want to stay with you and Draco!"

"Tori, I swear to Merlin, if you don't do as I say I will never visit you again, and I'll tell all the Slytherin boys at Hogwarts you've got pubic lice," snapped Pansy.

Astoria quivered with betrayal. "You wouldn't."

“I would! And you’ll have no beaux forever and and you’ll make no friends, and it’ll serve you right for being a brat!”

Moaning in misery, Astoria wheeled herself inside with the haste of a girl who took Pansy at her word.

Draco watched the door seal behind her. “You’ve a maternal touch.”

“She’ll be fine,” said Pansy dismissively. “Besides, she’s a shameless rat. She’s about to run straight to my dad and tell on me, which is good, because we’ll be safe when he gets here.”

He did not share her confidence in the matter. “Your father’s not an auror, is he?”

“He’s an Unspeakable,” she said, and it was the first time he’d heard her sound remotely proud, talking about her parents. “They might not have hired him to win fights, but he didn’t get the job by losing them, either.”

Before they could further litigate Prescott Parkinson’s skill with a wand, a third *boom* erupted. A blade of green fire slit open the darkness, so close that they both shielded their eyes, and when it dissipated a huge furl of smoke was opening like a hungry claw into the sky.

The Irish quarter was on fire.

The lanterns along the path flickered on and off, weakly, and then died. It was dark except for the firepit and the lights on the horizon.

Boom. Boom. Boom. Three more explosions went up, one after another, along the horizon, and the smoke billowed. The last one, a fourth, went up in the Weasleys’ section.

Draco was running before the sound had faded from the air.

“Stop! *Stop!* What are you doing?”

He barely heard her. A throng of people were streaming past the well. Their voices clashed in a violent cacophony of screams and fruitless shouting. Mediwizards raced stretchers through packed alleyways, bellowing for space. Aurors whizzed overhead on broomsticks, trying in vain to direct crowds. An old woman was knocked to her knees and disappeared under the thunder of feet. A witch in a green nightcap mounted the well and screamed for her children.

Vertigo struck. He listed against the nearest tent, head swimming.

“DRACO!”

He spun around. Pansy was trying to push her way through a pair of Bulgarian wizards. They shoved her back; she snarled, kicked one in the crotch, kneed him in the stomach, and leapfrogged across his back when he doubled over.

“Come back to the tent,” she shouted, grabbing his arm. “It’s not safe —”

“I can’t — I’m here with the Weasleys — the last explosion was on top of them—”

“The *Weasleys?”* She was baffled. He might as well have said the Dumbledores. “Well — but—”

“Whatever you’re going to say, consider that there has never been a worse time.”

“I was going to say they’ll be fine,” she snapped. “Let them take care of their own. We’ll take care of ours.”

“I can’t,” he said. At the thought of it, a peal of nausea almost drove him to his knees.

She gave him a stare that could have cut glass. Abruptly, she let go of his arm. Her lip trembled, like something fidgety was caught inside

her mouth.

“Would you?” she said. “If it was me, would you? Instead of them?”

He stared at her.

“Despite your frankly appalling sense of timing,” he said, “I unfortunately do, yes, consider myself obligated to save your life, if and whenever possible, for any number of dim reasons not limited to being a *remotely decent human being,* and under certain circumstances even extending to — sod this. Yes. I would. Is that what you want to hear?”

She wilted. “No, I was afraid you’d say that,” she said.

“What?”

“Fine.” She raked back the sleeves of her jumper. “Let’s go find the stupid *sodding* Weaselbees. And don’t you expect a birthday present from me ever again.”

“I didn’t ask you to come.”

“And you never will,” she said sadly. He couldn’t spare the several decades it would take to unpack *that* remark, so he tried to ignore it. “But the thing about me is I’m secretly just as thick as Teddy, and I never knew how to t—”

But he never found out what Pansy didn’t know. A beam of green light paved the slate of the sky. Illuminated in its grasp were four floating figures, struggling against the grasp of the Levicorpus Charm. It was a man, a woman, and two children. They were being paraded through the tents like a float, their bodies bent into unnatural shapes.

“Muggles,” said Pansy.

“How—”

“Don’t be stupid, it’s muggles,” she said quietly.

Screams broke out. Tents shuddered and started to collapse. Tongues of fire ran up the sides of the path and leapt from tent to tent, roofing the paths in smoke. The woman’s legs were forced open and her head bent back, like a child playing with an unloved doll, trying to see where its hinges were. Her mouth was open, and she must have been screaming, but amidst the noise of the riot it was as if she were silent.

“This can’t happen,” said Pansy numbly. “The International Statute of Secrecy—”

“You think they give a damn? It’s a terrorist attack.”

“By *whom?”*

“I don’t know,” he snarled, elbowing his way through a group of fleeing Croatians. “Your dad’s the Unspeakable, you tell me.”

The smaller muggle child had started spinning, his limbs flopping around like so much puppetry.

“Someone needs to get them down,” he said, but he felt sick. Where were the aurors? Where was Runcorn, where was Nott?

The muggles floated over them, their bodies eerie and limp in the green light. Finally, Draco saw the figures holding them up. They were dressed in black shrouds, covering their heads, and wore black gloves and black robes — all black, save for the bone-white gleam of their masks.

He knew what those masks were. He’d seen one before.

He stepped back, into Pansy. She didn’t notice.

“Parkinson,” he said.

“My dad’s back at the tent,” she interrupted.

They stared at each other.

“Do you understand me?” Her voice had none of the warmth or vulnerability it held a minute ago, when she was holding his arm and entreating friendship. Her voice was not an invitation. It was barbed wire wrapped around a sledge hammer. It was a ten-foot wall of brick. “My dad is at the tent with Astoria. He’s been there all night. You *saw him there.* Do we understand each other, Malfoy?”

He had never seen anyone wear the expression on her face. No one.

Standstill. Deadlock on the tongue. Deadlock in the brain. He had only two options and both of them were lies, so he chose the one he could live with in the short term, cast away the implications he’d have to pick out of his shrapnel-ridden conscience later.

“Yes. We do.”

She nodded. “Good. Then we can go find your friends.”

The marchers passed over them, but another *boom* went up in the distance. There were multiple groups. Draco and Pansy wrestled through a glut of people surging away from the explosions, and got caught in a river of movement towards the edge of the campsite, where people were streaming in large congregations towards the woods.

“That’s the evacuation point,” panted Pansy. “If they’re alive, they’re headed there. If they’re dead, we don’t stand a chance of finding the bodies.”

“You’re a comfort in these trying times,” he snarled, and ducked under a stretcher carried by two mediwizards.

He didn’t think about Hermione. He *didn’t* think about Hermione. He kept moving, in no small part, because he wasn’t thinking about Hermione.

Damn Pansy.

A flock of birds zoomed overhead, forcing him to duck. He realized belatedly that they weren't birds at all, but womanlike creatures whose arms and fingers had fused into bird's wings, their feathers a resplendent white gold, their skinny legs an unnatural cross between claws and talons. One of them gave a earsplitting shriek and soared up to the floating muggle child, gripping him in her talons and beating her wings — trying to pull him free — but a green light darted out of the crowd below, struck her, and she tumbled out of the air.

The other veela screamed and peeled away, fleeing a barrage of spells that followed them.

"That wasn't," said Pansy, "you don't think—"

Something collided with his knees. He stumbled and caught sight of a house-elf running for its life, gripping a dark purse in its arms. In the haze and confusion, his heart skipped, thinking it was Dobby — but no, it was a female elf, wearing a dishcloth for a cloak.

"Little sneak," said Pansy darkly. *"Expelliarmus."*

The house-elf squeaked and tumbled to the dirt, her bag leaping from her arms. Pansy caught it and stomped over her.

"Who does this belong to?" she demanded, shaking it. "Where did you get this?"

"Begging your mercy, m-m-mistress!" wailed the house-elf. "It belongs to my m-m-master—"

"Who's that? Who do you belong to?"

Draco's impatience and discomfort peaked simultaneously. He hauled her off the house-elf by her collar, dodging the hiss and the elbow she threw at him. "Parkinson, stop. That's enough. She's not hurting anybody."

“Mimsy b-b-belongs to the Most Noble and Most Ancient House of Nott!” pleaded the elf. “Mimsy is a good and loyal elf, and she is t-t-trying to f-f-find her f-f-family—”

“Oh, really?” Pansy was scornful. “And who’s that?”

“Me, probably,” said a rather breathless voice, and Pansy’s head snapped up.

Theo stood in the alleyway beside them, his face a dalmatian mix of soot and cinders, his hair a static rumpus, and a bandage swaddling his left hand.

“Pans, would you please unhand my elf, before she pisses herself in fright? It’s rude to chew on other people’s toys.”

Pansy gave a cry of exasperation and surged forward with violent speed, and Theo let her hurtle into his chest. He grunted and let her put her hands on his neck — an unwise move from a tactical view — where she latched onto him and clung like a two-headed creature conjoined at the breast.

“You’re *fine,”* she said. “You shit, you awful shit, you’re fine. You’re fine.”

There was something strange and othering about watching the two of them reunite, as if he were witnessing an arcane ritual to a god he didn’t worship in a language he couldn’t speak.

“When am I not?” he said lightly, and tweaked her nose. She snapped her teeth at him, and he whisked his finger away, shaking it. “Oi. We’ve talked about the biting. Evening, Draco. Terrible night for it. You’re not hurt, are you?”

“No,” he said curtly. “I’d ask the same of you, but it seems you haven’t had the luck.”

Theo glanced down at himself and shrugged. “Oh,” he said. “This wasn’t the riot. I ran into a bit of trouble with some French girls at the celebrations — you know how it goes, the old *‘voulez-vous coucher avec moi, monsieur,’* and you try to let her down easy, *‘Non, madamoiselle, je ne couche qu'avec des blondes qui pourraient me tuer, et vous êtes beaucoup trop une dame.’* Only I forgot the word for ‘kill’ so I said ‘terminer’ instead, which I think she took as an insult to her skills. Or possibly she was just a bad sport. Anyway, it turns out they *do* teach them something at Beauxbatons besides lipstick and charm.”

“Ninny,” said Pansy. “Why’d you bring your stupid elf out here?”

“Because my father doesn’t trust me to my own devices,” he said indulgently, “does he, Mims? Doesn’t Lord Nott trust his own son less than a paper umbrella in a windstorm?”

Mimsy turned green. “Mimsy c-c-cannot presume to s-s-s-speak for Lord Nott,” she squealed. “Mimsy is only a house-elf — no insight into the minds of wizards — she only serves—”

Theo snorted and cut her off. “Oh, shut up.”

“Send her away, if she’s not helpful,” said Draco coldly.

He raised his eyebrows at him. “I forgot,” he said, “you had a soft spot for stupid things. Alright, as you like. Mimsy, go back to my father.”

Mimsy groaned, rocking on her heels, and eyed the purse in Pansy’s hands covetously.

“What? What is it? Oh. Pansy, give that back to her. Why on earth do you have it, anyway?”

Pansy threw the purse on the ground, and Mimsy scrambled to pick it up. With a *crack,* the house-elf disappeared. “How was I to know

she hadn’t stolen it?” she said scornfully. “You’re lucky someone didn’t snatch it off her before I did.”

“Nott,” said Draco, slowly, “where’s your father?”

Theo paused. “With the Minister,” he said. “Like always. Why?”

“I’m wondering how he plans to get the muggles down.”

Theo shrugged. “The aurors will deal with that bit, I expect. Really, most of the Ministry is working on crowd control. It’s no picnic, evacuating a hundred thousand people—”

“I should think,” said Draco, hearing his own voice as if through water, “that a demonstration of that size, considering the number of muggles in the nearby area, and the likelihood that other muggles were disturbed when those four were taken—”

“Yes, yes, we’ll do all the cleanup later. I’m sure there’s a whole department for these things, somewhere, buried under a sub-division of the Bureau of Something-Or-Other. Say, your pal Weasley might even get to be involved—”

“So does the Minister have any plan,” he said, and his voice sounded very loud, now, curious that, “to address the muggles being tortured in the fucking sky?”

Theo jerked.

“I don’t know,” he said. It was the first time he’d sounded honest, and perhaps not coincidentally, the first time he’d sounded afraid.

Draco didn’t think about Hermione. He didn’t. Didn’t, didn’t, didn’t. Say it often enough, and a word became a kind of spell. He repeated it, a litany against imagination, and it kept him fastened to the ground.

“I have to go,” he said, because his litany was starting not to work. “If you want to come, do. I’m going to search the woods—”

There was a searing light, like the sun had broached the midnight clouds. Something shimmery climbed from the treetops, snaking through the air like something living. It radiated the ethereal chemical glow of the Aurora Borealis, only green, cold green, antifreeze green, the green of death and unforgivable things. And the world beneath it was green, too, cast in its light like actors under a floodlight, locked in the heartstopping temporal freeze of a lifted curtain, staring at the skull and serpent twining sensually against each other in the sky.

“They put up the Herald,” said Theo.

He rubbed his hand across his mouth like there was a stain. “But why? It doesn’t — there’s no one *to summon,* it wouldn’t— forget it. There’s no time. Come on.”

He threw out his hands. Pansy took one unquestioningly. Draco hesitated.

Theo shook it at him.

“Malfoy. *Hurry.* Grapple with your masculinity later—”

“I’m not going with you. I have to find the Weasleys.”

“Great! Good! Wonderful! Let’s start by getting *out* of — bugger all. I don’t have time for this.” He grabbed Draco’s wrist and turned on his heel.

With a *crack,* the world flattened into a two-dimensional plane, and he felt himself inside it, squeezed along places that his three-dimensional body assuredly and vocally did not want to be: and then, just when the pressure reached an unbearable peak, he shot back into the third, as if the second had misliked him and popped him out.

He stumbled away from Theo, gasping. They had Apparated.

He’d done that before, but only ever with his mother and Snape, and this was the first time he had realized it was possible to be bad at it.

They were standing on a hill over the campgrounds, far from the smoke and the tents. They had crossed the wood, and now had at least an acre of trees between themselves and the Dark Mark, or the riots; Theo had put them on a grassy knoll with a cairn at the top.

“My *hair!”* Pansy was fumbling at her head in horror. The little that Draco could see of it through her fingers offered very good reason for rage. “You twat! You splinched it!”

“What? Oh,” said Theo faintly. “Dreadfully sorry.”

He knelt in the dirt with his hand on his wrist, clamping it, breathing in and out through his teeth. Florets of red spotted the gauze on his arm, first a mere sprinkling, and then harder, faster, like snowfall.

“Nott,” said Draco in amazement. “You splinched yourself.”

“Is that what happened?” Theo’s voice cracked, a dreadfully pubescent sound. He was fumbling for something in his pockets. “You mean to tell me this doesn’t happen every time you Apparate?”

Pansy flew to his side, her hair forgotten, which was saying something, considering what it looked like. “Teddy! Oh, God, don’t move, don’t move.”

“Dial back the volume. It’s a paper cut with pretensions. Not that I don’t appreciate the hysterics — trust me, when I die, I’ll expect you to go full Niobe, but if you do it now it won’t feel special.”

“It is a truly hilarious cosmic joke that you think you’re a good liar,” she said. “I think of it and giggle when I’m blue. How bad is it? Apply pressure. Lift it up.”

“Look who’s a healer, all of a sudden,” he said through his teeth. “Shove off, I’m fine. It was worse before.”

“You did this *before?”*

“Where did you learn to Apparate?” Draco was stunned. “It’s seventh year magic.”

“Not really,” said Theo, with savage confidence that was undercut by obvious pain. “They teach it in sixth year at Durmstrang, and I’ve always been a dab hand at Charms. Anyway, it’s not that tough. It’s side-along that gets… tricky.”

“Yes! Wow! Maybe that’s the reason that you can’t do side-along before you’re *twenty-five!* Because of *idiots* who try to take two people when you can barely get all of *you* where you want to be!” Pansy had wrapped her handkerchief around his elbow and was tying it tight enough to compress the muscle, puffing out a small ring of purpling skin.

“In my defense, one of them was very small,” he said. “Ow. *Ow.”*

“Don’t be a wuss. Draco, do you have any healing charms? All I know is *Episkey,* and it’s not worth a wet toot for something like this.”

“It’s outside my wheelhouse,” he said, wishing that Hermione were here. Then he had to quickly slam the shutters on his own brain.

“Blood-Replenishing Potion? What about you, Teddy?”

“Sure, Pans, but I left it in my other trousers—”

“Okay. Shit. Okay. Fine.” She drummed her nails on her mouth anxiously; then, with a guttural, furious sound, she tore her hand away and wrenched up her sleeve.

“No,” said Theo sharply. “Stop it.”

Draco didn’t realize what she was doing, and then he wished he hadn’t.

Pansy sank her teeth into her wrist, bringing shallow wells of dark blood bubbling up around her teeth. When rivulets began running

down her arm, she jerked her head free and spat a gobbet of red foam into the grass.

“Pans! No! Listen to me, you fool of a girl—”

“If you think I won’t knock you out and do this while you’re unconscious, Teddy—”

“What the hell are you doing?” said Draco, feeling ill.

Pansy wet her finger in blood — his gorge rose — and, tremblingly, drew a clumsy, ill-defined symbol on Theo’s wrist.

“The hell does it look like?” she said tightly. Her jaw was tight with pain. “It’s a rune.”

“Forget Apparition — where did you learn *blood runes?”*

“Not runes. Rune, singular,” she said grimly, sealing up her wrist and then sweeping her wand over the symbol. *“Episkey.”*

It blazed brilliant white, like a star, and then faded into rusty brown. The spots on Theo’s bandages stopped growing, and then started to shrink, leaving only ruddy brown stains where the wound had been. He swore violently and wrenched his hand out of her grasp, but the damage was done. His hand was whole, and his fingers flushed with a healthy glow, like they’d never been hurt in the first place.

“I — I didn’t know there were blood runes for healing,” he said numbly.

“There aren’t,” she snapped. It had taken a lot out of her: she was pale and shaky, and she lilted to the ground, on unsteady footing. Theo caught her and lowered her, snarling something inaudible into her ear; but he already looked better, stronger, as if she had infused him with whatever vitality she’d bled out from her wrist. “There is — ah — t-there is one for p-p- *power,* however, and I happen to know it,

because I was the only twelve-year-old in h-h-history… to muster a f-f-full-force — Petrification Curse."

There was an awful beat.

"Yaxley?"

"No, Filius Flitwick. *Yes,* Yaxley. And please, don't bother reading me the Riot Act about Dark magic, because I'm going to hell anyway; it's the only way I'll get to have it out with him."

"I wasn't going to," he said, which was true. The fact that blood magic was Dark had been only the fourth or fifth thing on his mind.

"First off, you're not going to hell," said Theo, with a horrible, uncharacteristic gentleness. He chucked her under the chin and stood up. "Second off: leave some fun for the rest of us."

A glistening apparition came galloping out of the woods. He recognized the silver sheen of a patronus, bounding over the hill at top speed. As it approached, he identified the shape of an ermine.

It skittered up to his feet, cocked its head, and spoke in the haggard voice of Arthur Weasley.

"Find Draco. Tell him to meet at the Portkey," it said. Then it dissipated into mist.

"That's my cue," said Theo. He clenched and unclenched his freshly healed hand, like it was resisting him. He turned to Draco. "Find Arthur Weasley," he said. "He'll keep you safe, for a given definition of *safe,* and a given definition of *keep,* neither of which I endorse personally, but then, my standards are usually higher than other people's."

He turned on his heel and went *crack.*

"Teddy!" Pansy staggered up. "He's going to splinch himself again," she said angrily. "He's lucky he didn't die. *Two* in side-along! I can't

decide if he's arrogant or suicidal!"

"A strong argument to be made for both."

She made a cross between a grunt and a scream. She fluffed at her shorn hair, helplessly, and then turned to him.

"You're not hurt, are you?" she said, sort of despairingly, as if she really didn't want to know the answer.

"No," he said, though he didn't feel too great about his toenails, to tell the truth. "I don't think so."

"Thank Merlin and Morgana," she said. "No offense, but I don't have another rune in me for you."

"None taken," he said, his stomach turning queasily. "Parkinson — how often do you—"

"What, rip open my own wrists?" She used *Episkey* to heal up the shallow bite on her wrist, but it was a mediocre *Episkey,* and it left a ring of crescent marks on the flesh. "Only on wrong Thursdays, you know — what the hell are you talking about? Does this look fun to you?"

"Yes, but I mean— at school— have you ever—?"

She burst into hysterical laughter. "Draco Malfoy," she said, "are you asking me if I use blood magic to cheat on exams?"

"No, you ninny."

"As if I care that much about my grade in sodding *Charms?* I'm not Granger. Now, *she* might."

The thought of Hermione locked several muscles in his gut.

"We have to leave."

She studied him for a moment and sighed. “Oh, piss,” she said. “Fine. Let’s go shelter with the blood traitors. I can’t very well go back home with my hair looking like this, anyway. ”

At the top of the Portkey hill, a huddle of people in nightclothes clustered under a Lumos-light, and when he was close enough to see the color of their hair he broke into a run.

Hermione saw him first. She gave a shout and tripped away from a tight three-way huddle with Harry and Ron, floundering down the hill. Her hair was tied in a silk kerchief and the hems of her pajamas muddied near black. Uninjured, however: apart from a long scratch on her cheek, she wasn’t hurt, and she was running like she could have done a neat half-marathon at daybreak. He could have cheered.

She tripped on a rabbit hole — she never did have the coordination God gave a fawn — and slammed into him like a Body-Bind. He hiked her up off the ground and sort of — this was embarrassing — wrapped them together, an arm around her waist and one hand spanning her narrow shoulderblades, and put his face in her neck and breathed, and breathed, and breathed.

She smelled like smoke and sweat and muggle soap. Probably there were other people trying to get his attention, but he didn’t actually care if there was another Mark going up over their heads. It would keep.

Hermione was yelling at him. It was a perfect moment.

“...woke up to find you GONE, no word, no note, the whole camp screaming on fire, you could have been KIDNAPPED—”

“Mmhm.”

“—or DEAD, for all I knew, trampled or trapped somewhere burning or caught by a stray curse, and we’d never find your body under the

wreck, we'd wait here all night and never know it — Draco *Malfoy,* I could SKIN you—"

It was surprisingly gratifying that she'd worried about him; he'd been so caught up in worrying about everyone else dying that he'd had relatively little time to consider the non-zero risk of doing so himself. Alarming.

"I didn't mean to leave. I was caught outside."

"I know that NOW! And there were muggles, and they — I—" She broke off and shuddered with her whole body. She was so small. That was concerning. She hadn't been so small last year, had she? He could hold her up without any effort at all.

"The muggles," he said. But that was all. He had nothing to say. Nothing would make it better. Words couldn't help it. It was a black pit of a thing, where sympathy and compassion and all the encouragement in the world would fly in and dissolve at the corrosive touch of the truth.

She gave a push on his shoulder, and he lowered her down. "You shoes," he said suddenly, for she was still wearing her bed slippers, now shredded from running.

"What? Oh. They're fine," she said dismissively. "My feet are numb, anyway."

Pansy cleared her throat. Hermione stiffened.

"Hello," said Pansy. "Ciao, Granger. Glad you're not dead, it'd be a pain to wipe Malfoy's brains off my jumper. I'll just be going, then, shall I?"

"What, by yourself?" said Hermione. "No, no. You have to stay with us."

“Like any bad party, I appreciate being invited,” said Pansy, her lip curling, “but I’ll make do with a calling card. My father’s out there, and he’s worried sick.”

“Draco! *Hermione!”*

Harry and Ron hurried down the hill. They were quickly surpassed by the bounding strides of Arthur Weasley, who swept down in a midnight blue drawing-gown and a knit cap.

“Merlin’s *blood!* Thank God! Draco! You’re alright? Not hurt?”

“No, sir, thank you.”

“I’m so sorry we lost you, boy, it was pure chaos, when I saw you’d gone I was about to lose my mind — but I had to move the others, we couldn’t wait for you to come back—”

“I should say not,” said Draco, shocked. “That would’ve been— you shouldn’t have even thought—”

“Bill and Charlie are out looking for you,” breathed Mr. Weasley. “I’ll step away and call them back; pardon me for a moment.”

He was touched, and nigh astonished, that they had wasted time looking for him. Harry and Ron shuffled closer, and everyone languished in the sheer embarrassment of relief.

“We wanted to go,” said Ron, breaking the silence, “but he wouldn’t let us. I told him, listen, I can have this done in five: we’ll just listen for wherever the loudest complaining is coming from.”

“A good thought,” he admitted.

“Are you not a confounding variable?” said Pansy.

The four of them looked at her. She cringed.

“Don’t do that, it’s creepy,” she said. “Reminds me of phookas.”

“Where did you come from?” said Ron rudely.

“Your mum’s house. She keeps a Portkey in her bedside drawer,” said Pansy immediately.

Ron’s eyebrows climbed the white cliff of his forehead, with shades of impressment. There was a beat as everyone fumbled for the lost end of conversation, like a bunch of blindfolded snake hunters chasing an asp.

Hermione said, after a moment: “Pansy — please don’t take this the wrong way — but what did you do to your hair?”

The veneer of calm shattered.

“It wasn’t on *purpose!”* she screeched. “I was splinched!”

“Oh! Oh, alright, I’m sorry then—”

“You think I’d go around like this in public if I didn’t have to? You think I’d let the hairwitch escape *alive* if she did this to me? I’d be in Azkaban for murder in the worst degree!”

“Murder in the ‘first’ degree, Pansy.”

“Not the way I’d do it!”

“I think it looks sort of cool,” said Harry, whose own hair did not give him a lot of ethos on the subject. “It’s all shaggy and modern. You’re like Courtney Love.”

Pansy quieted, but remained suspicious. “Who’s that?”

“Er. She’s a musician.”

“...Is she pretty?”

Hermione scrunched up her nose and opened her mouth, and Harry stepped on her foot.

“Yeah, I reckon,” he said. “Everyone talks about her all the time.”

Mr. Weasley galloped back up the hill, dressing-gown a-flapping. “Bill’s coming,” he gasped. “Charlie’s on his way, got caught up helping some Bulgarians out of a bind — he’s going to swing by the Portkey office on his way, pick up something to get us home.”

“Oh, good,” said Pansy. “I’ll be on my way, then—”

“You’ll come with us, of course,” he interrupted her. “Also. I’m sorry. Who are you? I fear Ron’s got more friends every time I turn around.”

It was hard to say whether Pansy or Ron was more appalled.

“I’m Pansy Parkinson!”

“She’s not my *friend,* Dad!”

“Parkinson as in *Prescott,* who’s my father, if that doesn’t ring a bell —”

“Not even an acquaintance—”

“—thank the Lord for small mercies—”

“—a third year Slytherin, she’s like an evil baby.”

“Enough.” Arthur cut across both of them. “Pansy, you’ll come back to the Burrow with us. I’ll contact your father and tell him where you are.”

“I should say not!” She was indignant. “I only came because Draco made me.”

“I did *what?”*

If her wrist felt strained from twisting the knife in his back, she hid it admirably. “I’ll be perfectly fine waiting here myself,” she announced.

“There’s no need to shepherd me back to whatever ‘the Burrow’ is. I’ll just wait here.”

Arthur shook his head. “The riot’s not over. It’s not safe. I’m sorry, dear, but that wasn’t an offer. Harry, will you make sure she gets a hand on the Portkey?”

Choosing Harry was a wise move: Ron was gaping at his father like he was speaking Troll, and even Hermione looked like she had doubts. Harry nodded, accepting this surely painful duty with good-naturedness.

“You’re kidnapping me?” said Pansy, not so much enraged as disbelieving.

“No,” said Mr. Weasley, with much more gentleness than Draco would have, if he were accused of the same by a thankless child with terrible fringe. “We’re getting you back to your parents, just as soon as we can find them. Now, all of you come along; there’s Charlie.”

The dragonkeeper had *cracked* into existence on top of the hill, holding an old tire. He was harried. “Got one,” he yelped. “Basil’s office is overrun, Dad! Everyone wants out of here! Had to call in two favors with a mate from Games and Sports, and then I got jumped on my way out!”

“Thanks, Chucky,” rasped Fred. He and George were bundled up with Percy under a blanket, shivering in their pajamas. “You’re a real mate. You nail any Death Eaters on the way?”

Mr. Weasley flashed him a razored look. Fred fell silent.

“Why don’t we table mention of — that,” said Mr. Weasley, “until we get home.”

“Sure. Yeah, Dad. Sorry.”

“It’s alright,” he said. His shoulders slumped. “It’s alright, boys. I’m sorry to snap. It’s been… a very long night.”

They crowded the tire. Draco got sandwiched between Pansy and Hermione, shoulder to shoulder in the packed circle of tired faces and outstretched hands, and under the limpid green light of the Dark Mark, everyone’s face was pale and wan. He caught Hermione staring at it as though it were a crack in the sky itself, and the whole thing was about to fall down on top of her.

In a thoughtless impulse, he grabbed her hand.

Words were useless, words were drivel and dead cauldronwater, but there was still something to express. She was warm against him like a tiny radiator, generating twice the heat something her size ought to, and in the dark ghoulish basement of his mind a war drum still hammered on like a broken clock. He held on because it was that or get sucked down into that mental cellar and see the first thing he’d thought of when he saw the muggles floated overhead, the worst thing he’d thought of in years, which was an image he would have to carve out of his skull with a scalpel, and a terrible two-word litany: *Not her.*

-pansy my beloved. one of the most fun characters to write. like if you took a pack of nitroglycerin and gave it two pigtails plus a snotty accent

-on the subject of 90's celebrities that pansy may or may not look like, in my head, I always envision her as a young Christina Ricci, who you may remember as Wednesday from the original Addams Family movies. Something about that kid's killer glare just gives me tremendous Pansy vibes, I love it.

-apologies for the lack of hermione, this chapter; the next chapter will have much, much more of her!

-as always, incredible love to the wonderful commenters. my reason for writing!

-next chapter goes up on Friday, as per usual! It's called "Mad-Eye Moody."

Mad-Eye Moody

Chapter 36: Mad-Eye Moody

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

It was mid-morning when the Weasleys and company lagged on foot through Ottery St. Catchpole and made their way down the unpaved lane to the Burrow and the frantic woman standing outside it. She appeared at the first sight of them through the window and ran up the driveway to meet them, barefoot, with a fistful of skirt and soon two arms full of children. It was unclear what portion were hers: she was embracing any she could get her hands on.

She threw her arms around Arthur's neck and kissed him with a little more vigor than Draco thought was necessary. Ron politely made noises of death.

After much too long, Molly broke off. "Boys," she gasped. "Ginny — *Hermione,* your shoes! Get inside at once, I'll draw some water for a bath—"

"Can I have a bath, too?" said Ron hopefully.

"Yes, but after the girls."

"That's sexist."

"No, it isn't," said Hermione.

"It *is,"* said Pansy, thoughtfully. Molly finally noticed her.

"Arthur—?"

"Ah. Yes. Picked her up with Draco," said Arthur. "Her name's Pansy Parkinson, Parkinson as in Prescott." Draco couldn't tell if he was making fun.

Molly and Pansy regarded each other with expressions of equivalent shock. “You brought home the Parkinsons’ daughter?”

“Yes.”

“Alone?”

“Hm. Yes.”

“I see,” said Molly. “And where is she going?”

Pansy had turned around and begun walking back up the path. Bill caught her and dragged her back by the collar.

“Right,” said Mrs. Weasley bravely. “Well. What’s one more?” (Draco thought one more, in a house of twelve, was actually a great deal.) “Come in, dear. Cuppa?”

“I’m not thirsty,” said Pansy.

“Have,” said Molly, “a cup of tea.”

Pansy did.

They crammed into the tiny kitchen. Certain compromises were made with respect to personal space and physical laws. Mrs. Weasley made a cup of eye-watering tea that Mr. Weasley gave a no less eye-watering shot of Ogdens, and they sat in a dull silence of clinking and slurping that was somehow its own comfort. The walls of the Burrow had never seemed more firm and more necessary to his survival than they did now.

When the clock tolled five, Arthur stood up. “I have to go in. They’re going to need all hands.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Percy at once. The two crossed to the door, and a pair of *cracks* sounded beyond it.

Harry was rubbing his forehead like he wanted to erode it from friction. Ron nudged him.

“You're about to start a fire over there, mate.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “It hurts.”

“Does it often?” said Pansy curiously.

Everyone looked at her. It was the first time she had said anything since coming in.

“Not usually,” said Harry. “Just sometimes, when I have nightmares. Molly says it's psychomat- no, hang on— psychosoto...” He looked at Hermione.

“Psychosomatic,” she said. She was tucked into a corner of the sofa and holding herself very tightly, a small and defensive posture that gave the impression at any moment she might burrow between the cushions and vanish.

“Yeah,” he said, “that. Thing where your brain makes your body thinks it's hurting, even when it's not, because it's scared. Apparently it's not uncommon for people who... I mean, if you've seen stuff, and you...”

The conversation dwindled awkwardly, like a swish of dirty water circling a drain.

To Draco's surprise, it was Pansy who intervened, giving Harry an approving jerk of her chin. “Cool. My dad has a magical scar on his back.” She leaned forward on her knees. “He got it fighting a horde of feral muggles in the underground.”

“They’re not animals,” said Hermione coldly.

“Fine. Whatever. Mad muggles, then. It’s what you call muggles that see magic and go crazy,” she said. “Their poor brains can’t handle the shock. Then you have to go clean it up and Obliviate them. *My*

father’s not an Obliviator, that’s busywork, but he has to deal with the residual magic.”

“What was it?” said Harry. “That your dad was doing, I mean.”

She sniffed. *“I* don’t know. My father’s an Unspeakable, all his missions are classified.”

“What does an Unspeakable do?” said Hermione.

“Are you deaf? I just told you, his missions—”

“They’re the Ministry’s covert operations unit,” Draco said quietly. “They work in the Department of Mysteries. Platinum-grade clearance only.”

Hermione gave him a quiet, fleeting glance of gratitude. He shrugged. It wasn't as if it were particularly impressive knowledge to hold.

“Dad’s silver-grade, for reference,” Ron told her.

Hermione turned to Pansy. “So your dad’s a spy?” she said bluntly.

The other girl flicked her eyes at the ceiling. “If you wanted to be painfully simplistic, I suppose. It would be more appropriate to say he's a top-clearance political operative. He isn't running around in fake mustaches and silly hats. I see you got your metal off, by the way. Mazel tov. Does this mean you’ve become a woman, in muggle custom?”

“What?”

Pansy rolled her eyes and bared her teeth.

“Oh. I did, thank you,” said Hermione stiffly. “And it doesn’t mean anything except that my teeth are healthy. If you were a friend, I might suggest you get some, actually, yours are slightly crooked.”

Pansy turned scarlet and sealed her lips like a seam. “I beg your pardon?”

“Well, it's true. It's nothing to be ashamed of, most people need them.”

“I believe you'll understand,” said Pansy thinly, “if I don't take cosmetic advice from *you.”*

“Parkinson,” said Draco, mostly from exasperation, as the other three recoiled in varying states of distaste. Harry sat up straight and scowled, while Hermione — against whom this accusation was terribly unfair, really; she was quite put-together, most of the time, with the sole exception of her hair — suddenly found something of great interest in her clasped hands.

Ron said “Oi,” calmly but firmly, and Pansy made a little scoff, but still fell silent; Hermione was unusually subdued.

It was a bad moment, feeling-wise, for everyone.

“Oh, God, silences this long should be illegal,” said Pansy. “Bugger this, I'm going to get some air.”

She stood up, wrenched her jumper straight, and stalked out of the room with the airs of someone on six-inch heels, instead of a pair of muddy loafers. The door clattered emphatically behind her.

“Little bint,” muttered Ginny.

“She's just spoiled,” said Hermione calmly, though she was still staring at her hands. "Her teeth *are* crooked. It would do her good if more people told her things she didn't like to hear."

Then she looked sidelong at Draco, as if she expected him to say something. He didn't. He was glad Pansy had the good sense to remove herself before something more pyrotechnic happened. He didn't trust her and Hermione alone together in a small space for

more than five minutes; neither had the patience to deal with each other. It was an unfortunate remark on his social situation that most of the girls he knew well had more personality than patience.

The fire blazed green. They cleared a small space for Arthur Weasley to stumble over the grate.

“Ministry inquest,” he said breathlessly. “Aurors dispatched for questioning. Everyone out—”

Too late. The fire turned green again, and there was a screeching and thumping of furniture as everyone tried to clear yet more space in a living room that was already all but bulging outwards at the seams.

Three men stepped over the grate, one at a time. The first was a short, pug-nosed man in a double-breasted black uniform, with his hair slicked within an inch of its life to his skull. The second was Barty Crouch. The third was an auror.

He wore an oily brown leather greatcoat over his auror’s uniform and a wand holster with a longknife strapped to it. A dirk sat on his other hip, while two handles jutted from his boots, and another holster disappeared under his jacket. He had a beady blue glass eye and a shag of silver hair, and the only face Draco had ever seen with more scars than Remus Lupin’s.

The auror hopped the grate with an agility quite unfit for his age, and planted a gnarled walking stick on the rug. Crouch stepped aside, clearing his throat, and the glass eye swiveled around to follow him. In fact, the glass eye never left Crouch, no matter where the auror was looking.

“Mad-Eye,” said Arthur, with surprise and faint warmth.

“Arthur.” The auror, Mad-Eye, scuttled over and exchanged a grim handshake. “Sorry to intrude. Prissy Parkinson here insisted.”

“Quite alright, I understand completely. Mr. Parkinson, I’d like to apologize—”

Prescott Parkinson pointed his wand at Arthur.

“Where is my daughter?” he said, in a calm steady voice, with a calm steady hand.

Crouch massaged the bridge of his nose. “Prescott,” he began. “We talked about this—”

“Put that down!”

It was Molly, come in from the kitchen; she drew her own wand and jabbed it at the intruders. “Not here! Not under my roof!”

“If someone doesn’t answer my question, you will soon have very little roof left to worry about,” said Parkinson. “My daughter. Where is she?”

“Touch Arthur, and in a minute she’ll be scrubbing her father out of the carpets,” snarled Mad-Eye.

Prescott turned to him, and there was a beat of intense silence.

Just when Draco was certain that the next word spoken was going to be a curse, the door banged open. Pansy stalked in, followed by a harried Bill.

“Father,” she said. “Finally. Do you know how long I’ve been stuck in this hovel?”

Parkinson dropped his wand. A change came over him completely. “Poppet,” he breathed, and dropped down to embrace her. Pansy hissed and danced out of reach.

“Dad! No! God! *Not in front of the auror!”*

“What happened to your hair? Didn’t Mummy offer—?”

“Nothing! Nothing!! Don’t draw attention to it!”

“Prescott,” said Crouch tiredly, “you have acquired your daughter. Acquit yourself.”

Nodding stiffly, Parkinson turned to Arthur. “We require use of your Floo,” he bit out.

“We don’t have any powder,” said Arthur calmly. “If you want to Apparate, you’ll have to go out to the yard.”

Without a word, Prescott Parkinson silently swept his daughter out of the room. Draco didn’t meet her eyes as she left, and she didn’t try to meet his.

“I apologize for the interruption,” said Crouch smoothly. “Prescott insisted on joining us. We’re here to conduct interviews.”

“Interviews?” piped up Fred. “Are we going to be in the paper?”

“Not if you know what’s good for you,” snarled Mad-Eye. Fred paled.

“All eyewitnesses will be questioned. Starting with Ministry officials and their guests. Someone breached Ministry security — someone on the inside.”

“Is that an accusation?” said Molly coldly.

Mad-Eye softened, insofar as the word ‘softened’ meant anything, for him.

“Molly,” he said.

“Hello, Alastor. Lovely to see you. Answer the question, please.”

“It's procedure,” snapped Crouch. “A hundred employees and their families have been interviewed already. Starting with the inner circle.”

“Oh, yes? *All* of them?”

“Sibelius Nott has been under questioning since sunrise, as has his fourteen-year-old son. Please do not think I fail to understand the gravity of the situation.”

Draco startled.

“And the muggles?” said Arthur.

“Obliviated,” said Crouch. “Having their memories modified as we speak. When they wake, last night will be a strange dream.”

Molly was skeptical. “And how do you intend to explain what happened to any other muggle witnesses?”

“Gas leak,” grunted Mad-Eye. “Cockridge and Peaseblossom hacked up a pipe near the closest town, and they’re leaving a tip-off in with the muggle paper.”

“Hard to do better,” Arthur admitted. “But the children were with me all night. You can question me, instead.”

“Arthur,” said Molly, disapproving and sharp.

“All of them?” said Mad-Eye. “The whole night?”

“Yes.”

“Dad, that’s not true,” said Percy quickly. “Malfoy left the tent, remember?”

Ron made a furious noise. *“Perce,* you great fat snitch!”

The unwitting elegance of this betrayal left Draco slightly impressed. The Minister and Mad-Eye both confronted Draco with new interest.

Hermione stood up suddenly. As gestures went, hers warmed him, but he actually rather wished she’d stayed out of Mad-Eye’s

sightline.

“What? It’s true!”

“He’s fourteen,” said Molly loudly. “I repeat, fourteen.”

Crouch ignored him. “Mr. Malfoy, is that true?”

Draco nodded jerkily.

“He went to get water,” said Hermione. He was torn between wanting to thank her and wanting to clamp a hand over her wretched wonderful fearless mouth. “He was thirsty and the tents don’t have plumbing, and anyway, I’m certain there are thousands of wizards you can’t account for, it was havoc. Draco’s hardly an unusual case.”

Crouch acted as though he hadn’t heard her. “A quick interview,” he said crisply. “We’ll make it short—”

Mad-Eye grunted in disapproval. “No. *Prior incantato.”*

“Really, Alastor?”

“No special treatment, Barty.”

They traded a strange, knowing look. Mad-Eye did something with his cheek. Crouch clicked his tongue. Mad-Eye did it again. Then Crouch sighed and flapped his hand and Mad-Eye turned back to Draco, faintly smug, as if he had won something.

“Draco, listen,” said Arthur quickly, stepping between him and the Ministry men. He spoke in a low voice. “You don’t have to cooperate. You’ve got a right to an attorney. Alastor would be the first person to tell you that.”

Mad-Eye made a grunt that could be interpreted as agreement. It could also be interpreted as homicidal intent. All in the eye of the beholder, was Mad-Eye.

Draco felt an unexpected touch of affection for Mr. Weasley.

“I’m aware.” Come to think of it, he didn’t know how to get ahold of Gatz, if he needed to; they didn’t have Floo powder. But the Ministry men didn’t need to know that. “It’s fine. I haven’t anything to hide.”

The kitchen was cleared for his questioning. The others shuffled upstairs or into the garden and closed the door, leaving the Burrow eerily quiet, animated only by the dripping faucet and the creak of floorboards as people tried to eavesdrop upstairs. Mad-Eye and Crouch sat on one side of the table, and he sat on the other.

He pulled out his wand, flipped it, and held it handle-out. He tried not to show how it unsettled him. A man wasn’t supposed to be separated from his wand.

Mad-Eye took it by the handle — his index and third finger were covered by a dragonskin wand-guard, and a rather expensive one; Draco wanted one on sight — and lifted it before his glass eye. He grunted at whatever he saw, and gave it an experimental swish. “Do you know its properties, boy?”

“Do I? Please. Ten inches, hawthorn wood and unicorn hair. Pliant.”

“Hawthorn, eh?” Mad-Eye danced it over the back of his fingers, a gesture that was facially useless but patently cool. Draco wondered how he did it. “Any good at healing magic, are you?”

He wasn’t about to bloody well say *no.* “Better at jinxes, sir.”

“I see. The second wizard, then.”

“...Sir?”

“You know the saying about hawthorn,” muttered Mad-Eye, though he didn’t. “Every tree makes two wands. The first is for a healer, and the second is for the wizard who keeps them in business.”

He suspected he had been accused of a murderous nature. It wasn't impossible, but at fourteen, it seemed a touch premature.

"I'm not an expert in wandcraft," he said delicately.

Mad-Eye snorted. "Hark at him. 'I'm not an expert.' Lucius Malfoy rides again. And Merlin wept."

Crouch cleared his throat in discomfort. Draco narrowed his eyes.

"Forgive me, but I have a hard time believing you knew my father. Sir."

"I knew his backside well enough when I was chasing it over hill and dale," said Mad-Eye, with a certain gleam in his real eye. It reminded him slightly of the Weasley twins. "Enough chatter. Let's have a look at you. *Prior incantato."*

The hawthorn wand trembled, and from its tip issued a length of white mist. The mist took the shape of a lock.

"Colloportus," said Crouch with satisfaction. "And some time ago, judging by the color. What was that for, Mr. Malfoy?"

"I locked my trunk before I left Hogwarts, in June. Is that enough?"

Mad-Eye spun the hawthorn wand around and handed it back to him. "Hardly," he growled. "You could've cast the Mark in a dozen ways we'd never know about. You could've stolen someone else's wand. Obliviated them. Or made one of them do it. Arthur Weasley could be under Imperius as we speak."

Draco folded his arms. "I'm flattered," he said, "but we don't learn Unforgivable Curses until next year."

Neither of them laughed at his hilarious joke.

Crouch stood up. "We've spent enough time indulging your habit for conspiracy, Alastor. The boy didn't do anything. Mr. Malfoy, I

apologize for the interruption. Please enjoy the rest of your summer vacation, if you can."

The glass eye swiveled around to follow the other wizard as Crouch stalked out of the kitchen. Mad-Eye waited and then leaned over the table, bringing his pitted face altogether too close to Draco's. "Remember what I said," he muttered.

"...About what, sir?"

The eye stayed trained on something behind his head, giving him the unnerving impression of a glassy white sclera. The other eye was cold and bright and wide as a dinner spoon. "Absence of proof is not proof of innocence. That's what no one at this kangaroo court of a Ministry can get through their heads. No one is *ever* innocent until you have the man who did it at the point of your wand." He paused, and when Draco thought he might have blown a gasket in that old ramshackle machine of a head, he shrieked: *"Constant vigilance!"* and Draco shouted and banged his knee on the table so hard that he was still nursing it when Mad-Eye scuttled out.

"Just a spell? That's all?"

"You sound disappointed. Would you rather I was put to the thumbscrews?"

They were in Ginny's bedroom, where Hermione was finishing her last-minute packing before they departed in the morning. (The 'last-minute' phase still occurred several hours before Draco intended to so much as think about packing at all.)

He sprawled sideways over the pillows while the Cranberries fought to be heard over the bellow of rain on the tin roof. The evening light dappled through the water on the windows.

"I had hoped it might build character," she said. He smirked at her. "But what they did is much more interesting. So a wand keeps a

history of its uses? Like a ledger?”

“More like a palimpsest, I think. It only showed the last spell I’d cast.”

As befit the privileges of Only Girlchild, Ginny’s room was nicer than Ron’s. It was covered in peeling yellow wallpaper and Weird Sisters posters, as well as a Holyhead Harpies pinup calendar that Hermione, amusingly, couldn’t look at without blushing. (Draco could, and did.) A small bed was wedged in the corner, and Hermione’s sleeping pad had been rolled out on the floor beneath the window.

She pulled a garment bag from Ginny’s closet and paused in thought. “That’s still fascinating. Flitwick told us a wand is a conduit, like a vessel for water, but a vessel doesn’t remember the nature of what it holds.”

He turned a page of *Quidditch for Seekers*. An advertisement for riding gloves featuring one of the Bulgarian beaters winked at him. “It can still keep traces.”

“But that doesn’t make sense, because the spell should end once you’ve stopped casting it. How can you have a ‘trace’ of a spell like *Colloportus?* It doesn’t produce anything. If anything, it’s just a particular form of motion, moving the tumblers in a lock. It’s the same concept as *Bombarda,* or *Ventus.”*

“Fine, I’ll bite. How do *you* think it works?”

“I don’t know! I really don’t! But I do have a theory.”

“Shock. Surprise,” he said, turning another page.

“It would be simple to test, if only we could use magic — I suppose it’ll have to wait. But if your wand has memory, like a computer—”

“Objection. Refer to the Granger-Malfoy Treaty on Use of Muggle Analogies.”

“You analogize to things I don’t know *all the time*— no, never mind, we can’t do this again. If it has memory, in theory, you should be able to retrieve prior spells other than the last one. Possibly without going in order.”

“Very exciting. Of course, without limits, your theory implies that your full spellcasting history is accessible through your wand, which obviously can’t be the case.”

She had a special pout reserved for whenever he said one of her theories was demonstrably incorrect or impossible, especially because of things she had no reasonable ability to know. It was deployed now in full force. “Why not?”

“Because it could have been used to exonerate Sirius Black,” he yawned. “‘Did you blow up those muggles? No? Very good, sorry to bother you, have a nice day.’ Now, he still tried to kill Pettigrew,” he added, “so it doesn’t necessarily get *him* anywhere, but the point stands.”

“It’s possible they haven’t figured out how.” Sudden bursts of energy to her brain often stalled her in other places, and so she had been gripping the same garment bag, half-folded, for several minutes. “Spellwork is some of the most complicated magical theory. Especially metamagic, spells having to do with spells themselves. There’s a reason wandwork is so hard.”

He deserved an Order of Merlin, Second Class at least, for not making a joke about ‘wandwork.’

She was quiet again, and he put down the magazine.

It had been two days since the Dark Mark. Hermione had been unusually subdued since then, although out of respect for her and an obvious recognition of its probable cause, no one had — as far as Draco knew — yet commented on it. He found himself waiting for the right moment to broach the subject, but it was never good, it was never not awkward or inappropriate or a violation of some unspoken

rule of engagement that kept their little rapport buoyant and tugging along.

And he was embarrassed, too: embarrassed because when he'd seen her on the hill, there had been a full minute or thereabouts where he hadn't thought a thing else, and that was alarming, in its own way. There was a wildness and rough-edgedness to those feelings that he didn't care to directly address. He didn't like that she'd seen him that way. She knew that about him, now. If she wanted, she could throw it in his face. Just because she hadn't didn't mean she couldn't.

He shifted uncomfortably. "Alright, Granger?"

"Of course," she said, with a funny look. In fairness, he hadn't exactly told her what he meant, which was: *Are you unaffected by watching a family of muggles being tortured for possession of the very blood that flows in your admittedly magical veins? Are you processing the information that certain people want to hurt you, Hermione Granger, very badly, in a healthy way? Because certain other persons in this room are not.*

The rain drummed on the windowpane like another musical instrument. He was struck by the idea that if they stayed here, in this room, then there would never be a need to concern themselves with Death Eaters ever again. Her blood status would be irrelevant, being that there were only two of them; it would be terribly easy. He could lay hexes on the doors, the windows, the cracks in the walls where the wind slithered in. And Hermione would be alright. And he would get to relax, for once in his life, because he wouldn't have to worry about anyone getting herself hurt when his back was turned.

Ridiculous idea. She'd hex him in half for the suggestion, anyway.

"What?"

"What, 'what'?"

“You’re staring.”

“I’m not,” he said immediately. “I don’t suppose — you don’t need any Sleeping Potion, do you?”

Her hand hesitated on its journey to the sock drawer. Then she resumed with a certain brittle businesslike vim. “Not recently,” she said. “I haven’t had trouble sleeping. More than usual, anyway.”

“If you do.”

“I’m fine.”

“I know.”

“This isn’t the first time — I mean, in second year, someone wrote a threat in *blood* over the Pink Lady—”

“I know,” he repeated, curtly. “I remember. But you’d be entitled—”

“I’m not some delicate muggle-born naif—”

“Obviously not, and neither am I, but one still might worry.”

He hadn’t meant to say that.

“You worried?” she said curiously. “I wouldn’t have think it was as awful — for you. Considering. No offense.”

She had a habit of appending *no offense* to statements that were heedlessly tactless, as if that helped. Still, it was endearing that she tried.

“Don’t be daft,” he snapped. “Only an idiot wouldn’t. Muggles floating in the sky, insurgents everywhere, it was madness—”

“Death Eaters, you mean.”

“We don’t know that for certain. It could have been a hoax.”

“The muggles looked fairly real,” she said, slightly acerbic.

“No, clearly, but the wizards might have been anyone. Death Eater was a real title, it referred to a fledged soldier of the Dark Lord, and there aren’t that many of them left. If everyone in masks at the Cup was a former Death Eater, it would mean everyone left in Britain showed out. No, it’s more likely that the group was inspired—”

“I think the kind of people who use Death Eaters for inspiration,” she said, “aren’t so very different from Death Eaters, actually. From my point of view.”

The beat that followed was distinctly guilty.

“Fair,” he said.

“I’m not afraid of them,” she said firmly. “Death Eaters or not, whoever they are.”

“Merlin’s sake.”

“I mean it, I’m not. I’m not going to run away from them. They can do whatever they like, they’re pathetic, and I’m not frightened—”

“I respect that you’re a Gryffindor and have to save face,” he said, with dwindling patience. “But it might occur to you one of these days that cowardice and wisdom are not mutually incompatible qualities.”

“Would you rather I was *afraid?”*

“I *want* you to save your own skin,” he said, irritably, “so as to save me the trouble of doing it.”

“Oh, because it’s such an inconvenience to you, is it—”

“More of an irrational compulsion,” he drawled, and hoped that the sarcasm would dry out any hidden evidence of feeling. He flicked another page of the magazine.

Hermione seemed taken aback. Her fingers curled tightly around the side of a hanger, and she fidgeted with a loose thread, absentminded.

“Were you — worried about *me?* At the Cup?”

He glared at her over the top of his magazine, lowered his eyes, and said nothing.

“You were scared — for me?”

“I shall reiterate the situation,” he said, “since it may have slipped your mind. Explosions. Killing Curses. Muggles in the sky. I was worried for everything living in a five-mile radius, I don’t know why you think this is some revelation.”

“But for me in particular. Specifically.”

“What do you want from me, witch? A signed confession? *I, Draco Malfoy, do hereby declare I should not desire the violent and premature death of Ms. Granger, chiefly from aversion to the disastrous inconvenience of finding a new potions partner?* Fine. Yes, in particular,” he said sourly. “Go on and laugh.”

“I don’t think it’s funny,” she said, still slightly startled. Now that was starting to annoy him, too. It wasn’t *that* ludicrous for him to care. He had a beating heart, for God’s sake, he wasn’t some cretin. “I worried about you, too — in particular — obviously. You know that.”

“That’s different,” he said. Hermione would have been worried if bloody Pigwidgeon went missing. If poor Ronald had misplaced himself, she’d have mobilized the Queen’s navy by sunup. He would have been insulted if she hadn’t shown a bit of nerves, honestly. “As you said, it’s not the same for me.”

She hummed in thought. “I wanted to go looking for you,” she said, absently. “Me and Harry volunteered. Mr. Weasley stopped us.”

He cast a sharp look at her over the magazine. “It’s a bloody good thing he did,” he said curtly. “I never took you for a lemming.”

“That’s rich! *You* went running off by yourself. And how did you end up with Pansy, anyway?”

“That was an accident.”

“Alright, then don’t tell me.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Mm. You just ran into her after midnight, then. On accident.”

“I entreat you to take that implication and stuff your woeful mouth with it. That’s heinous, Granger, she’s a *child.”*

“She’s almost our age,” she said, but she was very bad at repressing laughter. “I’m sure Harry would have done the same with Cho, if—”

“That’s enough.”

“—half a chance — or Fred and Angelina, I’m sure he knows a dozen ways to sneak out—”

He tossed the magazine onto the bed and sat up. Crookshanks glared at him balefully for jostling the mattress. “Right. I’m going to go vacate my intestines into a toilet bowl, and once I’m finished, if you’d care to act like a gentlewoman, I’ll return, and we can revisit *other subjects* of conversation.”

“You’re such a boy,” she laughed, and threw a pillow at him. He caught it with ease, snickering. He had a seeker’s reflexes, and she had what you could only generously call ‘reflexes’ at all. “You act like you’re *so* different from Harry and Ron, but you’re really just as silly as they are, only with a posher accent.”

“I am not,” he said indignantly. “I am a gentleman.”

“A posher accent,” she repeated. He scoffed.

“So what, then? You’re a girl.”

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. You are, aren’t you?” he said vaguely, and when he glanced up she was looking at him. She was wearing her light-wash jeans and a two-tone muggle shirt with sleeves more sheer than the camisole beneath, so one could see her soft birdlike arms and pointy shoulders through the film. She didn’t dress like this at Hogwarts. It was very hard to forget she was a girl when she was wearing such different clothing. Maybe that was why the subject hadn’t come up until now.

A lock of hair drifted into her face, and she blew it away. He followed the movement with his eyes.

“Your mother thought I was a boy,” she said finally.

“So? That doesn’t mean I did,” he said. “I don’t keep her abreast of everything that goes on at school, either. I think the werewolf and her disinherited cousin would be more of a shock than the fact that I’m mates with a girl.”

“Being ‘mates’ doesn’t mean you can’t *mention* it,” she said, with a sulky lilt. “I mean — and I don’t care, mind, it’s obviously not important, but — you never even used a pronoun? How often did I come up?”

“Often enough, and what did you expect? ‘Hello Mum, Granger looked *ever* so womanly today, as we brewed a Polyjuice Potion illegally in the second-floor girls’ bath, of which she is one, a girl, of the feminine sex. Yours, Draco.’”

“Trust you to miss the point,” she said, and set about folding her socks.

“Apparently I have missed it, because I wasn’t aware you had one.”

She was putting a real dent in the sock population. It was brutal. The day would live in infamy in sockdom.

“My point,” she said emphatically, “is that — I’m a girl.”

He stared at her.

“I *know* that. We’ve only been discussing it for about five years now, I have acquired the gist.”

“Good!”

“Yes, good.”

He had no idea how they had ended up in an argument, which meant, on experience, that he was on the verge of losing.

“...Are you angry, Granger?”

“Don’t be silly,” she muttered. “Why would I be angry? We agree. Like you said.”

The socks were packed into their soldier’s graves, row upon row of sad white tombstones, and sealed away in the tomb of her trunk. She sat on the lid to get it closed, with a bit more force than was necessary.

“I’m glad we have an understanding,” he said suspiciously, and returned to a magazine. She rolled her eyes and went to change the CD, which had skipped into static.

Getting a bit cryptic these days, was Hermione.

On Hermione’s suggestion, Mrs. Weasley ordered muggle taxis into London. Draco generously decided not to resent her for this, despite the fact that it meant all eight of them — the four schoolbound

Weasleys, their guests, and Mrs. Weasley, Mr. Weasley being still stuck in the glut of post-Cup madness at work — had to cram into three musty-smelling green taxi cabs, along with their trunks, four owls, a cat, and a case of Filibuster's Fabulous Wet-Start No-Heat Fireworks, which would not have been a problem had Fred's trunk not sprang open at the first red light.

Draco, pinned between Harry and the door, put his head to the window and concentrated on not being sick. Crookshanks used every leg he could find as a stretching post. The stop-and-go traffic lurched them around the packed cab, which smelled of something sour and earthy and also, bizarrely, of pineapples. He tried to roll down a window and was yelled at by the driver for letting rain into the car.

He concluded that driving was a fresh hell that Hermione and Harry had both become inured to by exposure, which raised his respect for both of them, but when he tried to tell them so, they assured him that most car rides "weren't like this," for his next one would be "much better," and the very idea of a "next one" reduced him nearly to tears.

Everyone was better when they got outside. Hermione scooped Crookshanks from out of the cabbie's lap, apologizing profusely. Fred scraped the burnt firecrackers out of the cab under his mother's immolating gaze. The rain soaked them in an instant, and this leant a somewhat hurried, unsentimental quality to their goodbyes. Nobody was congregating to chat on the platform this year, and the convivial spirit, damp but undaunted, migrated onto the train, where people were drying off with Warming and Siphoning Charms in every aisle. Magic hummed overhead, that taut, wavery quality like air over hot pavement.

Piling into the compartment, the four of them shucked their wet clothes and let them dry over the luggage racks. "I can't believe I don't get new dress robes," moaned Ron. "Everyone else did. Harry got them. Fred got them! Even Ginny got a new dress."

“What do you even need dress robes for?” said Hermione. “You never wear them.”

“They’re on the school list! Dunno why there’s so much bloody new stuff this year.” He flopped his threadbare copy of *Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4,* which wore the marks of three careful owners and two not-very-careful ones: its cover clung to the spine by four spindly threads, like bony fingers. “Why do I never get new things?”

Hermione clucked her tongue and ran her wand over the back in what must have been its umteenth Mending Charm. “I’m sure that your mother does the best she can. You said things were getting easier, now Percy has a job.”

“Yeah, but now Ginny’s getting bigger, and she gets all new stuff, because she’s a girl,” he said sourly. “And Percy doesn’t like paying for us. He wants to spend all *his* money on nice robes and snooty quills.”

Draco subtly adjusted the sleeves of his robes, which were, of course, new, and a soft midnight black, cut from the finest cotton that Madame Malkin had to sell.

Pigwidgeon chose that moment to erupt in a fit of screeching. Ulysses, Thucydides, and Hedwig all glowered as if deeply ashamed to share a species with him.

“See?” Ron pelted an Owl Treat at his cage. “Even my owl’s rubbish.”

There came a tap at the door. It revealed a yellow-haired girl in a Slytherin tie, with a milk-white canyon of scars running from her right ear to her left jaw, and disappearing into the folds of her collar.

Hermione’s breath hitched.

Daphne smiled bravely. “Boo,” she said. “Hullo, chaps. Surprised?”

“Merlin’s taint,” said Ron. “Your face.”

Draco pulled out his wand and jinxed him. Ron’s tongue sealed to the roof of his mouth, and he gave a panicked grunt.

“Ron,” said Hermione furiously. “Daphne, it’s really — you’re lovely as ever, and really well — I’m sorry—”

“Oh, what, like you think I didn’t know?” Daphne tittered. “Yes, it’s a big honking ugly scar. Just hideous. I shall never be an actress. May I sit down?”

There was a beat.

“What,” said Harry, bewildered, “with us?”

Another beat. Daphne, caught in the compartment door, faltered and folded her small white hands around the handle of her trunk.

“Unless you’d object.”

“No,” said Harry, “but it’s just — you’ve never sat with us, before.”

“I was never invited. You four are *dreadfully* insular. You’re a harder ticket than Queen Charlotte’s. I was all aflutter to be invited to your Christmas party. I thought: ‘Now I’ve really made it, the Gryffindor Four are letting me in.’” She gave a nervous, tinkling laugh. “I don’t mean to put myself where I’m not wanted, of course. I suppose I can go sit with the first years or something—”

Ron scooted over on the seat and patted it. With obvious relief, she dropped with a bounce onto the seat between Ron and Harry, legs swinging girlishly.

“Well!” she said eagerly. “What shall we talk about? Muggle sports?”

A number of furtive stares ricocheted around the compartment.

“No, then,” she said. “No muggle sports. That’s fine. There’s plenty to talk about. Do you want to know what I did with my summer? I’ll tell you anyway. I read through the complete novels of Philomena Guinea. There are forty-seven *in toto,* and each one involves a strapping warlock fighting for the hand of a pureblood gentlewoman unwillingly affianced to her rich blood-traitor cousin. I won’t spoil the rest but if you like the kind of book where people are always ‘frozen in astonishment’ at the ‘fathomless depths of his onyx orbs’ then boy, does Miss Philomena *ever* have a story for you. Hermione, in fact, there’s one that you might like — the princess is only a *half*- blood in it, and she has four cats. Are you all this quiet all the time? Stop staring, I feel like I’ve spinach on my teeth.”

She turned to Harry. “You’ve got a scar on your head,” she said, belligerently, “and nobody stares at you.”

“They do, actually,” he replied. “These ones are just used to it.”

“But yours is such a neat little shape,” she said thoughtfully, touching her cheek. “I, er… how long was it, would you say? Before your friends were used to it?”

Apropos of little, Hermione said: “Won’t the other Slytherins sit with you, Daphne?”

Daphne smiled. “What do you mean? Everywhere was full.”

“...Every compartment?”

“Oh, thereabouts!” she said. “I don’t want to bother them. It’s not a pleasant thing to be reminded of, and I can understand… how one might think…”

She paused.

“Well, I might as well get right out in front of it,” she said fiercely. “I don’t know who came up with the idea that I’d caught lycanthropy, but you should all know it’s not true. I’m very well and I keep myself

very clean.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “So you haven’t anything to worry about.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open. He could hear her mentally adding Daphne to her collection of endangered objects, a coterie that was as large as it was motley, and he was unsure whether or not Daphne would be glad to know she was in it. Hermione hoarded lost and broken things like dragon’s gold.

If it made her occasionally annoying, well, he had an annoying streak himself, anyway.

“We’re not worried,” said Harry loyally. “Lupin was our friend. It wouldn’t matter if you were a werewolf.”

“But I’m not,” she snapped.

“Oh. Okay.”

The train chugged on in silence through the coursing rain.

“I’m human,” Daphne said.

Ron unstuck his teeth with a monumental effort. “H’llo,” he managed. “Y’lk. Wkuh.”

She blinked at him. “I beg your pardon?”

“You. Look. W’cked,” he said, and drew his finger down his cheek. She brightened.

“You’re a dirty liar, Ronald Weasley,” she said. “And if you weren’t so nice to me, I’d give you the scolding you deserve. Now — oh, who’s there?”

There was another knock on the compartment door. It revealed Theo, whose arm was in a sling, and Pansy, who was lurking in the background, eyeing all of them with mistrust.

“Theo!” said Daphne happily. She wriggled over, nearly sitting on top of Ron, who grumbled and made a sliver of room on the seat. “Pans! Come join us.”

Pansy burst into a suspicious fit of coughing.

“Tempting,” said Theo, and his voice could have dried a lake. “But I can’t. What are you doing here, Daph?”

“I wanted to catch up with everyone,” she said, without batting an eyelash. “I haven’t seen these chaps since before the summer. Where have *you* been, anyway? I looked for you for— longer than a gentleman has any right to make a lady look.”

“That’s my fault, we got caught up. Crabbe wanted to have a word about the League.”

“He’s not joining, is he?” Daphne was astonished. “Vince?”

“Unclear. He said he’s ‘interested,’ which is the first time I’ve heard him utter the word, so I don’t really know what it means.”

“But he’s not political! Vince? *Vince!”*

“It’s not all politics,” said Theo sorely, as if this were the third or fourth incarnation of an argument. “It’s a social club, we have speakers and things. Honestly I thought you’d be happy for him, you’re the one always getting on his case about having no hobbies.”

“Drinking in stuffy rooms with old people isn’t a hobby, it’s a career,” said Daphne hotly, “and Vince hasn’t got the brains for politicking. He’ll insult someone’s wife by accident and end up in St. Mungo’s. It’s irresponsible to let him join.”

“Come and save him, then,” suggested Theo, leaning against the door. “We’re rounding up for the first meeting.”

“On the train?” said Hermione shrewdly. “Jumping the gun, aren’t you?”

He shrugged. “It’s easier to schedule when we’ve got everyone in one place. Anyway, are you coming, or not? You’re welcome too, Draco,” he added, nodding at him. “But Pansy suggested that your summer activities might incline you to spend your time elsewhere.”

Draco’s stomach gave a queasy flip.

Hermione took a sharp breath and stared at him. He wished she wouldn’t; on the one hand, it felt like she wasn’t giving him enough credit, and on the other, it felt like he was being forced to decide something critical and important whose nature he could not begin to name. Why couldn’t he just have all of what he wanted at once?

He waved his hand lazily at the door, as if he couldn’t be bothered to move from his seat. “I’m not walking the length of a train for your Parliament of Prats. If I wanted to be bored stiff, I’d go sit with the Ravenclaws.”

“Have it your way,” said Theo. His voice revealed nothing. He jerked his head at Daphne. “Seriously. Daph. Come on.”

“I’m not sitting with them,” she said.

“Then stand, damn you, or I’ll carry you. Everyone’s there, they’re waiting.”

“They wouldn’t sit with me before,” she said, in a hard voice. “I’m not going to sit with them now, just because they’re scared of you.”

There was a thin dark silence, like the ice in the center of a frozen lake.

Theo stepped back from the doorway. “Fine,” he said. “Fine. I — okay. Whatever. I don’t actually care. Sit with the rabble if you want. Hell, go live with them, apparently that’s what Draco’s doing.”

Ron gave a cry of outrage, but Harry was already on his feet.

“I reckon she was pretty clear, but maybe you’re so thick you need someone to spell it,” he said. “She doesn’t want to go. And we don’t want you to stay. That means you’re leaving, and she’s not coming with you.”

“Isn’t she?” said Theo crisply. “Isn’t she, now!” He turned to Daphne. “Should I tell them what you said about blood traitors at Beltane? Or will you do the honors?”

“Just go,” she said miserably. “Theo, I’m sorry. I can’t go to the meeting. I’ll — I’ll join next week or something.”

“Fine. Or don’t. I really couldn’t care less.”

Which would have been more convincing if he hadn’t slammed the door.

Hermione let out a long breath, and sagged into the wall.

“He’s not bad,” said Daphne in a small voice, to no one in particular. “He’s a good person. He cares a lot. He’s under a lot of stress now, that’s all.”

“Yeah, what could *that* be like?” said Harry. “I guess none of us would know.”

Draco snorted.

“They make me nervous,” said Hermione. She was watching the compartment door. A frown twitched her brows together. “I don’t know why.”

He frowned at her.

“They make me sick,” snarled Ron. He propped his chin in his hand and stared out the window, his face streaked by the shadows of raindrops. “‘Live with pigs.’ Posh little wanker trotting around like he owns everything. Just because his dad’s got a Ministry connection. My dad could’ve had a promotion whenever he wanted…”

“Don’t let them get to you,” said Hermione bravely. “You just can’t let them get to you, that’s all. That’s giving him what he wants.”

“I’ll give him what he’s asking for, one of these days,” Ron said darkly. “For me and for you.”

Draco folded his arms and slid back into his corner. Meanwhile Ron and Hermione exchanged a broken trapjaw of a smile, which left him feeling like a man standing outside of a warm cottage in the rain.

And we're back to Hogwarts.

-Daphne my beloved! We'll get more from her later. There are several asterisks by her name in my outline for this year.

-Oh, dear Hermione.

-I am completely confident that Hermione is the kind of girl who organizes her socks by material and day of the week. Draco is the kind of person to whom it has never occurred to use "organize" and "sock" in the same sentence. This is still an improvement over Harry and Ron, who are on distant terms with the word "organization" at all.

-As always, a metaphorical bouquet of extravagant roses to everyone who commented! Next chapter is "The Triwizard Tournament."

The Triwizard Tournament

Chapter 37: The Triwizard Tournament

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The carriages rattled through thick gauntlets of mud, swaying in the wind. Through the mirrored darkness of the window, he watched Hogwarts swell out of the rain, its golden windows blurred into watercolor shine.

Lightning flickered behind Gryffindor Tower as the carriage shuddered to a halt at the foot of a huge stone staircase, which unfolded from an enormous pair of oak doors. Draco jumped down from the carriage, splattering mud, and held out his hand for Hermione, who had hesitated to climb down with an armful of cat. After some deliberation, she tucked the moaning Crookshanks under her robes, planted her hand in his, and hopped down.

“Evening, Hagrid,” Harry hollered. The giant groundskeeper stood by the doors, lantern aloft, to count the students as they hurried into the warmth behind him.

“All righ’, Harry?” Hagrid bellowed back, waving. “Goin’ ter get the firs’ years. See yeh at the feast if we don’ drown!”

“They can’t be going on the lake in this weather,” said Draco, horrified.

“It’s tradition!” said Harry cheerfully. “They’re all wet anyway.”

Draco shared a glance with Hermione, who silently shook her head at him, shrouded in her cape like a nun.

The Great Hall always seemed especially lustrous at the start-of-school feast. A host of floating candles poured light like melted gold light from a bespelled ceiling, the shining host plates and goblets

catching the light on each long table, and festive garlands glittered on every window. After the storm, the dry warmth of the Great Hall enveloped them like a welcome embrace.

The Heads of House stood at the doors to the Great Hall, ticking them off on rosters. Draco caught the eye of Professor Snape, for whom a summer of sun and rest had done nothing but make him paler and more tired; he exchanged a nod with his godfather before reporting to Professor McGonagall, who was wearing a festive new red-feathered hat and a tiny gold Ireland pin.

“Draco Malfoy, Professor.”

“I know quite well who you are, Mr. Malfoy,” she said, with a hint of mischief. “And Mr. Potter. A belated happy birthday.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, grinning. “Er — you wouldn’t happen to know anything about a broom-polishing kit, would you, professor? One of my presents came without a note.”

McGonagall peered at him severely over her spectacles. “I know nothing of the sort. Of course, if you have a broom-polishing kit, you should endeavor to use it; old brooms require more care than new ones. But anyone would tell you the same. Miss Granger, hello, and I apologize for ignoring your letter about partial transfigurations — stop by my office tomorrow, I have an article I think would interest you.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Hermione rapturously, and Draco had to tow her into the Great Hall to stop her from starting a symposium right there in the doorway.

At the Gryffindor table, Colin Creevey had high hopes for his brother Dennis, who would be sorted that year.

“Got his letter in May! Two in a family! Isn’t that mad? And I told him Gryffindor was it! The place to be! The *only* place! Best house by a mile! This is the house that’s got *Harry Potter* in it! Oh! Hello, Harry!!”

A flashbulb snapped, and Harry, who had been wringing out his socks, gave a groan. “Not *now,* Colin, look at us.”

“Oh! Yeah! Course! Didn’t realize! Sorry!!”

Draco threw himself down and raked a wet coif of hair back from his forehead. “The other one had better get Hufflepuff,” he said grimly, “or I’m transferring to Durmstrang.”

“‘The house that’s got Harry Potter in it,’” muttered Ron, throwing himself down with bad grace. The bad mood had carried over from the train ride, understandably, since harsh rain and bitter cold were not known for softening tempers. “Yeah, no, a thousand years of wizarding history, a top quidditch team, four Head Boys in the past six years, but no, we’re *Harry Potter’s* house. No offense, Harry.”

“None taken. That guy sounds like an arse,” said Harry.

The first years were late that year, straggling in soaking wet and goggle-eyed with wonder nonetheless. To the disgruntlement of many, Dennis Creevey was Sorted in Gryffindor.

“Guess what! Guess what!! I fell in!” he announced, throwing himself into an empty seat. “It was brilliant! And something in the water grabbed me and pushed me back in the boat!”

“Cool!! That was probably the giant squid, Dennis! They feed first years to it, if you’re late to class.”

“Wow!” said Dennis. “Cool!!”

“Dennis! Dennis! See that boy down there? The one next to the brown-haired girl? See him? Know who he is? That’s *Harry Potter!!”*

Harry cringed and turned his head. Draco, on the other side of Hermione, cut a lazy salute at Dennis.

“No pictures, please,” he drawled. “It’s hard enough, saving the wizarding world, but I’m just trying to enjoy my evening like the rest

of you."

Dennis' eyes turned wide as moons. "Sorry, Harry," he gasped, and whipped his head around to stare at his plate.

No sooner had the first course been cleared from the table than the doors to the Great Hall swung open again, and a clap of thunder sounded from the torrent outside. Draco, who had more important concerns related to achieving the ideal gravy-to-mashed-potato ratio on his fork, didn't look up until Hermione elbowed his ribs.

"Oi, look," said Ron, startled. "It's Mad-Eye."

Draco disengaged from his mashed potatoes in time to see the man silhouetted in the doorway. He threw back his hood and strode with military precision toward the teachers' table.

"What's he doing here?" wondered Hermione.

"Additional security?" suggested Draco.

"Doubt the Ministry would send Mad-Eye, if it were," said Ron absently. "He was in the Order of the Phoenix. Leftie as they come, but a bit of a crank. Bet Runcorn hates him. Dad says he's not popular."

"What's the Order of the Phoenix?" Harry wanted to know.

"A rogue militia, back in the war," said Draco quietly. "They fought Death Eaters. Hunted them."

"...Didn't the Ministry do that?"

"Ostensibly, but who knows," he said, flourishing his fingers in a *don't-ask-me* gesture. "The books describe most of the fighting as taking place between the Order and the Death Eaters."

Hermione turned to him. "Did the Ministry do *anything* to try to end the war?"

“One: yes, assuredly, but you can’t go running around committing government-sanctioned extralegal killings, so if your enemies *can,* it’s useful to leave some things to private enterprise. And anyway, for two: when you say things in that tone, it makes me hesitant to talk to you about them, because I worry you’re going to go blow up a building or something.”

“Maybe it needed blowing up,” she muttered.

He considered this, and admitted it was true.

Mad-Eye reached Dumbledore. He stretched out a hand that was as badly scarred as his face, and Dumbledore shook it, murmuring something inaudibly. He seemed to be making some inquiry, to which Mad-Eye shook his head and replied in an undertone. Then Dumbledore gestured to the empty seat on his side, and Mad-Eye sat down.

“May I introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?” said Dumbledore brightly into the silence. “Professor Moody.”

There was a slightly confused spatter of applause.

“He dropped out to teach?” said Harry, confused.

“I don’t think so,” Ron said, frowning. “Maybe he’s on sabbatical. I don’t remember. He’s only been working part-time at the Ministry recently, anyway.”

“What happened?”

“There was a scandal, I think. Don’t know if it ever came out just what... Dad would know.”

“We could just ask him,” said Hermione. “We’ll have him for Defense, after all.”

“You do that,” said Ron meaningfully. “He looks like he’d take a chunk out of me for trying.”

As the Feast wound to a close, the plates vanished from each table. Full and content, they turned with the others to the staff table, where Professor Dumbledore had risen. The buzz of chatter dimmed to a burble, and then a silence, as the headmaster took the podium.

“I will not erode your evening with overelaborate welcomes, though I must insist on my prerogative to issue one, most warmly, to all who return! I hold too great a respect for your time, as students, to deliver a commencement address that includes any but the most immediate points of import, for which I require a brief loan of your absolute attention.”

If anyone had been murmuring before, they stopped now.

“I remind you, as ever, that the Forbidden Forest — contrary to the beliefs of many — was not named ironically, and any students inclined to brave its depths should be wary of the dangers that lie there. The village of Hogsmeade, our neighbor, is similarly barred to all below third year. Filch begs me to remind you that he will enforce this rule with every instrument of punishment at his disposal, which — though he has been denied the pleasure of the thumbscrews — are nevertheless, if I do say so, quite sufficient deterrents. Thirdly,” he said, amidst rising titters, “the Inter-House Quidditch Cup will not take place this year.”

There were many loud and profane objections to this, and none more loud nor more profane than Harry’s, who had to be hauled down by his robes to prevent him from standing up in protest. Draco thought for a moment that real violence was going to break out. He considered joining in.

It was unfair, verging on cruel. Quidditch was one of his few hobbies that didn’t involve sitting at a desk and arguing with Hermione. Without it, he really did worry that they’d kill each other.

Ginny clung to George’s sleeve. “He’s joking, isn’t he? They can’t do that! I mean, it’s — it’s quidditch! Quidditch!”

“It doesn’t sound like he’s joking,” Hermione said happily. She was smirking like none had smirked before. She was smirking like she held a monopoly on the expression. She smirked like the smirking market was about to go up in flames, and she was liquidating all her stocks.

“Quiet, please,” said Dumbledore kindly, and in a ripple of what could only have been magic, the students’ protests broke off like someone had ripped out a speaker. “We have the honor of hosting an event of much greater importance this year, as for the first time in a century, we have been granted commission from the Ministry to hold it. I announce, therefore, with no small degree of gratitude and honor, that Hogwarts will be hosting the Triwizard Tournament this year.”

“Holy shit,” said Fred.

Belatedly, he remembered that the Great Hall was dead silent.

Laughter exploded from the Gryffindor table, dissipating the remains of the Silencing Charm. Professor Snape drew his wand to repeat the enchantment, his face a dour rictus of disapproval, and most of the faculty looked like someone had forced them to gargle a lemon. Professor McGonagall delicately lifted her nose.

A groundswell of chatter swelled in the wake of Fred’s announcement. Excitement surged through the Hall like an electric current. There was much whispering and speculation, largely positive, though there was no small amount of dismay — Marcus Flint, the Slytherin captain, was swearing furiously, which probably marked the first time in his life he shared common cause with Ginny Weasley.

Snape had to cast three more Silencing Charms before the assembly regained any semblance of decorum.

“The selection of the three champions will take place at Halloween. An impartial judge will decide which students are most worthy to

compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and a thousand galleons."

Now there was no way to suppress the excited murmuring.

"I am sure every Hogwarts student is in some way worthy of the honor," Dumbledore said, which made Draco chuckle, he had to admit. "However, the heads of the participating schools, along with the Minister's delegation of tournament administrators, have agreed to impose an age restriction. Only students of seventeen years or older may put their names forward for consideration."

Fred and George groaned a duet: they were seventeen in April. Complaints broke out, but Dumbledore raised his voice above them. "This is a measure we feel necessary, given that the tournament tasks will require some of the most difficult magical handiwork any of you have ever done, and we are not so overrun with underclassmen that we feel the need yet to cull them. Please, for your own sake, do not attempt to enter; it will not work, and you should not want it to.

"The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will arrive shortly. That is all," said Dumbledore politely. "Good night!"

Chairs scraped on the stone as a vast, slow-moving mass of chatter lumbered towards the oak doors. Throngs pooled in the antechamber, babbling excitedly about the announcement, while prefects tried in vain to corral them. It was somewhat strange not to have Percy Weasley peering down his nose and prattling endlessly about the architecture of the hallway; and indeed, Peeves seemed somewhat put out that his favorite target for water ballooning was gone. Draco thought, with a strange resonance, that at least half the people who had been at Hogwarts in his first year were gone, and thoughts of this strange changing-of-the-guard preoccupied him as they returned to the familiar grueling stairwells.

Ron and Harry were calculating how much quidditch gear you could buy with a thousand galleons. Hermione, who neither could nor would ever spend a galleon on quidditch, was rattling off facts about

the Triwizard Tournament at top-speed, perhaps in the fear that someone else would get to them first.

“...and they used to invite other schools, Ilvermorny and Koldovstoretz and the ones from North and Central Africa, and the European schools, of course — what’s the German one called? It’s only called ‘tri’-wizard because the first one ever had three in it. They’ve gone back to those competitors now, for tradition I suppose, though it’s a shame — I’d just die to see how they did things at—” She said a word that Draco didn’t understand, with clicks in it. “But who do you think the champion will be? It’s likely a Ravenclaw, they tend to do best in exams… or a Slytherin, I imagine they’re the type to want the prize…”

“Yes, wanting a thousand galleons, a notorious Slytherin trait,” said Draco.

“You know what I mean. Eternal glory, ambition, cunning, those things. It’s not an insult.”

“Glory is a Gryffindor value,” he remarked, but she didn’t seem to hear him, for Ron had an epiphany.

“Hey! Angelina’s seventeen, she could do it! She’s a tough nut. Plus she’s got an O.W.L. in Charms.”

“I hope she doesn’t,” said Hermione fervently. “Champions have died during the Tournament before. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. You don’t think they’ll make us watch, do you?”

“No, but you’d better, if Angelina gets it.”

“The best money is on Cassius Warrington, for what it’s worth,” he drawled, trotting the last few stairs.

“The Slytherin?” said Harry, betrayed.

“Naturally. He’s the new Head Boy. Top grades, top breeding, spotless record. It would help his career, and he’s got the skills. It makes sense.”

“He’s a bit of a prat,” said Hermione, tactfully.

This was undeniable. Cassius had a fervor for taking points and a scrupulous eye for dress code violations. Lavender Brown had once lost fifty points to him in a week.

“Even so. Dumbledore never said that the judges ruled on moral character. Personally, I wouldn’t want the Hogwarts champion to be some soft-hearted team player.”

“In that case, why not Marcus Flint?”

“First, because Flint thinks his fists are hammers and every problem is a nail, and second, you don’t have to be an utter toad to have an edge,” he said patiently. “Whoever goes in for Hogwarts ought to be properly ruthless.”

“That’s quite nearsighted, don’t you think?” she said thoughtfully. “You don’t even know what the challenges are. You’re assuming they’re going to be feats of athleticism or daring.”

“What else?”

“I don’t know, but there’s more to being a wizard than being good at magic.”

“A good wizard is *by definition* someone who’s good at magic,” he said, aggrieved. “That’s the whole point.”

A fire crackled in the common room, scattering light on the leather armchairs and dark wooden tables. Hermione and Ginny said goodnight and disappeared up to the girls’ dorm, while Draco, Ron, and Harry retreated to the same small room full of four-posters they had inhabited for three years.

A house-elf had lit a fire in the grate and left a warming pan between the sheets, so the bed was warm as a bed of sun-baked gossamer. He donned black pajamas and crawled under the coverlet, listening to the storm run itself ragged against the windows.

“I hope the twins find a way to get their name in,” Ron said sleepily, his voice coming soft through the dark. “They’d be bloody good. I bet they’d win the whole thing.”

“Go to sleep, Weasley,” said Draco, but he imagined it nevertheless. The Hogwarts banner flying over a crowd of devastated Frenchmen and Bulgarians, a silver cup the size of Dennis Creevey, overflowing with galleons; though in his imagination, the champion’s hair was not red, but white.

And the crowds were going hoarse for cheering, and Hermione, who was sitting in the front row, was surprised and envious, but smiling, as if she had to admit that after all, she had been wrong, and he had been right, he *could* do it, she had believed it all along — and as she came up to the stage, saying something about how brilliant he was, her hair flew in her face, and he knelt at the side of the podium to speak to her — when she brushed it back, she was still smiling, and he was smiling, too — and then the scene dissolved into a quidditch pitch, and he was flying, and with the typical thoughtless logic of dreams, he couldn’t remember where or what he’d been doing a moment ago.

He slept, in his warm corner of Gryffindor Tower, and for once he did not dream of monsters.

By the middle of September, one couldn’t last an hour inside the castle without hearing mention of the Tournament. Speculation about the nature of the champions’ tasks ran wild (Seamus Finnigan, whose uncle worked for the Ministry, claimed that there had been talk of manticore jousting, which the public received with unanimous and unqualified delight). Wilder still, however, ran speculation about the nature of the other schools. Where fact failed, the rumor mill

hastened to supply. On different occasions, Draco heard it said that Beauxbatons was a delinquent school for troubled girls (no comment), a convent (untrue, and no comment), and a training program for young Veela (no comment, for the communications representative committed ritual suicide on the spot). Durmstrang, as Draco had suggested, caught a lot of flak for the crime of being somewhere cold and Soviet.

“That’s hardly fair,” he pointed out. “It’s just because they’ve got a share of unsavory alumni, which everyone does, including Hogwarts. And their academic program is robust. My parents considered sending me to Durmstrang.”

“Understandable. Counterpoint,” said Hermione. “Your parents did not, historically, consider the practice of the Dark Arts to be a complete deal-breaker.”

He gave an unkind laugh. One of the nearby Ravenclaws turned around and stared at him. He sobered up and scowled at the little swot until she squeaked and turned around again.

“Granted,” he said, sprinkling some doxy wings into their cauldron. “But they don’t teach Dark Arts, they teach about them. There’s a difference, though apparently the nuance is lost on some people.”

“Seems sort of dodgy.”

“Only if you consider ignorance a form of safety.”

She drizzled Essence of Murtlap in small concentric circles. “I’ve always wondered about why we call them the Dark Arts. As if ‘good magic’ and ‘bad magic’ are just different sorts of spells, and not fundamentally a question of how the wizard wields her power in relation to others… and it’s not as if any form of magic is inherently corrupt, is it?”

Their potion smelled like cinnamon and honey, and with the addition of the doxy wings had turned the color of hot chocolate. He prodded

it with a stirring wand. “You’re asking me, or the Ministry?”

“Either,” she said, shooing his fingers away.

“Then no, it’s not. I’ve lived in a house full of Dark heirlooms for years, and it hasn’t done anything to me.”

“The opportunities for jokes here are unbearable.”

“Watch it. Anyway, Durmstrang hasn’t produced any more Dark wizards than Hogwarts. What they do produce more of is competent and high-ranking aurors, which should give us all something to think about. You think it’s done?”

“Yes. Let’s see if we can supersaturate it.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Other classes proceeded with a sense of queer anticipation. In Defense Against the Dark Arts, Mad-Eye proved irascible and animated, full of what could only be described as a bloodthirsty joie de vivre, and impressed them all by demonstrating the Bat-Bogey Hex on Neville’s pet toad during the first lesson (“for morale,” or so he claimed, when Professor McGonagall chased him down the hallway bellowing about pedagogy). Arithmancy had progressed to first-order derivatives, which Draco only accepted because it freed him and Hermione from the tediums of Double Divination on Mondays, which Ron and Harry reported consisted mostly in gazing at a crystal ball and portending vaguely of one’s own doom, until you left, having secured the O, but depressed.

There was another difference between their schedules. On Tuesday mornings, instead of bundling up and crossing the lawns to the groundskeeper’s hut, they went to a sunny, cozy classroom on the second floor, near the Hufflepuff Common Room, where a smiling, large woman named Charity Burbage sat in a plush armchair and taught Muggle Studies. In fourth year, this mostly consisted of

learning about electricity and some newfound muggle fruit called a McIntosh.

It took no more than the first day of Care of Magical Creatures to assure him of his choice. Ron and Harry came back with charred fingertips from handling Blast-Ended Skrewts.

“Hagrid asked for you,” Harry said, somewhat accusingly, as Hermione cast *Episkey* over his blistered palm. The skin stitched itself together and flushed to a healthy brown. “We told him you were sick.”

“And what did you do that for?” sighed Hermione, flipping his hand over to do the other side. “He’s going to find out eventually.”

“Tell him yourself, then! He was holding an explosive slug, I wasn’t going to tell him you’re not coming back.”

Draco leveled his quill at him. “Statements like that are why we dropped the class.”

“He’s our friend,” said Harry stubbornly. “He’s still finding his stride. He only just got his certification this summer.”

“It was no picnic, if you ask Charlie,” muttered Ron. He shuffled forward for Hermione to repeat the spell over his hands. “He’s not, er… academically-minded, is Hagrid.”

Draco threw up his hands. “Of course not. Why on earth would that be a quality you’d want in a *teacher?”*

On a Wednesday in late October, a gigantic rust-colored barn owl dropped in the middle of Draco’s omelet. It waddled over to Harry, who lit up with excitement.

“It’s from Padfoot,” he said. “And Moony. They’re in Egypt!”

Draco, surveying the fallen kingdom of his breakfast in gloom, failed to celebrate.

“‘The news about your scar is the latest in a series of strange rumors that have reached us here. If it hurts again, go straight to Dumbledore… they’re saying he’s got Mad-Eye out of retirement, which means he’s reading the signs, even if no one else is. We’re traveling north, so we won’t be able to write again for a bit. Our best to Ron, Hermione, and Draco.” He held it out to Hermione, who snatched it at once and began scanning for double meanings. “All our love,” he finished, somewhat thickly, “P and M.”

“You didn’t tell us your scar’s been hurting again,” said Ron.

“It isn’t. I mean — not much.”

“Damn. Does it have something to do with the Cup? All those Death Eaters together… say, you don’t think you’re psychic, do you, Harry?”

“Yeah, reckon so. Hang on, there’s one coming on now: *Ronald Weasley, you are about to lose something dear to you, which you will never recover.”*

He stole Ron’s cinnamon bun and popped it into his mouth.

“HEY!”

Draco peered at the letter over Hermione’s shoulder. “They’re coming north?”

She tilted her head so he could see better. “North could mean anything. If they’re in Egypt, ‘north’ means all of Europe.”

“Or they could be coming to Hogwarts,” Ron suggested, through a mouthful of Harry’s toast. “Trying to see Harry. They might think — oi! Easy!”

Harry had just pounded himself in the forehead.

“I’m an *idiot!”*

“I understand your disappointment, Potter, but you’ve got other good qualities,” said Draco, with great sympathy.

“I shouldn’t’ve told him! It’s made him think he’s got to come back!”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “Or maybe he’s just coming for the climate. Either way, Padfoot is his own man, and he’ll go where he pleases.”

“But there’s nothing wrong with me!”

“You’re very thoughtful, Harry,” said Hermione. “But whatever Sir—”

“Padfoot.”

“—whatever Padfoot does, thank you, isn’t your responsibility. He’s a fully grown man, and so is L— Moony. God, these names are *stupid.* Why couldn’t they have come up with better ones?”

“‘Mione,’” said Draco.

She pinked. “Shut up.”

“I think we should have cool nicknames,” said Ron thoughtfully. “Say, we’ve already done worse than they did. Bet *they* never broke the law.”

“They became animagi at thirteen,” said Hermione, deeply skeptical.

“So we’re a little behind, but not by much. Say, it’d be bloody cool to transform into an animal, innit? Wonder which I’d be. Hate to go through all that effort and get stuck as a rat or something.”

“You can choose,” said Draco, mopping pumpkin juice irritably. “It’s not like a patronus. I expect Wormtail chose his form so he could scout for them.”

“Blimey, how do you know that?”

“There’s this funny thing that happens when you open a book, Ronald, where your eyes start moving and information goes into your brain.”

“We talked to Professor McGonagall about it,” Hermione added, spoiling his quip. He gave her a look of betrayal as she passed the letter back to Harry. “She offers an elective on becoming an animagus to seventh years, but she won’t teach the method to anyone who’s not of age. I think she’s quite right, too, she makes it sound incredibly dangerous, and positively horrific if you get it wrong. She had pictures. *Eugh.”*

Those pictures had cured him of any desire to follow the Marauders’ footsteps. He shuddered.

“Well,” said Harry, “that just makes it metal.”

“It *is* metal,” agreed Ron, decisively, and took a bite of pumpkin-juice sodden toast.

Beauxbatons and Durmstrang arrived on an overcast evening in early October, and the school piled onto the lawns to watch.

Draco drew his cloak tighter about him in the crisp air, and jostled with the other tall students for a better view. Since none of them were exactly clear where they were meant to be looking, this meant a lot of friendly shoving in no particular direction, more or less to pass the time. The wind snaked around their ankles and raked its teeth over any bare inch of flesh.

“There!” shouted a sixth year, pointing.

The ground near the lake trembled and bulged. It shuddered. It frothed. The grass vanished under a tide of upturned dirt, which rose around the growing maw of a yawning crack in the ground. Students scrambled back from the crevice, shoving and climbing over each other in their haste not to fall into the gap. Several unlucky

bystanders had to be *Wingardium Leviosa'd* to safety by a professor; one poor swot caught a Levicorpus.

Out of the crevice rose a tall black spire. It rose to a height of ten feet, then twenty, and then a cone of green-copper shingles emerged from the earth beneath it, rotating gently while the earth around it shuddered and quaked. At first, Draco thought it was a strange sort of metal tent, but when the lip finally crested over the earth he realized it was the roof of a carriage. Beards of ivy, somehow perfectly preserved despite their recent subterranean state, trawled over the metalwork and hung in flattering curtains around the windows, dotted with pink flowers. The windows glinted under a pearlescent blue sheen, and nary a speck of dirt clung to the immaculate white flank, as if someone had ripped the picture straight out of a vignette by the Brothers Grimm.

Ron couldn't resist elbowing Draco. "Do you see that? Look! It's enormous!"

Draco, who had hidden his hands in his sleeves like a monk to keep them warm, glanced cursorily up at the carriage and snorted. The snort turned to fog. "Tacky," he said. "Filch will spend a myriad repairing the turf."

"The turf! Where's your sense of childish wonder?"

"I lack a sense of 'childish' anything," said Draco, a child.

Indeed, the doors to the carriage had swung open, and people had begun to spill forth from within. At the front of the crowd stood a tall, lightly muscled woman with pale hair in a receding half-moon hairline, tamped down to her scalp under a suffocating lacquer of gel. Sometime in her clearly numerous years, her bodily reserves of fat and muscle had resigned from poor working conditions. She was a woman of some age, but handsome enough, if you were into giants and also skeletons.

"That'll be Beauxbatons, then."

“How can you tell?”

He jumped. “Where did you come from?” he demanded of Hermione, who had materialized at his elbow.

“The library,” she said breathlessly.

“You were doing Runes without me?”

“Not Runes,” she said impatiently. “Another thing. Who’s the tall woman?”

“The Beauxbatons headmistress. Olympe Maxime.”

Behind her trailed an ordered line of students from Beauxbatons. They were shivering, which wouldn’t have been surprising except that it revealed nobody had told them to wear more than a silk shawl on a visit to Scotland in October. Their uniforms were identical sets of cornflower blue, with pleated skirts for the girls and white pants for the boys. The boys wore busboy caps, and the girls wore cloche hats.

Dumbledore and Madame Maxime traded a few words, and then she made a lazy, indolent, *well-go-on-then* gesture at her students, and they started up towards the castle. Filch hurried forth to guide them, his lantern aloft in the dimming twilight.

“Aw, piss,” sighed Ron. “I thought we’d get to talk to them.”

“There’ll be plenty of time for fraternization. I imagine they’re just as eager as we are to get out of this bloody cold.”

“Oi, who’s ‘fraternizing’? I want them all to eat it in the Tournament. I’d just like to meet them first, is all.”

A small smile bent Draco’s mouth. “Even if our champion is a Slytherin?”

“Scratch that, disclaimer: if Warrington’s champion, I’m transferring.”

“You wouldn’t possibly,” said Hermione, yawning. “They don’t have a quidditch team, Beauxbatons. You’d be miserable… although honestly, that might be better for you *and* Harry’s grades. Do you hear that?”

“Between your prattle and the sound of my own teeth chattering, I can actually hear very little,” said Draco.

“Shut up, then,” Hermione said absently, cocking one ear. “Listen, I think there’s something coming from the lake.”

She was right. Down by the shores of the lake, the air shimmered like a heat mirage over black-top, only it couldn’t have been heat, since the temperature dipped closer and closer to freezing with every moment. A strange humidity weighed the air, turning every hair on Draco’s arms upright. Static skittered along his clothes.

A neon black line opened in midair, like a wound in the universe. It sprouted a second dimension and swelled to a black square, approximately two meters tall and across, sending billows of wind across the lake. Small bursts of lightning sparked and fizzled out on the edges. It remained there, suspended a few inches above the ground, unchanging for the better part of the minute. As the seconds ticked by, Draco worried that something had gone wrong.

Then a black dragonhead mast glided out of the void. It was long, gleaming lacquered wood, with teeth carved from whalebone and a body that wrapped seamlessly into the head of a ship.

The vessel was a love letter from Gothic splendor to baroque extravagance, written in a beautiful and ornate hand: a rail of wrought-iron lattice, sculpted into the shape of flowers and plants and small animals, rimmed the dark slate of the deck, atop which rested four vast sails so white they almost glowed green through the fog. Smoky silver glass rimmed the cabins, and ornamental struts of age-tarnished gold formed clawed feet from which the rigging protruded. Up and among these riggings climbed a hundred

animated skeletons, skittering here and there to bring the ship into dock.

An anchor in the shape of a whale's skull tumbled from the side, and then a plank lowered like an outstretched blade to the beach.

A man marched out. He was small, but the sleightness of his build was somewhat hidden under the enormous ruff of his mantle, which pooled at his ankles in a foam of red and black. He wielded a long dragon's-head cane whose point seemed a fair bit sharper than any walking stick should require.

Behind Karkaroff, the students of Durmstrang had dressed in similarly appropriate winter wear, hidden under fur coats and thick leather cloaks. Many of them wore tall coonskin hats. Unlike the Beauxbatons students, they appeared in more or less good spirits, and chattered amicably to each other as they filed out of the ship (which must have been bigger on the inside, or else the students of Durmstrang were very well-acquainted with each other). Some of them were laughing. A couple pointed at Hogwarts and gave audible exclamations of delight, as in: *My God! That's a big castle!*

"Dumbledore!" said the headmaster, shrilly. "How are you? Are you well? I'm wretched. I hate traveling. One of my students threw up on the ship."

"A crime of passion, no doubt," said Dumbledore serenely.

"I would have turned him into a dormouse," said the headmaster grimly, "but your man at the Ministry was very clear about the restrictions of British law. Well? Shall we stand here and stargaze, or will you invite us in?"

Dumbledore stepped aside, and Karkaroff stalked into the light cast by the open doors to the Great Hall. He paused, and snapped his fingers at the crowd of Durmstrang students behind him. "Hello! Come! *Bez provolochek,* Viktor!"

A student hurried out of the crowd. He was swarthy and short, almost drowned in the thick overcoat of his school uniform, but when the wind raked back his hood it revealed a short crop of black hair and a face that drew gasps from the crowd of Hogwarts students.

Ron gave a war cry. He shook Harry's arm.

"Harry!"

"Yeah! I know! I saw him!"

"What is it?" demanded Hermione, whaling on Draco's cloak. "I can't see! Did something happen?"

"No," said Draco, who was so distracted he forgot to be annoyed at her. "That's Viktor Krum."

"Oh," she sighed. "I thought it was someone interesting."

The doors to the Great Hall swung closed with a thunderous creak. The staff followed the students to their seats, herded in file by Dumbledore, Maxime, and Karkaroff. At the sight of Madame Maxime, the delegation from Beauxbatons jumped to its feet with a great scraping of benches and shuffling of feet.

(Both Hogwarts and Durmstrang found this move to be a rank bit of lick-arse, and the collective groan of irritation was shared.)

The Beauxbatons delegation took no notice, and did not sit until their headmistress had assumed her seat to Dumbledore's right. Karkaroff flanked him at left. A fourth chair remained empty to the right of Madame Maxime, and halfway through the meal it was occupied by, of all people, a harried Barty Crouch.

Along with the regular fare, the kitchens had seen fit to prepare an additional variety of foreign foods for their guests. A vat of some shellfish stew sat next to a casserole dish of aubergine. Puffed and

golden-brown pastry sandwiches rose in a pyramid from a large platter to Draco's left, while a tray of roasted snails sat untouched between enormous tins of shepherd's pie.

When they had eaten their fill, Dumbledore rose from his seat.

"Hello! Welcome! I extend you all my warmest thanks for coming, both on my own behalf and that of the school.

"A word about the Tournament before selection begins. There will be three tasks, spaced throughout the school year, and they will test the champions in many different ways. One champion will be reaped from each of the participating schools. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the Tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire."

He nodded at the casket. Wandless, without so much as an incantation, the lid slid back and a large white goblet rose from its depths, its bowl hewn from an ivory so pale it could have been bone. But short of a giant's skull, there was no creature large enough to yield a bone that could be carved into a goblet this size: it would require manipulation of the sort that even Hermione struggled to master.

"Ahem," said Dumbledore, and blue flames erupted out of the cup.

Gasps ricocheted around the chamber. Draco wasn't altogether impressed — conjuring flames was relatively easy, especially if one wasn't too picky about the quantity or where they went after you made them.

"All students of age seventeen or older wishing to submit themselves for consideration must write their name and school clearly upon a slip of parchment and drop it into the goblet," said Dumbledore. "Aspiring champions will have two weeks in which to put their names forward. At the end of that week, the Goblet will return the names of

the three it has judged most worthy to represent their schools. The Goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely accessible to all those wishing to compete.

“Both I and the Ministry wish to impress upon all of you that this tournament is not to be entered lightly. Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, they are obliged to see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your bid constitutes a binding magical contract. There can be no change of heart once you have entered your name. Please be very sure, therefore, that you are wholeheartedly prepared to compete before you submit your name. Good luck to you all, and may you judge wisely what you do.”

The students from the other schools filtered out of the Great Hall, shepherded by their respective headmasters.

Crouch remained and sipped from a small cup of coffee. To his right, Mad-Eye Moody was staring at him with the most furious frown he’d ever seen on a member of the faculty, and he’d seen Professor McGonagall after Slytherin won the House Cup.

“What’s his problem, I wonder?” said Hermione.

“Who knows,” said Harry.

“Who cares?” said Ron. “Draco, look. Warrington’s putting his name in.”

This was indeed enough to distract Draco from the staff table. Cassius Warrington had crossed the hall and was approaching the Goblet. A knot of fellow Slytherins stood off to the side, cheering him on. He got caught behind one of the boys from Durmstrang, who trotted up to the cup, dropped his name in, and strolled away. When Warrington succeeded, the Slytherins gave a little cheer.

“What are the twins doing?” Hermione said sharply. Fred and George had lined up behind Warrington, and both held slips of paper in their hand. “They can’t, they’re not seventeen!”

“Tell that to them,” said Harry.

The twins were next in line. They linked arms, grinned at each other, and lifted their hands together to drop their names into the cup. But as their hand passed over the blue flames, they let out a twin cry — Ron half-rose out of his seat, startled — and snatched their hands back. Nearby students shouted and recoiled from the sight: their fingers had shriveled, the nails split and crumbling away from blackened beds, the skin charred to cinder-gray.

“I believe it was made clear,” said Mad-Eye, cutting across the chatter in a loud voice, “that supplicants to the title of champion were to be of an age no less than seventeen.”

The twins whispered frantically at each other, scurrying away from the Cup. Hermione made a harsh sound of disapproval.

“That’s horrid,” she said. “I can’t believe the Ministry approved any of this.”

“Yeah, it’s awful,” said Ron distractedly. “Hey, can any of you see where Krum went? I want to see if we can get his autograph.”

“I’m serious! This is dangerous! They could’ve been hurt! Who lays down that kind of enchantment in a school for children? I want to have a word with Mr. Crouch.”

Draco was watching the upper table. Crouch had stood up and was talking to Mad-Eye Moody in low tones. Neither of them looked happy. Crouch gestured at the Gryffindor table, and Mad-Eye’s eye swiveled to surveil it while he continued to argue with Crouch. Draco glanced away, to the Goblet, where a group of Beauxbatons students were standing on tiptoe to put in their names.

Constant vigilance.

“Why now?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

He nodded at the Goblet. “Over a hundred years since the last Triwizard Tournament, and they bring it back now. Why? Dumbledore wouldn’t put it forward. Neither of the other headmasters seem too happy about it, either.”

“It’s a game,” said Harry simply. “Don’t they want to compete?”

“No,” said Hermione suddenly. “I understand. You’re making a point about — the timing, politically.”

He jerked his head in a nod. “What does the Ministry want to say about Hogwarts?” he said quietly. “What does it mean that we’re hosting? It’s a disruption, an academic distraction, and as you said, it’s dangerous—”

“You’re thinking too much,” said Ron idly. “It’s a tournament. The competition is the point. It proves you’re the best.”

Draco stared at him.

“You know, Weasley, sometimes I wonder what could happen if you kept your brain activated all the time, instead of just taking it out for walksies every blue moon.”

“What? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You said it exactly. The competition *is* the point. It proves you’re the best.” He pointed his chin at Cassius Warrington, who was holding court with a group of Slytherin upperclassmen. “And when the best looks like that?”

It would be all over the *Daily Prophet.* He’d make headlines even if he didn’t win, but if he did, it would be all anyone could read about: *Warrington Heir Wins First Triwizard Title in a Century. The Pride of Slytherin Strikes Gold.* There would be interviews and sponsorships, and a photograph of Cassius Warrington, a strapping blond Slytherin

Head Boy, shaking the Minister's hand, plastered across every flat surface in Britain.

"There's no reason to assume the Hogwarts champion will be a pureblood," said Hermione. "You're assuming one will. Most students here don't have pedigrees, you know. Angelina's a halfblood."

"No. I'm saying the *Ministry* is assuming it'll be a pureblood, for reasons that I'm certain I don't have to explain to you."

Her expression changed. She worked her jaw furiously, as if trying to break the argument between her teeth. "I understand," she said finally, "but surely they couldn't — it's incredibly dangerous! I understand some people at the Ministry don't really care about — I'm not delusional, I know it's not as though they all — but aren't they worried about their own children getting hurt?"

Someone needs to fix Hogwarts… It used to be the greatest wizarding school in the world.

"It's about tradition," he said.

"Tradition," she said, as if it tasted sour. "The *pureblood tradition* of having children get hacked to pieces for a thousand galleons and a made-up title."

"You wouldn't get it," he said absently. He almost envied her for that.

She threw down her fork and stood up. "Yes," she snapped, "as you've made me *very* aware before, there are a number of things I don't get about your stupid brainless 'pureblood traditions,' because I'm not born into it. And by the way, in the *real* world, things like child endangerment and neglect are *crimes.* I think the truth is that there are a hundred things about the way you live that just don't make sense if you happen to give a damn about other people!"

His head whipped around. He could feel the force of her anger, like a physical heatwave, leaving his face was tingling and numb.

“I didn’t mean that,” he said, feeling rather like he was staring at the crunched remains of a teacup he’d just stepped on. She kept fuming at him, obviously unconvinced. “And what do you mean, ‘the real world’? This is real.”

“Then don’t — don’t—” Her hands spasmed, as if she wasn’t sure whether she wanted to rip out her hair or his. “Don’t talk to me like that,” she snapped.

“Like *what?”*

“Like it’s — you know — some sort of chore to explain things to me. Like you’re so exhausted with telling me things you had the good luck to be taught growing up. Well, I’m *sorry* to bother you with it, you know, I don’t *like* feeling like I’m stupid, but I sleep about four hours a night trying to read as much as I can so I *don’t* bother anybody with questions about things they already know, so maybe I’d like someone to treat me like I’m not an idiot for not— for not—”

She realized, perhaps for the first time, that many people were listening to her. Draco was stunned silent, his mouth parted.

“Never mind. That was — I’m sorry. That was stupid. I didn’t — I shouldn’t.” She snatched up her bag. “Forget I said anything. I’m going to the library” she muttered, and fled.

“Hermione!” Harry stood up and glared at him. “What’d you do that for?”

“I didn’t do anything,” he said, shell-shocked. “I didn’t — not on purpose.”

“Ah, she’ll be alright by tomorrow,” sighed Ron. He idly hit Draco’s shoulder and stretched for the ceiling, twisting his wrists together. “Let her sleep it off. She’s been pulling double hours at the library. She’ll be sorry for snapping at you, mate, you’ll see. Though,” he added, “you could stand to be a little nicer to her.”

From Ron, who called Hermione a know-it-all at least once a week, and had veered into much worse during what Harry once called the Great Rodent War of 1993, this was something like receiving advice on dental care from a mountain troll. “Nicer?” said Draco, baffled and irritated. He was nicer to Hermione than he was to virtually anyone in his life, up to, and possibly including, his mother. He thought that, based on his regular standard, she ought to be aware of her own privileged status. “I don’t think she’s stupid, she bloody well knows that.”

“Beside the point, innit,” sighed Harry. He slung his bag over his shoulder. “I’m practically muggle-born, and she trounces me in everything, anyway, so it’s not like anyone can say I know more than she does. Ron’s a pureblood but he doesn’t give a rat’s arse for tradition, and she trounces him, too — sorry, Ron. But she still worries, doesn’t she? It’s not Hermione if she’s not tearing her hair out over something. And then at the Cup, with the Death Eaters and the Dark Mark, she gets a nice ugly reminder of everyone who wants her out.

“And then *you* come around, practically the most pureblood-est pureblood-y pureblood anyone ever dreamed up, with the white hair and the Eton sneer and everything, and she spends about half her waking hours trying to beat you just to prove she can, and you wonder why it means something different when you say she’s not good enough?” Harry shrugged. “I dunno. Wasn’t all that confusing to me.”

Draco, wordless, had nothing better than the truth: “I never said that.”

Then, belligerently: “How on earth do you know all that? Did she tell you?”

The idea of Harry being Hermione’s confidante in anything was unseemly. Using Harry Potter, lover of beasts, quidditch, and not one book ever written, as a source of wisdom reflected a dearth of choices that verged on tragicomic.

“No, but it’s not exactly a puzzle, is it,” said Harry exasperatedly. “Merlin, you’re bright until you’re thick. Don’t you listen to her?”

“Of course I listen to her,” he said coldly. “Far more than you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Ron, bizarrely angry, because they both knew damn well it was true. Draco could list things about Hermione that would make both of their heads spin; he could cite theses for her papers, chain-cite the bibliography of her summer reading list, rattle off the music she listened to when she folded laundry. He had more datum in his brain about Hermione Granger than either of them could pool with Gryffindor House, and the implication otherwise was a cold insult of the sort he’d normally demand satisfaction for.

Harry waved his arms between them, windmilling for peace. “Oi! Stop it! We’re at quota. One row a day.”

Ron huffed. “Makes us sound like right arses,” he muttered. “Course we listen to her.”

Perhaps he hadn’t given them enough credit, Draco thought, as they climbed the stairs to Gryffindor Tower in silence.

Well. —Not Ron. Ron was still suspended on paper-thin ice. But it was with a deep pang of discomfort that he acknowledged the things Harry had seen and he had not. He would never have admitted as much, on pain of death, had the proof not been tasted in the proverbial pudding: Harry hadn’t been surprised by Hermione’s outburst, while for one terrifying moment Draco had looked at her like a stranger, not knowing her at all.

Sorry for the tension! It wouldn't be fourth year if there weren't a little bit of angst. Fourth year is Hermione's Big Year. She's done taking everyone's nonsense. Fifteen-year-old girls are brave and terrible.

-dennis is mildly surprised to discover that harry potter is a blond, but that is the extent of his thought on the matter. big of heart and dumb of ass: the creevey boys story

-draco: oh you know, durmstrang isn't so bad, my parents would've sent me there

-hermione: your parents? your parents, the death eaters? those parents?

Up next: Chapter 38: "Four Names." Coming events: an interaction between Cho Chang and Ginny Weasley; a small row (unrelated); and a manifesto.

Four Names

Chapter 38: Four Names

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The next day was Saturday, and so Draco would have ordinarily laid in until half eleven, marinating in the heat from the fireplace and his feather coverlets. Instead, he dressed at nine while the others slept. The dorm smelled of coffee and woodsmoke, and rain trilled merrily against the windows, a mild-mannered shower of late autumn, turning the lake to glittering diamonds and paving a layer of fog on the lawns.

With some regret, he left it, and went instead to the one place that would be empty as a graveyard on Saturday morning.

The doors to the library were ajar. Hermione always sat in the same place. It was a table in the Transfiguration section, under a round east-facing window, where sunrise drenched the whirling dust motes in gold, and the metal bindings on the books gleamed and glinted seductively on their plush leather spines. The table was engraved with the loquacity and carelessness of generations of students, epithets scrawled in Irreversible Ink and simple childish carvings, A + F in a heart enclosed, foul words, fouler curses, vows to perform acts sublime and unnatural with the reader's mother, all covered by the canopy of Hermione's Arithmancy homework.

He set his book down first, to test the waters. It made a soft *thunk* on the table. She didn't look up.

He sat down, crossed his legs, and opened the book.

His advantage in this was the knowledge that, though he had virtually no patience whatsoever, she had even less.

"You just missed him."

“Hm?” he said, as if he had been here for hours.

“Krum,” she said. She scrawled something, flipped back a page to check something else, and added another line. “He was just by. Along with his fan club. I’m sure he’s still around, if you’d like to meet him.”

He would. She knew that. It was beside the point, however.

“I’m not here for Krum.”

“Hmph,” she said. She signed something with a scribble and turned the page over.

“What are you working on?”

“None of your business.”

“If it’s the Arithmancy, I already finished it. You can have a look.”

“That’s cheating.”

“It’s collaborative learning,” he said. “Also, you give Potter your Potions homework every week.”

She sat up and put her quill down. “That’s beside the point. Harry tries, he and Ron just need a boost.”

“You coddle them.”

Narrowed eyes. If her anger had a meter, it would have slipped from green to yellow. “Coddling? I have to yell myself hoarse to get them to even look at the homework.”

“And the fact that you’re yelling yourself hoarse doesn’t tell you anything, vis-a-vis: coddling?”

She scowled. “You help Ron with his Potions, too.”

“Sure. I answer the questions he asks me. And only when those questions aren’t ‘hey Malfoy, what’s the answer.’ There’s a difference.”

“If you say so,” she muttered, in the put-upon way that meant she did not care to hear anything else that disagreed with her, and he suppressed a twinge of irritation. She could be impossible. She *was* being impossible, and a little bit on purpose, if he wasn’t wrong. Ridiculous witch.

He leaned out and snatched the top paper from her stack. “So. Let’s have a look—”

“No—!”

“—addressed to Madam Portia Magnussen, the Chairwoman of the Allegiance for Muggle-Born Wizards, Order of Merlin, Third Class — Granger, you’re not applying for a job, are you?”

“No!” She snatched it back and ferreted it away into her bookbag as if he'd read her bank information. “And I’ll thank you not to snoop!”

“Then what are you doing? They don’t take underage applicants.”

She slammed her hands on the table. Papers scattered. He caught a page of Arithmancy before it escaped into dusty oblivion.

“I know! *It’s maddening!* Why on earth would you restrict membership just to adults? *Most* of the difficulties of being muggle-born start at school, where you haven’t got the same resources as everybody else, so what’s the bloody *good* of starting an organization once your education’s over?”

He fell silent. There were some things it was better not to touch, and on a scale from cashmere to hot stoves, this subject was a flobberworm. If he hit it from the wrong angle, he could end up pitched into last night’s argument.

He still didn’t understand what he was supposed to say there. That everything was alright? That blood status didn’t make a difference, to him or anyone else? Neither of those things were true.

“Well, anyway,” she said, suddenly withdrawn, “I thought it was time someone tried to fix that. I thought — you know, enough complaining! I don’t want to be one of those people who sits around feeling sorry for herself when nobody helps her. So instead of any more whinging about how hard things are for muggle-borns — you know, all that stuff that nobody cares about anyway — I did something about it.”

She pushed a stack of papers across the table. Draco flipped up the top sheaf and read:

THE SOCIETY FOR THE CULTIVATION AND RECREATION OF UNDERPRIVILEGED AND MUGGLE-BORN YOUTH

A MANIFESTO IN EIGHT PARTS, AN APPENDIX, AND A POSTSCRIPT

The postscript alone was seventeen pages.

“You wrote this?”

“Yes.” She leaned forward on her elbows, smirking with commingled pride and embarrassment. More pride, though. With Hermione, it was almost always more pride.

“Good Lord, when?”

“I’ve been sneaking up to the library as often as I can,” she admitted, “which hasn’t been often as I’d like, between classes and this stupid tournament, everything’s been so crowded — but I’ve got the manifesto down, and there are an order of badges on the way. I’ve filed a permit with McGonagall, and S.C.R.U.M.B.Y. will have our first meeting in October.”

He looked up. “You’re not serious.”

His fondest hopes for her to be joking were quashed by her stony expression.

“‘Scrumby’?”

“It’s S.C.R.U.M.B.Y.,” she said impatiently. “It stands for the Society for the Cultivation and Recreation—”

“I know what it stands for,” he said, gesturing pointedly with the melee weapon she’d penned. “But — Granger — and listen to me, here—”

“Yes?”

“Why on *earth* didn’t you just call it the Allegiance for Muggle-Born Wizards?”

“Because they wouldn’t give me permission for licensing,” she snapped. “I wrote to them weeks ago explaining what I wanted to do, and they said they didn’t allow student chapters!”

“Maybe they haven’t finished reading the manifesto yet.”

“No, it’s because they don’t want to be affiliated with Hogwarts!” She stabbed her finger at the manifesto. “They said the Ministry doesn’t let private organizations recruit at schools with government funding, and Hogwarts only permits student-led clubs, which I’d have been fine with if I didn’t know it was the most bollocksing bloody tripe I’ve ever heard, because that stupid League for Special Purebloods or whatever it is was started only last year! But the Allegiance is already scared to death of the Ministry cracking down on them, no thanks to your friend Nott, so instead I’ve had to do it all myself, and without a lick of help!”

It was vaguely strange, hearing her use ‘we’ in a sense that didn’t include him. On some level, of course, he knew that it wasn’t his

affair, and that he oughtn’t care less about whether or not there was a muggle-born society, but he had no idea what to say about it that wasn’t some flavor of condescending or trite.

“Well,” he said stiffly, “how’s recruitment, then?”

She flushed. “I — I mean, I haven’t really started recruiting yet. But — as it stands — three.”

“That’s— wait, who?” He ran back the register of muggle-borns he knew. For reasons various, it wasn’t a long list. “It can’t be Potter and Weasley, they’re not muggle-born.”

“You don’t have to be!” she said hurriedly. “Anyone’s welcome! I’m hoping to recruit lots of people. Also, Hogwarts rules say you can’t exclude people on the basis of blood purity — in either direction. I was actually planning to ask you and Harry and Ron, after I finished edits on the manifesto—”

“You haven’t answered the question,” he interrupted. “Who’s two and three?”

“Colin and Dennis Creevey,” she said reluctantly.

He stifled a guffaw.

“Oh, go on, laugh it up, why don’t you—”

“The Gryffindor Paparazzi? And his brother, Squidbait?”

“They’re nice boys!”

“They’re about nine years old.”

“So they need a lot of help!”

“Like baby kittens. Never mind, I’m sure they’re wonderful. Listen. Do you think that enlistment numbers might change if — spitballing, don’t mind me — you named it something other than ‘Scrumby’?”

She hauled the manifesto away from him, glowering. “Never mind. I shouldn’t have told you about it.”

“Hey. Hang on, hello, Granger,” he said sharply, sitting up. “I’m not making fun of the idea.”

“No, you think it’s stupid.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“I don’t need to. The ones already in there are worse.”

“I resent that. Give me some credit. Here, I—” He was, distantly, starting to worry. The conversation was slipping precipitously from good-natured ribbing to pressure on a bruise. “Give it back,” he said, impulsively. “I’ll read it.”

She greeted this with the shock it was due. The thing was bigger than a volume of Bagshot.

“You’ll read my manifesto?”

“Why not,” he said, with distant fatalism. There was a part of his brain banging a gong labeled BAD IDEA, WILL REGRET, but his wild impulses put it down mercilessly with a headshot. “You’ll need line edits, won’t you? I’ve seen your Charms essays, remember. Someone has to prune down all those em-dashes.”

She smiled at him, first hesitantly, and then breathlessly when she saw he meant it, with teeth and dimples and everything. Suddenly he found it very difficult to keep his expression neutral, and so he tried to sober himself with thoughts of the new voluminous addition to his workload. It didn’t work, and he had to turn his head away and pretend to cough into his arm.

After that, she was in a much better mood. She prattled to him about the Arithmancy homework, and didn’t bring up anything about their argument from dinner; he got the distinct sense, watching her steam

unerringly through four minutes of monologue about second-order derivatives, that she, too, was slightly embarrassed by it, and saw it as a topic best drowned out with math. He could not have agreed more if he tried.

He was pleased, all in all, that things had returned so swiftly to normal, and for the trouble of only a few days' hard reading. Trust Hermione to be sensible.

When they finally found their way down to the entrance hall for breakfast, there were dozens of people milling around, some eating toast or sipping carafes of coffee, and examining the Goblet of Fire. It sat on the stool in the Great Hall that normally held the Sorting Hat.

"Has anyone put their name in yet?" Hermione asked Ginny.

The girl was wearing a plum-purple 'G' sweater, Molly Weasley's handiwork, and ratty corduroy pants. She yawned and shoveled sleep-tangled hair out of her face. "Everyone from Durmstrang. They got up in a line and did it earlier this morning. And from Beauxbatons, there were these two boys with weasel familiars, and this one tiny girl—"

"Fascinating, don't care," said Draco. "Who from Hogwarts?"

"Angelina just did," she said, indicating where the tall chaser leaned against the wall, chatting with Fred. She had done her hair in a different kind of braids this year, and was surrounded by a small hemisphere of worshipful Gryffindor underclassmen, who venerated her for her quidditch skills and the mere prize of being older. "She's got the best chance, I reckon."

He sized her up. Angelina had the advantages of height, strength, and athletic build, which would help her in physical challenges, and certainly any that involved flying. Anyway, she was friendly and ferociously competitive, frankly a much better sport than Oliver, but tolerated no nonsense and had an iron nerve. Everyone had thought she would make captain this year, now that Oliver was gone.

Her disadvantages, compared to these, were few: she lacked N.E.W.T.s in some of the thornier subjects, like Potions and Runes, which might come up as puzzles or challenges in the Tournament. She wasn't a prefect — she was part of Fred and George's gang of friends, so effectively disqualified, anyway — and aside from quidditch, she hadn't set herself apart as a student. She wasn't like Katie, who had a reputation for dressing wild and acting wilder; she was cool, competent, and wonderful at minding her own business, which in Draco's book was a cardinal virtue, but it meant not many people outside of Gryffindor knew her. Still, the Goblet wasn't a popularity contest.

"If it's her versus Warrington, I think she'll win," said Hermione. "Fred says she's top of her class in Charms."

"God, I hope it's not Warrington," said Ginny. "Imagine wearing green. I think I'd root for Durmstrang, wouldn't you?"

They fetched toast and tea and milled around watching students try their hand. A few more tried to cross the age line, without success, but by the time the hour bell tolled noon the only student to rival Angelina or Warrington was a Ravenclaw named Rogier Davies, the quidditch captain, a man with nearly as many acolytes as Oliver Wood. With him was Cho Chang, who spotted Harry across the hall and — Ron groaned — walked quickly over to talk to him.

"Hiya, Harry! Gosh, you look like you didn't sleep at all!"

Harry politely snorted some of his tea back into his mug and smiled blearily. "Potions essay," he said, at which Draco choked, because the liar had never lost sleep over Potions in his life. He'd been up scheming to get Krum's autograph with Ron.

"Wow! Boring!" said Cho. "I dunnae how you did homework after last night! Viktor *Krum,* Harry! I spent like an hour trying to figure out how to corner him without the entourage. I'm gonna get him to tell me how he did that Pincer move, if I have to hunt him down with a dart gun, I am toh-ta-lly serious."

“That’s brilliant,” said Harry, sounding concussed.

“Aren’t you in Ravenclaw?” Ginny said irritably. “Aren’t you supposed to like homework?”

Cho shrugged at her, guileless as a clear lake. “I dunno. We’re not like, the House of the Honor Roll. I’m just pure curious about things, I guess. I get mad into them, I’ll read three books in a day, but put me in class an’ I can’t focus for piss. I’m about quidditch, now,” she added, “but as a tyke, it was football and rugby. Mum’s a muggle, she played as a kid.”

“Wicked,” said Harry breathlessly.

Ginny’s face was pinching into an ever-tighter knot. She glowered at Cho as if she had been caught red-handed in the murder act, and at Harry for aiding and abetting it, but unfortunately, neither of them seemed to notice, having drifted into their own universe of chatter about quidditch plays.

“Doesn’t Cedric look handsome today, Hermione?” she announced, as if she wished all of Ravenclaw Tower to know about it.

Hermione looked like a startled deer.

“I… suppose? He’s, er… not really my type.”

“Your ‘type’?” What was her ‘type’ supposed to be, anyway? Besides *leatherbound* and *Harvard style?*

“I — not really — I obviously haven’t a lot of experience,” she said, turning pink.

“Have you *any* experience?”

Ginny mowed them both down on her warpath. “He’s terribly pretty, isn’t he? His hair’s perfect, like you said. It’s all neat,” she said, hitting her consonants percussively, “and well-combed.”

“You said his hair was *perfect?”*

Hermione was wringing the handle of her bag like it was Ginny’s neck. “I said ‘pretty,’ I didn’t say ‘perfect,’ and so what?” she said hotly. “Objectively speaking, it is—”

“‘Objectively speaking’? Do you *fancy* Cedric Diggory?”

“Not him, just his hair,” snapped Ginny, who was rapidly liquidating every token of his goodwill she had ever earned. “A lot of girls like a man who knows how to BRUSH HIS HAIR!”

Harry, hearing not her words but her tone, glanced over in bemusement and faint concern, and noticed Hermione’s mounting distress. “Hermione?” he called. “You alright?”

“She’s fine,” said Draco shortly.

“She’s wonderful,” snarled Ginny.

“I’m not involved in this,” Hermione said shrilly. “I was never involved in this. I will never be involved in this! I have no idea how I became involved in this! I hate all of you.”

She hadn’t said she *didn’t* fancy him.

Draco stared at Cedric Diggory, trying to see what was so bloody magnificent about him, and concluded little except that it would be remarkably easy to hit him in his tiny smug mouth.

Cedric himself stood among a group of his friends, toeing the age line. Draco watched through slitted eyes as he pulled a slip of parchment from his pocket. He walked right up to the Goblet, and his fingers passed harmlessly through the fire, which licked cheerfully at his wrist as if it were a mere light show.

He took a deep breath, opened his hand, and the parchment was lost to the blue flames.

“Lord, I hope it’s not Hufflepuff,” Cho murmured to Harry, while a few of the onlookers clapped for Cedric. “God bless an’ all, but all the same.”

Speak of the boggart. Out of the Slytherins milling around by the door stepped Gregory Goyle, who pointed at Cedric as he stepped down from the plinth: “What’s *he* going to do? Cuddle the other schools to death?”

“Don’t be silly, Greg,” said Marcus Flint. “He’d show them some Hufflepuff hospitality. Like: you turn around, bend over, and give ’em a *real* welcome.”

He demonstrated. There were shrieks and jeers from the Slytherin table. Cedric turned on his heel to face him, calmly, his hands in his pockets.

Harry bristled. “Oi,” he began, stepping forward — several of the Hufflepuffs had already drawn their wands — but Cedric smiled at Flint and cocked his head to the side, like he was speaking in a dialect he couldn’t quite understand.

“That’s not very sporting, Flint. We’re all in this together. One school, one champion.”

“Warrington’s our champion,” drawled Flint. “It’s an embarrassment he’s got to even compete with you. He’s going to be Minister someday, and you can’t even walk into a room without embarrassing us. I’m not letting *you* stand for me against Durmstrang, that’s for bloody sure.”

“Sounds like your mind’s made up,” said Cedric calmly, “so I won’t bother arguing. And I’m sorry to embarrass you, Marcus, but if my appearance bothers you that much, you’re free to divert your attention elsewhere. I didn’t realize it was so hard for you to look away.”

Some of the Hufflepuffs giggled. Flint’s lip curled.

“Shut up, you poofter.”

“You shut up!” Hannah Abbott, a girl he knew only for having the softest voice he’d ever heard, ripped out her wand and pointed it at Flint. “You’re a bully. Cedric’s worth ten of you.”

“Ooh, a *bully.* Am I mean? Did I hurt your *feewings?”*

“Langlock!” she shrieked. Flint dove sideways onto the table. He landed in the potatoes and knocked over a decanter of pumpkin juice, drenching his shirt.

Chaos erupted at the Slytherin table. Terrence Higgs and Adrian Pucey both shot jinxes back at Hannah, while Goyle simply lunged over the table. Hannah, who was generously speaking one-fourth his size, screamed and scrambled back, but before things could spiral any further, Cedric stepped between them and whisked his wand.

A shimmering translucent shield erupted between the Hufflepuffs and the Slytherins. Goyle knocked his head against it and tumbled back, rubbing his cranium.

“That’s *enough,”* Cedric snapped. “Ten points from Slytherin for verbal harassment, and language unbefitting a Hogwarts student. Ten points from Hufflepuff for improper use of magic.”

“What? Ced!”

“No exceptions. Hannah, go back to the table, I’m disappointed.”

Hannah trudged away, distraught. Cedric urged the other Hufflepuffs away with another wave of his hand, and shooting an unhappy look over his shoulder at Flint, he shepherded them out of the Great Hall.

“At least he’s fair,” murmured Hermione. The suggestion of violence still vibrated uneasily in the air, and as the Shield Charm flickered out, a susurrus swept over the hall. “I wouldn’t have taken points from Hannah for that, she was clearly provoked.”

“Fair, nothing. He was protecting Abbott. Otherwise, they’d have reported her.”

“Hm. That’s shaping up to be a nasty little gang,” she said. “I’d keep a close eye on them.”

He watched Goyle haul Flint off the table, scattering fruit rinds and pumpkin juice. The pack of Slytherins grumbled and bumped into each other with the brotherly violence of bulls. He hadn’t liked the way Flint spoke to Cedric — oh, it was only words, the sort of teasing that might happen anywhere, but it was the kind of teasing that hid the suggestion of what might have happened if there hadn’t been anyone watching. Of what might have happened to Cedric in an empty room.

“Not too close,” he murmured. Something hard turned over in his stomach at the idea of Flint looking that way at Hermione, or any other way, ever, at all.

On the Saturday before Halloween, Draco donned his nicest wool robe, threw some gel in his hair, and joined a throng of students in winter cloaks on their way to Hogsmeade. Frost crunched under his boots, and the crumbling leaves of autumn broke into brown shards underfoot. His breath turned shock-white in the air.

He was joined by Harry and Ron. Hermione bobbed behind them, her nose deep in a book about the Goblin Revolutions. Draco, having precious little social capital to spend ever since their quarrel over the muggle-born issue, didn’t dare remark on it, even when she almost tripped into a lamppost. While Harry and Ron guffawed, he suffered in silence. *Noblesse oblige.*

Emerging from Honeydukes an hour later with a bag of chocolate cream puffs, they strolled down Main Street, peering in shop windows. Hogsmeade was fuller than usual with Tournament spectators, as well as students from other schools: for every two or three black-robed Hogwarts students, there was a mantle of

Durmstrang fur. A trio of Beauxbatons girls in blue silk capelets huddled excitedly outside the door of Zonko's, pointing and giggling.

"When the four founders started Hogwarts, they meant it as a school for wizards everywhere."

They were waiting outside Sprintwitches Sporting Needs. Draco leaned against the window, nursing a Peppermint Wand from Honeydukes, and Ron was idly playing catch with Harry's pocket snitch. Meanwhile, Hermione was enthusiastically indulging in her favorite hobby, which was to explain things.

"That's why they built it next to Hogsmeade, a wizarding settlement, so they wouldn't have to hide. But couldn't have known how many wizards were really out there — we know from historical documents that they thought there were only a few hundred wizards in the world. And all of them in Europe! How small-minded can you possibly be? Anyway, when everyone came out of the Middle Ages and they realized how many there were, it became obvious you couldn't have one school for a whole continent, I mean really, there are ten in China alone, and there used to be three or four in Russia, before the Bolsheviks — so a bunch of wizards from France split off and started a movement for their own school—"

"While their monarch was otherwise preoccupied clobbering the Huguenots," said Draco, rotating his Peppermint Wand for another angle of attack. "A bleak time for French nationalism. *Vive la revolución."*

"Regrettable!" said Hermione, brightly, of the massacre of thousands. "But the founders of Beauxbatons were aligned with the crown. Or at least Bagshot thinks they were. It's hard to explain where they got the money from, otherwise, and the revolutionaries certainly weren't kind to them — apparently the château was burned down four times. Oh, there you are, Harry. Did you get whatever it was you wanted?"

Harry grinned guiltily. He held a giant Sprintwitches bag behind his back, as if they couldn't see it bulging around his hips. "Yeah, and a

few other things."

"I don't think 'few' means whatever you think it means," said Draco.

"Aw, but they had these new waterproof transition goggles! Which I need! Kind of. Probably. Oh, and Cho said she bought the new Firebolt scope that you can clip on your broomstick to calculate distances at speed, so you can do all these cool dives without worrying about velocity? She said it was the best hundred galleons she'd ever spent, seriously, crossed her hearts."

"Oh, good, she's rich, too," said Ron briskly, standing up. "Maybe I can have your dowry, when you two get married, then."

In the hierarchy of things not to be touched, this ranked supreme. Draco could point at it with a ten-foot pole and the pole's shadow would not grace the very edge of it, for that was how far, exactly, he was from touching it. Harry didn't, either, which showed three years of Draco's company had managed to rub off at least a thin shedding of tact.

Ron's feelings were more painful because they were obvious, as were his attempts to quell them, a child ripping fruitlessly at his own scabs. Everything about Hogwarts was grand and therefore subtly not meant for him, the robes and the books and the expensive supplies, the shops with sky-high markups at the end of the lane, posh traditions and sports where the best players bought their own gear, the secret pureblood rooms in which he, despite a Prewett pedigree, would never find himself welcome. Most of that wasn't magic, it was money, the second lifeblood of the wizarding world, the substance that did whatever magic couldn't.

Harry had inherited a third-generation fortune; Hermione's parents were well-paid Healers and lived in a suburb; Draco went without saying. What waited for Ron when he came home? A ratty attic bedroom full of secondhand everything? A house full of bigger, brighter, louder children than him?

“Weasley,” he began.

“Shut up,” said Ron evenly. “I’m serious, mate. Keep your head down.”

Twenty-three hours a day, seven days a week, he wouldn’t take that comment from Ron or anyone else breathing; but this was hour twenty-four, and he let it slip between his fingers without retort.

The Three Broomsticks was packed to the ears and people came by to say hello, Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, Katie Bell and George Weasley, the trio of Ginny, Neville, and a small blonde Ravenclaw Draco didn’t recognize — and meanwhile, high-collared students from Durmstrang peered with steely eyes from the bar, while Beauxbatons students flounced through crowds as though they didn’t understand why everyone was standing in their way. Fed up with being the magizoo exhibit, Draco lifted his stein at one Beauxbatons student who’d been staring at them for a while, who squeaked and burrowed back into her friends. Unfortunately, after a moment’s furious discussion, they turned and crossed the pub to Draco’s table.

One of them was tall and thin and pale like a dehydrated cornstalk. The shorter two were younger and earlier-on in their processes of dehydration, still flushed in the face and animated when they spoke.

“Allo!” said a short one. “You are ’Arry Potter, *oui?”* She zigzagged her finger over her forehead.

Harry smiled thinly.

“You are! You are!” She whirled on the second. “Je te l'ai dit! Combien y a-t-il de jolis garçons avec une putain de cicatrice éclair?”

Draco snickered.

The second hopped up and down. “Do you… can you…” She turned to her friend, traded mutters, and then waved her pinched fingers

through the air. “Signature?”

“Sure,” he said uncomfortably, fumbling for his pockets. “I can do that. Um, who’d you like it made out to?”

Hermione gave a deeply skeptical snort. Ron had slouched so low his eyebrows were on a level with the coasters.

The second glowed with pleasure. “Thank you, ’Arry Potter,” she said, curling her tongue slowly around each word. “Plees make eet for Gabrielle Delacour.” She smiled, the full bellows of her dimples swelling with life.

“Ai! Gabby! Et un pour moi!”

“And Monique! And Monique.”

“Gabby… and… Monique. Er — ‘have a nice day.’ There you are,” said Harry, handing them his napkin. It bore four lines of bleeding ink, an almost unrecognizable scrawl, and a butterbeer stain. Gabrielle clasped it like a bridal veil. “Have a good one, you lot.”

Apparently, the subtext of ‘thanks, get lost’ didn’t translate to French. The girls lingered at the table, even as Ron approached subterranean levels and Hermione’s little condescending throat-clearings threatened to broach the Richter scale. Gabrielle pointed at Draco’s tie. “Your tie,” she said. “You are: Gryffon-d’or?”

“Non, non,” hissed Monique. “Le jaune est pour Poufsoffle.”

“Je sais de quoi je parle! Harry Potter est un Gryffon-d’or!”

Draco decided to liberate them from doubt.

“He’s not,” he said to the girls in French. “In fact he’s a squib, and we only let him hang around because we like him. Don’t tell him, though, it’s his only reason for living.”

The girls fell silent. Monique gave a short gasp of betrayal.

“Parlez-vous français?” said the tallest, speaking at last, with a glimmer of interest. “Pourquoi n'as-tu rien dit plus tôt?”

He shrugged. “C’était marrant.”

A smile twisted her lips. It woke a sly, lazy cunning in her face, like a snake stirring to life. Her eyes took a leisurely vacation down from his face, and made no rush in returning. “Oui,” she said. “Clever boy.”

It was hard not to preen, but nobly, he managed. “So they tell me.”

“You may like to come see our carriage,” she said, still in French. “We do not let the students of École de Poudlard inside. But you will fit in with us, I think. And it is most magnificent.”

At first he thought he’d heard the word incorrectly. “Chariot? Vous voulez dire le véhicule?”

“Oui,” she said simply. Her mouth made the word in the shape of a kiss. Her eyes glowed with a lazy sort of interest, like an auror at the door of the most satisfying interrogation of her life. “We sleep there,” she said, in English.

Having dropped *that* on the table to fester, she sauntered off. The other two followed her in peals of insensate giggles. One fluttered her fingers over her shoulder at Harry.

Draco identified a great constellation of stains on the ceiling, and began composing an astronomical chart.

“So,” said Ron, from beneath the table. “Here’s the situation. I’m going to flip a sickle, and if it’s heads, I kill myself. If it’s tails, I kill *you*—”

Harry switched his empty glass for Ron’s full one while his head was submerged. “Are you talking to me, or Draco?”

“Both!”

Hermione stared at Draco with the perfect silence of a stalking predator. He glanced at her and lifted one eyebrow in a wordless question.

“I didn’t know you spoke French,” she said, in a constricted voice.

“Of course I do. It’s part of any complete primary curriculum. French, Latin, Greek, etiquette, dancing—”

“Latin makes sense. *Latin* is relevant for spellcasting. But *what,* pray tell, may I ask, is supposed to be the use of French? Besides fielding inquiries from blonde lampposts?”

“Hell if I know. I didn’t choose it. When I was seven, my mother handed me a textbook and didn’t talk to me in English for a month.”

“I suppose it’s come in very handy,” she said coolly.

“...Which means what, exactly?”

She flashed a meaningful look at him. He gestured in bold frustration. Then a sly smile curled the corner of her mouth.

“‘You know, we sleep there,’” she said breathily, in a very ungenerous dramatic interpretation.

He ignored the odd twitch that the hairs on his neck gave at the sound of her voice. “Shut up.”

“‘Ooh la la! Do you vant to see my carriage? It is *soooo* nice.’”

“That’s — don’t be ridiculous. She didn’t sound like *that.”*

Harry dropped his chin into his palm, grinning like a phooka. “‘Ooh, Monsieur Malfoy, talk French to me.’”

“You’re *so* good at it.”

“I could talk to you *all night…”*

He tripped and nearly tumbled to the floor in his haste to get out of the booth. He could light a match against the skin of his face. “I beg your pardon, I hadn’t realized I sat here by mistake. I meant to sit with my fellow fourth years, and yet somehow I’ve found myself up to my arse in *ten-year-olds.”*

“Monsieur Malfoy! Monsieur Malfoy! ’Ow do you say ‘bedroom eyes’ in Eengleesh?”

“Are ze mattresses as comfortable in Britain as zey are in France?”

Mockery piled on at the rate of avalanche. Ron made a double-entendre about carriage horses that made Harry spit up his butterbeer and Hermione bury her face in her hands, shrieking, and Draco was so violently appalled that he made a vow of silence against him on the spot.

When they hiked back to the castle, boots crunching through the shadowy frosted woods, they were still giggling about it, and he’d very nearly recovered enough of his dignity to start speaking to them again.

The silvery days of October slid out like beads of dew on a spiderweb, distended. It seemed that Durmstrang and Beauxbatons had been among them for months, not weeks, wandering around the castle’s labyrinths like overlarge first years and shouldering in at House tables during meals. All spoke English, some less perfectly than others, although some carried pocket dictionaries like the last life raft on the *Titanic,* and some stayed silent. Mingling was encouraged but rare. The Durmstrang students kept to themselves, and the Beauxbatons students, though friendlier, treated everything with a general haughtiness that made it clear they had meant to come as conquerors, not as comrades.

On Halloween, the Great Hall filled with orange garlands and flocks of enchanted bats, and pumpkins the size of hippogriffs were rolled up from Hagrid’s hut to service the roiling kitchens. The feast was

three times as grand as usual, towers of roast goose and dripping chocolate fountains, deep cauldrons of pumpkin pie, buttery toasted apple crisps in tins like upturned shields, flagons of spiced cider and mulled wine wafted foisted aromatics amidst the scent of woodsmoke and candles and burning leaves. But all this was scarfed down impatiently, or left untouched by the impatient hordes, for the Goblet of Fire had been moved from its resting place, and now stood in front of Dumbledore's chair. For once, Hermione ate the most of any of them, spooning pumpkin bisque methodically into her mouth while she devoured with gusto a book on the muggle witch-hunts, inured to the collective anxiety of waiting for Dumbledore's announcement.

When the feast ended, Dumbledore rose to his feet. The champions' instructions were simple: when the Goblet called their names, they would rise, be applauded, and go into the staff chamber behind him.

He flicked his wand. The pumpkin jack-o-lanterns swallowed their light, and the Great Hall plunged into darkness, lit only by the sparkle of enchanted stars above. Hermione lifted her head from her book, nose wrinkled in displeasure.

"All together, everyone," muttered Ron. "Not Slytherin. *Not Slytherin."*

The flames from the Goblet of Fire cast a blue beacon on the stone floor around it, and made Dumbledore's face shine with a ghostly pallor as he approached the chalice. From the faculty table, Mad-Eye Moody's glass eye swiveled across the hall. Barty Crouch yawned.

An apprehensive stillness fell. Angelina's knuckles were white on the table, and she was squeezing Fred's shoulder so hard Draco could practically hear the bones crack. Fred patted her hand.

At the Slytherin table, Cassius Warrington sat rigidly upright, unblinking. Cedric Diggory was casually stirring his coffee.

Dumbledore cleared his throat and offered his hand. The flames turned bright red, and a piece of charred paper leapt from the ashes,

flying high in the air and twirling to a graceful rest in his upturned palm.

“From Beauxbatons Academy,” said Dumbledore clearly, “the champion is Fleur Delacour.”

A willowy girl with flaxen hair, a hawk-nose, and a strikingly pretty face peeled herself away from a cheering group of girls and swanned up to the table. She had a lilting dancer’s step, as if she were more used to skating or gliding than having to walk.

“She’s rather small, isn’t she?” said Hermione dubiously. “I’ve seen bigger ballerinas. I hope she’s up to it.” She caught Draco’s look and flushed. “I’m just saying,” she said quickly.

Fleur’s fellow Beauxbatons students seemed to be of the same opinion. Several shot her nasty glares as she stepped up to shake Dumbledore’s hand. One of them even groaned. At a sharp cough from Madime Maxime, however, they sat up and applauded with fervor.

Each of the heads of school shook Fleur’s hand in turn. Dipping a graceful curtsy in the direction of the assembled students, she turned with a swish of her skirt and disappeared into the back room.

The clapping died down. The Goblet turned red again, and another piece of parchment spiraled from the ashes, lifted as if carried up on fingers of flame. This time, Dumbledore had to leap, and caught it deftly in mid-air.

“Spry for his age, inne?” remarked Ron.

“From the Durmstrang Institute,” he read, “the champion is Viktor Krum.”

A storm of applause and cheering swept the Hall. In contrast to Beauxbatons, no one from Durmstrang seemed remotely surprised, and applauded with good sportsmanship. Viktor Krum slouched up

toward Dumbledore, in his trudging, ungainly bird-step; up close, it was striking how the pictures exaggerated his features, for he could have been an altogether normal boy.

Krum shook Dumbledore's hand without much enthusiasm. He didn't even look Crouch in the eye. Professor Karkaroff was the only one he acknowledged, and the man leaned in to whisper something in Krum's ear; Krum paused, nodded, and followed Fleur into the antechamber.

Hermione elbowed Draco, who returned the move with the slightest twitch of his head. In their own code, it meant: *Well, isn't that interesting?*

"It's strange that the Goblet chose him, he's only a quidditch player," she whispered. "Will the challenges be athletic? But Fleur was so tiny… I suppose he must be good at something besides flying, mustn't he?"

Draco did not have time to give this as much thought as he would've liked, because the Goblet of Fire had turned red once more. This time, it was violent, almost vindictive, when it spat out the piece of paper. The flames churned and snapped, threatening to spill over the ledge. A scrap of parchment with ragged edges soared high in the air, and it was a long time before it sank within reach of Dumbledore's long fingers.

He caught it, and stared at the parchment.

Whispers flew. Draco glanced leewards, and found Hermione agape with confusion and alarm.

For reasons that escaped his understanding, Draco found himself on the edge of his seat. There were whispers at the Gryffindor table, up and down the aisles, various names chanted like incantations. The tension frayed.

Dumbledore cleared his throat with a short, staccato sound. “From Hogwarts, the champion is Cassius Warrington. Congratulations.” He folded the paper into his pocket and removed his glasses to polish them.

The tension snapped, and suddenly he missed it. What followed was worse.

He had never heard Slytherin go wild before. Even its celebrations of victory in the House Cup were nothing next to the riot of roars and applause that surrounded Cassius Warrington, a grinning, golden-haired boy of seventeen, as he wrestled free of his peers’ embrace and staggered up to the dais, smoothing the immaculate lapels of his cloak. Twice, someone hauled him back to pump his hand or ruffle his hair. Draco sought Theo across the hall, met his eyes, and found him sitting apart from the riot, smiling slightly to himself. There was something thin in his smile, though, and the way he and Pansy remained seated, with almost bizarre decorum, while the rest of the house exploded in triumph.

Ravenclaw applauded politely. Hufflepuff, particularly the section seated around or near Cedric Diggory, gave a few half-hearted cheers, but Gryffindor descended into a depressed silence from which it seemed unlikely that, say, Fred Weasley, would ever return.

“Not *a Slytherin.”* He had pillowed his head in his arms, and was groaning, while George rubbed sympathetic circles on his back. “Whole bloody student body, and it had to be a Slytherin. We gave up Quidditch for *this?”* Angelina, meanwhile, was receiving an array of whispered comforts from the girls, many of whom were inventing new ways to describe Warrington’s appearance and desirability with such spontaneous creative license it should have earned them the Booker.

It was some time before Dumbledore could make himself heard over the tumult. “Very good! Thank you!” he cried. “A fine selection! Three fine champions! Prepared to undertake… to undertake…”

He trailed off. The light in the hall had changed again from blue to red, for the Goblet of Fire was stirring a fourth time. A ripple of shock quelled the cheers from Slytherin's table, like a water drowning a bonfire, issuing only the guttering smoke of whispers.

Dumbledore glanced at the slip of paper and cocked his head. The silence dwindled on to the point of awkwardness, then misgiving, then deep foreboding.

"From Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry—" And he became silent again, gazing deeply at the paper.

"Maybe it changed its mind," said George hopefully.

There was a screech of chairs. Crouch came hurrying down from the teacher's table and plucked the paper from Dumbledore's hand. He squinted at it, adjusted his glasses, and then lifted a clear, distant gaze to the Gryffindor Table.

He said, "And from Hogwarts — Harry Potter."

Draco, along with the rest of the hall, swung his head around to stare at the fourth champion. He had a strange sense he was dreaming.

Harry didn't move.

This was not a figure of speech. By all appearances, there was zero activity happening above or below his cranium. Hermione lurched out and seized Harry's wrist, as if trying to hold him there, but she needn't have bothered. The boy was stone still.

The rest of Gryffindor also burst into merry, if confused, applause. This was gratifying but useless, as it made it harder for Harry to pry himself free. When at last he did, he stumbled up to the staff table on sluggish feet, as if wading through muddy water.

Professor Karkaroff had swept over to Dumbledore and was whispering urgently in his ear. Madame Maxime was berating

Crouch in spirited tones, but Crouch appeared not to hear her. Crouch had eyes only for Harry, who approached him on leaden feet.

Hundreds and hundreds of eyes rested on his shoulders, very few of them fond.

He stopped in front of Dumbledore, and waited.

“Well, in you go,” Dumbledore said, after a moment. He did not shake Harry’s hand. Neither did Professor Karkaroff.

Harry trudged into the antechamber. Maxime, Karkaroff, and Crouch followed him. Dumbledore hesitated, bid the Great Hall a somewhat cursory goodnight, and then swept in after them.

McGonagall rose to take control of the Great Hall, but it soon became clear this was impossible. The noise that erupted would take more Silencing Charms than the whole faculty could muster together.

Hermione was breezing through the early stages of hyperventilation.

“They won't let him compete." Draco’s knuckles were white on his knife-hilt. He spoke to himself as much as her. “There's no way they'll let him compete."

“He’s fourteen,” Ron mumbled. “How the hell…? He’s my age. We’re the same.” He swept around to Fred, and his tone was furious. “Did you tossers figure out how to cross the age line without telling me?”

“No,” George said, stunned. “We didn’t. Couldn’t crack it.”

“You swear? You didn’t help him? Or put his name in for him,” Ron was shrill, “or — something like that?”

“Why would we?” said George irritably.

“Because you thought he’d have a better chance than me!”

“Blimey, the bar’s on the floor,” said Fred. “We’d have had to put in all of Gryffindor Tower.”

All around them, students were yelling, chants of ‘Warrington’ and ‘Potter,’ meanwhile the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students clamored of unfair play. He agreed with them. Two champions wasn’t fair, it wasn’t proper. It doubled Hogwarts’ chances. The other headmasters would never stand for it. Neither would the Ministry.

Hermione doubtlessly understood it, too, but that didn’t change her expression at all. Her face was marble-rigid and twice as pale.

“They won’t let him compete,” he repeated.

“And what if he does?”

“Then he’ll be alright. He’s not going to die. That won’t happen.” A small tightening happened in his stomach, like a pang of indigestion. She was terrified for Harry, almost beside herself for him. Part of his brain lifted its head from slumber, revealing a shockingly nasty face, and said: *What if it was you?*

She was acting like Harry would be dragged out and shot at dawn. She cared an awful lot about him, didn’t she? Would she have been on the verge of tears if it’d been him walking into that room?

He let go of her arm. She wrapped her arms around herself and nibbled furiously on the skin of her thumb.

The party in Gryffindor Tower raged for an hour before Harry showed up. Fred and George, performing admirably on short notice, broke open the bottles they’d saved for Angelina’s celebration and charmed the name on the banner to read ‘POTTER’ instead of ‘JOHNSON,’ only the enchantment wore down when both of them got plastered and ended up flicking on and off between ‘JOHNSTER’ and ‘POTTON.’ Ron was nowhere to be found. Draco and Hermione found armchairs in the back of the common room and camped out,

waiting for Harry to come back, which happened when most of Gryffindor was already three drinks deep and nowhere near stopping.

When the shell-shocked boy came stumbling through the portrait-door, the roar almost scared him back into the hallway.

“S’him!” bellowed George. “Boy wonder! Fourteen!”

“A Gryffindor champion! FOR HOGWARTS!”

“FOR HOGWARTS!”

“Want some food? We’ve got some!”

“Butterbeer, Harry? Peanuts?”

“Tell us how you did it! Tell us how you outsmarted ’em!”

“I didn’t,” Harry shouted. He cringed away from the shouting. “I don’t know how—”

Draco, fed up and sore in the ears, rolled to his feet and pulled out his wand.

“Diffindo.”

The blast rocketed into the air and shattered a bulb on the chandelier, sending shrieks and good-natured hollers among the partygoers, who assumed it was part of the fun. In the noise-dimmed aftermath he cast a Movement Charm and stalked through the crowd, seizing Harry’s arm, and towed him over to the boys’ staircase.

“As you were,” he snapped, and bundled Harry up the stairs. Hermione hurried up after them.

On the way down, they bumped into Colin Creevey, who gasped and hit the shutter on his camera before any could object. The flash

momentarily blinded the three of them.

“That’s it,” Draco snarled, and threw Harry off-handedly at Hermione, who caught him. He whisked out his wand. “I’ve had enough of this —”

“Oh, Draco, don’t—”

“Levicorpus.”

Colin was whisked into the air, warbling in fear, and Draco stalked up the stairs under his dangling body. He slashed a counter-jinx over his shoulder, and there was a great *THUMP* as Colin went tumbling back down to earth.

“Colin! Draco, really, he might have been hurt—”

“Should’ve gotten out of the way, then.”

“I don’t remember Flitwick teaching that jinx,” said Harry distantly, in dissociative tones.

“Didn’t. Learned it from a book. In here.”

He kicked open the door to the fourth-years’ room and found it empty except for Ron, who was sitting with his knees up on his bed. At the sight of them he scrambled to his feet, and Hermione slammed the door firmly behind them, murmuring, *“Colloportus.”*

Harry was wrestling off the Gryffindor banner that Lee Jordan had tied around his shoulders. Draco, too tired to watch him struggle, flicked a Disintegrating Jinx at the knot, and it drooped to his ankles.

“So,” he said, after a moment. “I… I have to compete.”

Hermione’s hands flew over her mouth. Draco let out a short gutpunch of a breath and rubbed his jaw.

“Dumbledore argued for me. He said I couldn’t consent, I wasn’t… of age. He was really… really angry. I’ve never seen him so — but Crouch said, if the Goblet made a decision — I was supposed to compete. And — and if I didn’t, Hogwarts would be disqualified for tampering. Which he couldn’t — wouldn’t — allow. The Ministry wouldn’t. Allow it. He said.”

Ron blinked. “Oh,” he said. He wore an unpleasant, anemic cousin to a smile. “Well… congratulations.”

“I begged to get out of it,” he said hollowly.

“What?” said Ron. “Why?”

If not for the shield of his glasses, Harry’s eyes would have popped out of his skull.

“Because I could DIE!” he shouted. “Because I could get KILLED! Because I wanted a QUIET YEAR for once! D’you think I fancy dodging death at every corner? You think I like getting chased and jinxed and kicked around? Giant spiders and Death Eaters and dementors — wow, fun! D’you know what I wanted to do this year, Ron? I wanted to join the GOBSTONES TEAM!”

Ron was almost bowled over onto the bed. Harry had never shouted like that before. Draco was glad to know the kid had it in him.

“Blimey!” Ron snapped. “Fine, then! Why’d you put your name in, if you’re so miserable about it?”

“I DIDN’T!”

“Honestly, Ron, when would he?” said Hermione acidly. “You’re with him day and night—”

“EXACTLY!”

“I dunno! He might’ve used the Cloak!”

“THE CLOAK?”

“For an Age Line?” drawled Draco. “Do you age three years when you’re invisible?”

“Or something else!” said Ron, defensive, but also relieved. “I don’t know! Maybe you paid off someone to do it for you!”

“PAID OFF?!”

There was a crash: Harry had kicked over his nightstand.

Ron leapt out of his bed, his hands aloft in pacifying formation. “Mate. I’m sorry. I didn’t— ha, er, I didn’t think— I thought you might’ve kept it a secret or something.”

Harry whirled. His hair, never tidy at the best of times, had reached new Lovecraftian orders of tangle. “I could *die,”* he said, raggedly, “and you’re worried — what, that you wouldn’t get to *share the glory?”*

“You’re not going to die,” said Draco shortly. Hermione was standing in a rictus of fright, absolutely going to town on her thumbnail.

“Exactly. I was being stupid,” said Ron calmly. He grabbed Harry’s shoulders — Harry lurched at him as if to swing, and then gave a wheeze, collapsing at the last moment — and hauled him into a hug. Harry melted into it as if it was his first glimpse of home in years. “Go easy on me, mate. I get stupid sometimes. So do you.”

“You can say that again,” said Harry thickly.

“Alright. Earned that one.”

Draco straightened and jerked his head at Hermione. The boys deserved a moment, and he needed to speak to her alone.

They stepped out of the room. He threw a Muffling Charm over the narrow hallway above the stairwell, and then drew her aside, into an

alcove under the sconces.

“Well, he’s done for,” he said casually.

“Don’t say that. Don’t you dare.”

“What? He is.” He nodded at the door. “He’s fourteen. The magic in the tournament is designed for adult wizards. There’s no way he’ll manage.”

“You might at least pretend to have a little faith,” she said hotly.

“That’s not what I mean at all, and you know it.” He paused. “We’re going to help him cheat.”

He expected a wail of lament at even suggesting this heresy against School Rules.

Instead, she tilted her head and offered a quizzical: “No, we’re not.”

“Yes, we are.”

He had three arguments, an excuse, an appeal to emotion, and one very powerful expletive prepared to convince her. As it came out, he needed none of them.

“It’s not cheating,” she murmured, lifting her chin. There was a cunning flicker in her eyes. “It’s called collaborative learning.”

News! I made a Tumblr — @greenerteacups — if you prefer to get fic updates that way, or if you wanted to use the ask/messaging system there to reach out. It's threadbare at the moment, because it's brand new, but I thought it would be helpful to have conversations or answer questions that don't fit in the AO3 comments section. Anyway!

-One of the consequences of being friends with Draco Malfoy for four years, especially if you happen to be a teenage criminal genius, is

that things like "rules" end up meaning a lot less. Hermione Granger is officially Not Bothered by the rules of the magical world, especially dumb ones that endanger her friends. Some buildings need burning.

-This chapter comes with formal apologies to the House of Hufflepuff, and a sincere promise that they have not been forgotten. Rest assured that Cedric isn't disappearing, he's just going to be on a different journey. Certain plot elements are going to be a bit different, this time around.

-Fun fact, some of those French words come from the French translation of the Harry Potter, where Gryffindor is literally translated as "golden gryffin," and Hufflepuff is "Poufsoffle." Which is the cutest, really.

-Harry is that guy who goes into Dick's Sporting Goods because he needs to buy fishhooks or something and walks out an hour later with two carts full of the most arcane weird sports tech known to mankind. He DOES have a fitbit, he DOES share his workouts, he DOES get the special dri-fit running jackets with the built-in reflector patches. Meanwhile, Ginny (the actual pro athlete) wears sweats.

Wishing a fresh, tasty cup of your favorite drink to everyone who commented! Perpetually amazed by the warm reception to this fic. Y'all are the best. Next chapter: "Norberta."

Norberta

Chapter 39: Norberta

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“The way I see it, if the Ministry is going to throw the rules to the wind and make him compete, then Harry doesn’t owe them anything except that. Bare minimum. The rules about collaboration and doing it yourself — which are mostly implicit, I read the rulebook last night —”

“Naturally.”

“—include *nothing* about collaborative preparation, and for the Tasks themselves, the only rule is no one can accompany him into the arena. That’s it! Isn’t that ridiculous?” The text was summarily brandished aloft for its crimes against reason. “I can think of about ten loopholes off the top of my head!”

“Those rules were written in a pre-Granger era. I’m sure they thought ordinary swot-proofing would suffice.”

“Then they were wrong! And we’re going to prove it.”

“Do you know, when you start plotting,” he said calmly, stealing a triangle of toast, “you get the most astonishing maniacal gleam in your eye; it evokes something deadly and primordial. While fixed in it, one gets the unsettling thrill of thinking he is about to be set on fire.”

She lapsed into a thoughtful pause. “But that wouldn’t be any use,” she said, upon reflection. “I wouldn’t set you on fire; you’re being helpful.”

“I bet you say that to all the boys.”

True to form, Harry and Ron skated into breakfast when it had been so long that most dishes had disappeared, and left only a pittance of scrambled eggs and turkey bacon. Ron threw himself into it with the same aplomb as ever, while Harry had not the time to consume a wedge of toast before a snowy owl dive-bombed and stole it from him.

“Aw, Hedwig, no.”

“Your owl is a menace.” Ulysses offered his master a *Daily Prophet* speared on his claw.

“She can’t help it. She’s a good girl,” lied Harry, scratching the saucy bird’s head. “Anyway, I’m glad she’s come. I’ve got to send another letter to Moony and Padfoot.”

“Telling them about the Tournament?” said Ron, except it was strained through masticated eggs, so the actual utterance was a bespoke combination of vowels and gurgling. The fact that Draco understood it flawlessly delivered a crippling blow from which his dignity would never again recover.

“Yeah,” said Harry, who, even worse, didn’t seem to realize it wasn’t English. “This is from them, too… they’re telling me to hang on. They’re aiming to camp in Ireland,” he added, unhappily, “so they can be close without the Ministry finding them. I was right. I shouldn’t have said anything about my scar.”

Draco flicked a piece of scone at him.

“Ow!”

“Repeat after me. ‘I will not accept blame for the stupidity of others.’”

“‘I will not—’ hang on, they’re not stupid!”

“If you’re right, and they’re planning a return to Britain, then they are; if you’re not, you’re both blameless. Either way, the mantra is useful.

I, personally, have made it my manifesto."

"Maybe I shouldn't tell him about the Tournament," Harry said doubtfully.

Hermione rolled her eyes and cleared her throat. She continued clearing it, with increasing verve, while Harry drafted his reply on the back of some scratch paper.

"Why, Hermione. It sounds like you want to say something."

"No, it's just — Harry, I love you to pieces, but sometimes I wonder if you hear what you're even saying."

"Sort of hard to, actually, when someone's coughing in my ear—"

"It's the Triwizard Tournament! It's hundreds of years old, it's an international tradition, it's the first tournament ever to feature *two* champions from one school, and one of them is Harry Potter! I'd be surprised if you're not the front page of the *Daily Prophet* tomorrow!"

This blindsided him. "Me? You're joking."

"She's not," said Ron seriously. "I'm sorry, mate, it wasn't a nightmare. You really are Harry Potter."

"I — shut up. Fine, I'll write to him. Hermione, can I borrow your owl?"

"Thucy? Please do, she needs the exercise—"

"As the individual who procured said animal, I would like to lodge an aesthetic objection to 'Thucy,'" said Draco.

"Overruled — but why not Hedwig?"

"Told me not to. She stands out," said Harry, standing up. "I'll run this up to the Owlery— *oof."*

He pivoted on his heel and almost plowed into Severus Snape.

Hard to say who of the group was most horrified about this. A real nailbiter, it was. Draco would cast a vote for himself.

“Mr. Potter,” said Snape, hitting consonants like he was chopping them for kindling. It was brutal. An elocutionary tableau. No vowels were spared.

“Professor Snape,” said Harry, somehow failing to shrivel up and evaporate under the immaculate coldness in Snape’s eyes.

“You. Are required. Upstairs.”

“What. Do you mean. By upstairs,” said Harry, slowly, and Draco would have followed the others in giggling if he hadn’t been reasonably certain he was about to watch a dear friend get decapitated. “This. Is a castle. Sir.”

Snape gave the thin shudder of one expending a decade’s accumulated patience at once.

“Mr. Crouch… requests… all champions… to report to the faculty lounge.”

“Oh. Okay. Can I stop by the Owlery f—”

“Now.”

“Right, yeah, yep, sure, that’s what I thought.”

With a grimace and a wave, Harry shot off, making the kind of time you’d expect for someone with his back to an armed and scowling Severus Snape.

“Draco.”

Draco lifted his head slowly, like Snape might forget about him in the time it took to make eye contact. It was a misbegotten hope.

“With me,” he said curtly, and left.

He had about four seconds of scrambling before Snape was out of sight, and filled these with a muttered goodbye to Hermione and Ron, who watched him depart with the same mystified stare they’d given Harry. Then he trailed his godfather down a fractal of orthogonal hallways traversing a wing’s worth of distance from the Great Hall, including several sharp turns through a hidden alcove or passageway, until anyone following them would have had to either teleport or sit down and cry; and only then did Snape stop and fold them both into the alcove of a window overlooking the lake.

“Professor—”

“Silence. I have a letter from your mother.”

“You’ve seen her? How is she?”

“If she required me to tell you, I imagine she would not have gone to the work of writing a letter.”

Sometimes, on blue moons, when the stars fell into geometric perfections overhead, and the spirits of earth and sky conspired to incline the affairs of mortal men, Severus Snape woke up in a good temper. This was not one of those occasions.

The letter changed hands. He checked the unbroken crest and then made to open it. A sudden grip to his shoulder startled him out of it.

“How did Harry Potter put his name in the Goblet of Fire?”

Slurred in a harsh fast whisper, Draco was almost sure he’d misheard him. When he processed it, he still wasn’t sure.

“He… didn’t, sir.”

“Don’t lie to me,” snarled Snape, stepping forward. He didn’t have so much height on Draco as he used to, but he didn’t need it. A man who could take down a ravenous werewolf with nothing but his wits

and three wandstrokes was not the type who needed height to invoke the fear of God. “You two are always lurking together. You must have known it, if you did not see it. He would have confided in you.”

“I don’t — well, firstly — I mean, he *would’ve,”* said Draco, faintly flattered in the part of his gut that wasn’t scared fit to pee, “but he didn’t. Put his name in, that is. Potter doesn’t want to be champion.”

“Has he sworn you to secrecy? What oaths have you made? Answer me!”

“No, it’s true,” he said, melting fear with a tiny candle of indignation. “I’m not lying. He doesn’t want it. He’s fourteen and he doesn’t want to die, why would he risk it?”

“He is a vainglorious peacock—”

“Who? *Potter?”*

“—thirsty for fame, who rejoices in flaunting school rules—”

“Do I have the right Potter? Are we possibly talking about an effete thespian cousin?”

“He is a braggart! And a liar!”

“He’s a dumb friendly athlete who’s got no parents,” said Draco, half-stunned at Snape’s audacity, and half-stunned at his own. “He likes taking in strays and buying ripoff quidditch gear. He gets excited to de-gnome a garden. He thinks he’s got to thank people for being friends with him. Harry *Potter?* He’s thick, but he’s not vain.”

This was not Snape’s pleasure to hear. This was not Draco’s pleasure to say, exactly, either, but it was the truth and besides, it put an end to the interrogation. Snape closed off, a cold nightfall of eyes and hands that was almost more alarming than his fury.

“Swear that he did not touch the Goblet.”

“Fine. Done. I so swear.”

“On your house.”

He shifted onto his heels. “Uncle Sev.”

“On your house!”

“Fine! Merlin! I swear on the House of Malfoy.”

“And?”

“And on the land and the blood and the name of my father, which is now mine, and ever will be, and is that *quite* enough for you, or would you like me to fetch a witness for the Unbreakable, while you’re at it?”

“Careful,” said Snape, much calmed, but still cold. “Deep magic is not to be invoked lightly. Even in passing.”

“Understood,” said Draco, after a moment.

The tension simmered to a fever peak, broke, and descended into mellow silence.

“So,” he said. “Good summer?”

Snape let out a slow exhale through the nose, which was either a sign of immolating rage or slight amusement, depending on the angle of his eyebrows, but before Draco could check them there was a bark of: “SEVERUS!” and a clatter at the mouth of the hallway.

How a man of Mad-Eye Moody’s size managed any kind of stealth was a question Draco could not answer. The auror scuttled up the hallway. His height snuck up on you, and impressed itself in startling fashion when he peered down his nose at Snape, who had the automatic sneer of someone well-used to peering down at people.

“What are you about, Snape?” he growled. “Lurking around this one? Putting ideas in his head?”

“It may astonish you to learn that as his teacher, I am paid to do both,” said Snape, “but because you have so little experience in it, I can easily fathom your confusion.”

The two of them ogled each other in bold dislike. Abruptly, Mad-Eye turned to Draco.

“Is he trying to intimidate you, boy?”

“No,” said Draco, lying somewhat.

“Eh? Then what’s his business with you?” He flicked his wand between the two of them. “Not your head of house, is he?”

“Mr. Malfoy is my godson,” said Snape, in a slow and silken drawl. “I have a familial stake in his affairs.”

Draco looked at him with interest. Mad-Eye looked at him with even more interest; then he snorted.

“If I thought you could explain family with a dictionary in front of you, I’d pack my things and give you my job,” he said darkly. “Why haven’t you got it, by the way? You’ve been living in Albus’ armpit long enough, doesn’t he trust you yet?”

“Professor Dumbledore… has not seen fit… to appoint me… for the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. He seems to believe it lies better with his… very… *very* old friends.”

“Heh,” said Mad-Eye, with satisfaction. “True enough. Slither away, Severus; two of your little shits are trying to jinx a girl’s teeth into railroad tracks, and if you don’t get to them before I do, they’ll end up with a dose of their own medicine.”

Snape’s expression evoked an old fresco of Prometheus under the eagle. “We … do not… use magic… on students… at Hogwarts.”

“Maybe *you* don’t. I’ll not let your pack of pureblood mutts run rampant through this school without ever seeing a consequence. I made that mistake the first time.”

The first time? Did he mean the first Wizarding *War?*

“I agree completely. Which is why, at Hogwarts, we give detentions for bad behavior.”

“Go give some, then,” Mad-Eye suggested, his eye aglitter. “While Susie Bones still has some of her teeth.”

“Draco—”

“Leave the boy,” barked Mad-Eye. “We’ve got business.”

Snape radiated dislike, but he had no recourse. Draco sympathized with his position. Mad-Eye was a teacher, and he couldn’t very well force Draco not to talk to him. “May I trust you not to grind the ax of your dead causes while I am gone?”

“If I wanted justice done in this hallway,” said Mad-Eye, “I wouldn’t start with Malfoy. Put it that way. Off with you.”

Snape cast a parting sneer over his shoulder, and swept out.

Mad-Eye tilted his head. He examined Draco impassively for a long moment. Draco didn’t understand where their animosity came from, except possibly a holdout from the war — but Snape had been a double-agent, hadn’t he? He’d turned coat for the Order. What problem did Mad-Eye have with him?

He prepared for an uncomfortable interview.

“Gryffindor?”

Not what he’d expected. “Yes, sir.”

Mad-Eye did a strange thing, then: he grinned. The expression was so unusual on his withered and churlish face that Draco checked over his shoulder to make sure the Rapture hadn't snuck up around a corner.

"I'll be damned," he said. "If you could buy a hat a drink."

"Sir?"

"Nothing. Not Slytherin, eh?"

"Obviously not."

"Rude surprise that must've been."

"One acclimates," said Draco tiredly.

"Hm." Moody reached down to scratch his leg.

But the movement was wrong, somehow. It stuck out like a hippogriff in a centaur herd. Draco followed the hand with his eyes, frowning, as he tried to figure out what the problem was. After a split second, it came to him: it was the wrong hand. Mad-Eye had cast with his right hand when he interrogated Draco, but he'd reached for his leg, across his body, with his left.

Draco's wand was already halfway out when Mad-Eye's jinx soared at him. He was such a quick draw that Draco hadn't even seen him move. But Draco was quick, too, and the curse bounced harmlessly off his hastily conjured Shielding Charm. It soared into a corner and hit the wall, shattering a quaffle-sized chunk of brick.

"What the hell!"

Mad-Eye, his arm still outstretched, bared his teeth in a near-feral grin.

"You're a good draw, Malfoy," he said, lowering his wand.

“Lucky for *you,”* said Draco, staring at the new hole in the wall.

“Don’t be a candy-arse. I’m making a point.”

“It seems like there were other ways, potentially, to make that point. With words, for instance.”

“Shut it.”

He did.

“Holster your wand,” ordered Mad-Eye.

He holstered it.

Mad-Eye sheathed his own and tugged his greatcoat over it. “Nobody ever won a battle with book-smarts and letters,” he growled. “Those friends of yours, the ones with all-O’s in Potions, Charms, Transfiguration — oh, they’ll graduate, and they’ll be fast-tracked into Ministry jobs, professorships, bureaucratic appointments…”

“I mean, I might like some of those,” said Draco dispiritedly.

Mad-Eye loomed. “There’s a war coming,” he hissed. “A war, do you hear me? And it needs soldiers. Soldiers, not cloisterites and librarians. Not bureaucrats. Not academics. It needs quick draws and steady hands. Your school is failing you, boy. It is failing you in ways more grievous than you can yet understand. Keep that guard up. Stay vigilant. Trust no one.”

“What,” said Draco, because he couldn’t help himself. “Or you’ll jinx me again?”

The professor shook his head, his jaw set gravely. “I’m not who you’ve got to worry about,” he said. “Of all the people in this castle, there’s a dozen you should worry about before me.”

Draco didn’t know what to say to that. So he took it as a dismissal and made to leave.

“Malfoy,” called the professor. Against his better judgment, Draco turned.

“You bear an uncommon resemblance to your father.”

That much was obvious. Pure white hair didn’t crop up often, and Draco had seen himself reflected in a hundred ways in his father’s portraits, the hard nose, the hard-set eyes. At parties and congregations he could be clocked with a cursory headcount. The most that could be said for Hogwarts in this regard was that nobody was likely to stare at you for having white hair, because odds were a dozen people had done something even odder to their appearance for giggles just that week.

Thinking about Mad-Eye’s observation seriously was liable to stir feelings he didn’t want to examine. There were no normal ways to react to learning you looked like a dead man. Especially when it was your father.

Then again, there were no normal ways for your father to be dead.

He picked up these thoughts and summarily dropped them in the rubbish. What remained was impatience and wit and good, nourishing insincerity.

“We’re related,” said Draco.

Mad-Eye worked his mouth, as if chewing on something. Finally, he said, “Not sure it’s doing you any favors.”

Dear Draco,

Oh my darling, I miss you more than an arm and a leg and a hairy heart. I want to throw my arms around you and bundle you away forever at the Manor, except that I know you would never forgive me. When I heard what happened at the Quidditch World Cup it was all I could do not to abandon Briselda and run to your side, hang all

propriety; but I knew that you were a strong young man, and you would not be nearly as frightened as your weak mother.

Romania is beautiful and old. We have been sightseeing in some old churches and exploring the forests around Bucharest, which hold such exhilarating sights. Did you know that hidden in the heart of Romania are some of the most powerfully magical locations in the world? Your father took me to one for our seventh anniversary. Seven is an important magical number, as you know.

I've attached some things for you; souvenirs and trifles, little sweets from Mummy, so you remember someone somewhere is thinking of you fondly and ceaselessly. I've also sent a wee something for Theodore. His birthday falls in November, and I dread to think it went unremarked. Please deliver them at your convenience.

All best to your friends and housemates, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, & etc.

I love you more than perfume and waltzes and strawberries and the first crocuses of spring, my little lion.

All my heart,

Mummy

The common room of Slytherin House was secreted under the belly of the castle. Draco hoped and prayed that the pipes would break and flood the whole thing with scummy pondwater. He had never felt so lost as when trodding through endless windowless hallways, dark as dungeons and twice as musky, lit by identical reas of torches and unmarked by signs or doors: he was used to airy towers, staircases that crisscrossed wide open vaults and let you peer down dizzying heights, everything open, the whole castle tumbling out at your feet like a child's sandbox kingdom. For him, the dizzying annals of the castle basement offered an atmosphere not of mystery and secrets

but of aggravation and depression, which revealed more about the character of Slytherin in forty-six minutes than three years in their company could do altogether.

Finally, he stumbled into a second year in a green tie and threatened him into leading Draco where he wanted to go: a large V-shaped archway in the shape of a serpent, carved into a blank wall.

By then he was ready to spit acid and knock the thing down with *Ventus.* The second year squeaked, “Parseltongue,” and the brickwork peeled away to reveal a lacquered black door.

Behind it sat a large, dark vault of a room, paneled in green brocade, with marble pillars holding up a skylight into what could only have been the lake. A dozen inquisitive sneers perked up from a dozen leather armchairs; when they saw Draco, half sharpened in fascination, while the other curdled to disdain.

“Nott,” he barked. One of them spilled her crystal goblet. He swept inside and pointed his wand at the ceiling, prepared to cast *Sonorus.* “Where is he?”

A familiar yellow head poked over the back of one sofa. Daphne — who was, he noticed, surrounded by a wide radius of no one — kindled with excitement and scrambled over the sofa’s back, as if the time it took to go around was too great. She was thicker around the arms and middle than she’d been even on the train, and the scars had softened to a faint silver, washed out by the ruddy glow of health that suffused her cheeks. Where before she’d been a slender crescent of loveliness, all hollows, she had waxed into the round beauty of a full moon.

One of the other girls pointedly drew a handkerchief over her mouth and nose as she skipped by.

“Draco! You’ve come to visit! I thought you never would! I’ve wanted to show you the dungeons for ages and ages! You’ll adore our library, it’s simply without compare. Have you brought your friends?”

She ducked around his shoulder, as if he might be holding the other three Gryffindors behind his back. “No? That’s alright! Maybe it’s best you didn’t bring Hermione. I’ll show her later, when it’s emptier. One doesn’t like to make a scene—”

“Greengrass.”

“Hm?”

“I’m here on an errand.” He lifted the package.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “Theo? I think he *should* be here, I’ll get him.”

He had supposed this would mean her darting into one of the various passageways leading off the main vault, but in this he was mistaken. Daphne whirled, sucked her lungs full of air, and bellowed, “THEODORE!”

From a side-room to the common lounge emerged a mousy-haired boy, wearing an emerald green dress shirt less two buttons, disheveled by Slytherin standards, immaculate by Gryffindor ones. The sight of him lifted a wave of acknowledging murmuration from the nearest students, and he fluttered his hand casually, like a descending prince, which made Draco want to wedge his head in a toilet bowl and flush.

“Oh. You,” said Theo, with a complicated, unhappy kind of affection. “I thought you’d tired of shouting at me. You do realize you can’t do it here, don’t you? Or has your nerve finally overtaken what little remains of your brain?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. Do you have any idea how many stairs there are between here and Gryffindor Tower? I wouldn’t put myself through all that if I’d been poisoned and you had the last dose of antivenom in your pocket.”

“But you did,” Theo pointed out, more than a little smugly. “Should I be concerned for your health, or do we owe this dubious pleasure to

something else?”

“I *was* going to say that my mother sent you a birthday present, but as the one holding said present, it falls entirely within my discretion whether or not you deserve to get it, and frankly I’m seeing a lot of behavior I’m not inclined to reward—”

“What? No. It’s mine. Give it here,” said Theo immediately. Draco snickered and released it with a minimum of tussling. “Could have started with that, tosser, I would’ve been nicer. Didn’t anyone ever tell you how to supplicate? It goes gift, then introduction, then request. The altitude in that tower’s getting to your head, your manners are deteriorating.”

He noticed that Theo’s hand was still bandaged, as it had been at the World Cup, but these bandages ran further down his wrist than those had, covering his palm and fingers. Had he splinched himself again? Draco frowned.

“The asbestos down here’s getting to yours. Happy fifteenth, by the way, not that you deserve it.”

“Thanks, young buck. Your gift can be learning to respect your elders.” He shredded the wrapping and tossed it over his shoulder as if he expected a house-elf to whisk it away on the breeze. Inside was a green leather jewelry box, which he recognized as a case from Moribund’s. Settled on a bed of black velvet like under a clamshell were a pair of dark jade cufflinks with ‘T’ inlaid in gilt.

Theo was doing a terrible impression of someone not deeply touched. There was an irrepressible tremor in his cheek and a double-blink of verification. He snapped it closed. “Cufflinks, for fifteen,” he said. “Traditional. I’d expect no less.”

“Perhaps it’s a veiled way of telling you to do your shirts properly. Speaking of which, mind your collar, this isn’t a nightclub.”

He struggled to rally. “I’m partial to diamonds,” he said, “but I suppose, for a night at the pub, it’ll do in a pinch. Please thank her.”

“Thank her yourself. I’m not an owl. Apparently she’s nothing better to do than sit around thinking of ways to get you weepy—”

“Sod off,” he said lazily. “And stay for tea. It’s a waste of time to go back up, besides which you’re sure to get lost, no offense.”

“Offense heedlessly taken, and if your common room weren’t shoved arse-deep in the basement like an afterthought—”

“You don’t like it? I think it’s peaceful.”

“I’m sure the mildew agrees with you.”

He was putting the finishing touches on another insult against what he honestly thought was a quite lovely common room when Pansy backed into the room, holding a box of pins and at least three different threads of argument at once. She was flanked by Crabbe and Tracy Davis and a short, soft-chinned girl with an underbite, who wore so much dark eye makeup her irises appeared to float in a vacuum. All of them wore a trifecta of badges, like military regalia, on the breast of their robes: a House badge, the heart-shaped badge of the League of Promising Youth, and one that said ‘CASSIUS WARRINGTON.’

“Dear Merlin,” sighed Theo, “so we’re doing this, are we? Even after I asked ever so nicely, specifically, to not?”

“Yes, we are,” said Pansy firmly, foisting the box on an ottoman. “Because Dumbledore’s a demented old loon, and Flint’s a brute, and I’m not going to let down the side. Do you know what Davies and Tuttle are doing right now in Ravenclaw Tower?”

“I am gleeful to report I’ve not given it a moment’s thought.”

“They’re making badges for Viktor Krum. Because they like his quidditch moves, I suppose, and I don’t doubt they’ve some objection to rooting for a girl — gibbons. I don’t even think they know the charmwork for it, so if they actually manage, I’ll be responsible for their first academic accomplishment since Roger got an O.W.L. Hello, Draco. I’d offer you a badge, but I don’t suppose you’d like one.”

“Why not?”

She tapped her nail on the lacquered surface, and the writing swirled into another message: POTTER STINKS.

“Ah. Wit,” he said. “Spent a long time coming up with that, did you?”

“Potter cheated,” said Crabbe. He folded his arms, which roughly doubled them in size. “He tricked the Goblet. S’not fair. Slimy.”

“Cass didn’t need to do that,” mumbled Millicent. “’Least when Diggory lost, he did it right.”

“Potter didn’t cheat,” said Draco tartly. “He doesn’t even want to compete.”

“Then he should drop out,” snapped Pansy. “Let the real champion have it. The school’s having enough trouble getting behind Warrington without Potter splitting the vote—”

“What do you mean, trouble? Warrington’s a pureblood and Head Boy, I can’t think of anyone less politically objectionable.”

“You’d think! You’d really think!”

Theo sighed and caught the badge that Pansy lobbed at him; but he slipped it into his pocket, instead of putting it on. “Apparently,” he said, “Cass doesn’t have quite the reputation amongst the Tower Houses that we’d like, socially speaking. We knew Gryffindor and Hufflepuff wouldn’t swing for us, but we’d rather thought that

Ravenclaw might stay out of it, if only to be fair… but then again, Cass and Davies don't really get along. Something about taking all those points off for uniforms, I believe. Of course, the dark-horse candidate isn't helping matters."

Draco hummed, noncommittal. He hadn't thought that Cassius would struggle to rally anyone. But then, he also hadn't thought that Slytherin much cared what the other houses thought, in general.

"It's just embarrassing," continued Theo, "if we can't get a solid majority of our own school to applaud for us, what does it even say? Now, I'm of the philosophy that honey's a better condiment than vinegar, with respect to catching pixies, but Pansy's trying this bold new strategy where she tries to bully everyone in the right direction — negative campaigning, you understand, it's high-risk but it's worked before—"

"Potter *cheated,"* said Pansy passionately. "It repeat, he *cheated.* How is this even a question? The school is splitting up over a twat who *shouldn't even be competing!* Just because Cass does his *job,* and enforces the *actual rules—"*

"Yeah, the rule against nice outfits," muttered Daphne.

"—doesn't mean this is suddenly some sort of horserace! There's a real champion, and a fake champion! It's simple! God!"

"You're just sour Potter figured it out," hollered one of the Slytherins by the fire, and Pansy made a rude gesture with gusto. "Slimy brat, he is, but he *did* do the thing, innit? Even Higgs couldn't find a way around the age line."

"Oh, yes? Really? You think it doesn't matter, Yates? Snape came in and just about took the skin off your bollocks about breaking Tournament rules, you're not fussed that McGonagall couldn't be arsed to do the same?"

"Pansy's found a cause," Daphne whispered. "It's been good for her."

“Yes! It has! Speaking of. Daph, do you want one?”

Daphne wrung her hands and glanced at Draco, who refused to make things easier for her. He folded his arms and let her flail.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe — I’ll take one, just for Cassius — but I won’t switch the message,” she said to Draco quickly. “I like Harry. He’s nice to me.”

Millicent guffawed. The conversation tripped and plummeted into a hole of silence. Daphne stood up straight.

“Millie,” said Theo, massaging his nose, “I don’t suppose you’d do me the favor of our lifetimes and leave it be.”

“No, don’t,” said Daphne sharply. “I want to know what she thinks is so funny. I’d like her to say it. To my face. If she even can.”

“Daph, I swear, I’ll buy you enough pearls to wear as a ballgown if you just—”

Millicent was bristling. “Of course Potter’s nice to you,” she muttered. “We’ve all seen him with the half-giant.”

“Oh, but do go on, Millie. I can barely hear you.”

“Daph, don’t,” said Theo, tightly, “and that’s enough, Bulstrode—”

“I said, we’ve all seen him with the half-giant. I bet talking to you gets him extra credit in Care of Magical Creatures.”

Something unspoken was boiling over, and Draco didn’t realize until it erupted. This wasn’t the casual henpecking Hermione and Lavender waged on a daily basis, for mutual sport and pleasure. It was a wide open wound, and Millicent had spat in it, for Daphne gasped, “You *bitch,”* and backhanded her.

It was a good, cruel hit, four knuckles and a silver ring on her pinky, which ripped a glistening pink scratch over Millicent’s cheek. Millicent

screamed and hit back, and Daphne lunged with a high wild laugh of someone living a long-harbored fantasy.

“NUFF,” boomed Crabbe.

The girls split apart, dripping blood and venomous looks. Pansy ushered Daphne away and fussed at a split in her lip. One of her cheek scars had reopened, and wept pink pus down her cheek. Pansy dabbed at it gently with a handkerchief.

“You touch Millie again, I’ll clobber you,” said Crabbe.

“Try it,” said Daphne, brightly, wetly, despairingly. “Oh, try it! I’d so love for one of you to just come out and *hit* me, hit me, for once, and we’ll see who’s an *animal—”*

“Daph,” snapped Theo. “Enough. Vince, Millie, would you please bugger straight off and stop talking to Daphne, thank you? It’s causing us all more distress than it’s worth, and I’m just about sick of it all. Draco, you too, for that matter. The Gryffindor faction of this miserable operetta is faffing up the dynamics.”

“Bite me, Nott.”

“Perhaps another time,” said Theo. He cast off Millie and Crabbe with a dismissive hand gesture and herded Draco back toward the door. “Pansy, take Daphne to the girls’ and keep her there, would you? I’ll be around in a mo. Vince, try to keep your girlfriend’s mouth shut, and believe me when I say I know how much I’m asking.”

Draco did not get to see whether these orders took any effect. He was expertly shepherded into the hallway outside the common room. Once the door sealed, Theo sagged against the wall, his spine wilting like a daisy under a heat lamp.

“I didn’t realize the dungeons were such a fracas,” said Draco, by and by. “I should’ve been down more often. Do you place bets?”

“Shut up. Shut up, shut up, and see footnote, shut up, I lack the space on my schedule to tell you all the ways you should go bugger yourself. I’m half convinced that was your fault.”

“My fault? How?”

“Give me a minute, I’ll think of something.” Theo’s eyes were watery from rubbing, and the hollows beneath them were so deep they were developing cave systems. “God. Repeat this to anyone and I’ll skin you for a briefcase, but sometimes I envy you, Gryffindor.”

“No, you don’t,” said Draco, one shocked heartbeat later.

“I do. Put ten Gryffindors in a room together, and an hour later you’ll have an organized sports league. I can’t even get ten Slytherins to agree on what we should have for lunch. First there’s the awkwardness with Daphne, and then the Potter problem, and I’m spending enough political capital trying to get everyone not to tear each other’s throats out over Warrington—”

“Merlin wept. Try complaining to Daphne. Or haven’t Bulstrode and Crabbe convinced you of something, after all?”

“Hold your tongue before it chokes on its own stupidity. Bulstrode’s a cow and Crabbe’s barely amoebic, and for the record, I wouldn’t care if she turned into a Blast-Ended Skrewt every full moon, but I’m also the only reason she hasn’t been jinxed in her sleep, yet.”

Something unpleasant skittered down Draco’s neck. “It’s that serious?”

“Obviously. You know what they say about her. I thought you would’ve guessed. But it’s nice to know we’ve been masking more than I thought.” Theo raked his hands down his face. “It’s not that I don’t want to help. I’m trying. Fuck me, I don’t think I’ve ever tried at anything this hard in my life. Do you think it’s been easy, keeping peace in that room? If I lose standing with the people she’s fighting

with, I can't *help* her. Daph comes first, obviously — it's complicated."

"So? Who died and elected you Speaker of the Wizengamot?"

"If you could glimpse the sheer number of things on my plate at any given hour of the day, you'd go choke on a broomstick for the audacity of even asking that question," said Theo tiredly. He peeled himself off the wall and brushed himself off with the bruising strokes of someone slapping himself awake. "Draco, I know you're looking out for her, and that's the only reason I'm not cross with you, but I grow weary of asking you to trust me."

"Then you might consider making yourself trustworthy," he said coolly. "You strut around this school like you have your own Board seat, and you still won't tell me what's going on between you and your father. Pansy's worried sick about you, as you surely know."

Theo sighed a sigh the size of his whole body.

"I missed you," he said. "I know I'm not supposed to say that, as we're gentlemen rivals and everything, rah-rah, but I did. Over the summer. I wish you'd come to visit."

"I wish you'd stop antagonizing everyone who doesn't wear green."

"Yeah, well. If wishes were nargles, we'd all go mad."

There was something old and resigned in the way he adjusted his collar, but he blinked it off and was all jaunty cynicism again. He said, apropos of nothing: "A shame about the Samhain bonfire, wasn't it."

He had barely thought of it. It surprised him, actually, that he hadn't thought of it. After last year, "I assumed I wasn't invited."

"No, it was canceled. It was a real sore spot with Daph, especially since we couldn't have one last year, either, because of the

dementors. And this year, of course…”

“They drew the champions on Halloween.”

He clamped a hand on Draco’s shoulder. Draco stiffened, and the fingers of his wand-hand flexed.

“Among other reasons,” said Theo softly. “They won’t let anyone in the Forest this year. Word is that they’re keeping something in it.”

“At this point, I must assume you derive some sort of erotic satisfaction from being cryptic,” he said. “Make your point or spare me the headache.”

Theo’s lips twitched in a mean little smile. “No, I don’t think I will. My recommendation is, instead, as follows: One. Deal. Two. With it. Three: Stop expecting to be spoon-fed information. It’s an embarrassingly Gryffindor trait, and it belies a fundamental misunderstanding of how people actually end up winning these things.”

“Would it detonate some combustible node in your cranium to *say what you mean?* What are you talking about, ‘these things’? The Tournament?”

“If that’s not rhetorical, then you really are beyond saving,” he said blithely. The door swung open behind him, and several Slytherins passed out; he caught the door on his foot and held it, half-inside, half-out. “But I’m afraid that’s all you’re getting. I’ve got enough to deal with managing the dungeons; if you want to keep your other friends alive, you’ll have to do it yourself.”

“I’m thinking of outlawing journalism,” said Harry.

“Great idea,” said Draco, tossing him his cloak. “Put your shoes on, we’ll work on it on the way down.”

“No, really. The whole thing. The press. Shut it down. I’m serious.”

“You’re neither the first nor the smartest to think of it. The champions’ interview went well, then?”

“She said my eyes ‘glistened with unshed tears’ when she brought up my parents.”

“Anything about your hair?”

“Er— no.”

“Then leave it, you’ve been lucky as is. Ronald, do you have an aesthetic objection to ties? We’re going to tea, there’s a custom.”

“With who?”

“Hagrid,” said Draco, and took satisfaction in the way both of their mouths unhinged.

By the end of that week, the school had cracked into ugly, asymmetrical factions. As with most things, this shook out badly for Harry. The Slytherins gave him a wide berth in the corridors — only Daphne could be depended on for a *Good morning, Harry,* or *Get the door for you, Harry?* and then *See you, Harry,* which was the only evidence of so-called sportsmanship. The rest of them treated Harry as if they longed to duel him for Cassius’s honor. Terrence Higgs had actually tried it on, dropping a lambskin glove on Harry’s shoe outside of the greenhouses, which was decent of him, because it gave Draco a chance to try out a Furnunculus Jinx and two Jelly-Legs Curses before Higgs was dragged wailing to the Hospital Wing by Marcus Flint.

After that, the message was inked invisibly over Harry’s head: nobody tried it with Harry Potter. That didn’t stop bad feeling from percolating. Hufflepuff was having a mourning period for Cedric (who, for his part, seemed entirely unbothered by Warrington’s victory, and had given Harry a firm handshake when he passed him

in the halls), and too distracted to give much of a damn for either Hogwarts champion. Ravenclaw, a house of propriety and general regard for school rules, grew rather frosty, but Cho and a few other young Ravenclaws had started wearing POTTER POWER pins — which made Harry blush, and made Draco want to hunt down whoever invented the concept of a badge and find interesting places to stick one.

“Trelawney’s been predicting my death again,” Harry said glumly. They picked their way down the lawns to Hagrid’s hut in the yellow glare of an early November sunset.

“Everyone needs a hobby,” said Hermione absently.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t feel great, does it? Sitting down every Monday to ‘I see… *I seeeeee…* a boy with black hair and green eyes will perish at the start of May…’ Plus, I’ve got extra homework on Summoning Charms.”

“It’s not that difficult. You weren’t concentrating properly.”

“Yeah, because of those stupid pins! I can’t look at anyone without seeing my name flashing on their chests, how am I supposed to concentrate on anything?”

Hermione, who had spent Flitwick’s class whisking objects around her as if she exerted a unique gravity on school supplies, was not impressed.

“You didn’t seem so angry when it was Cho,” she said mildly. Harry’s jaw clacked together.

“What’s going on with you two, anyway?” said Ron cannily. “You gonna ask her out, or what? Because if not, you might put her out of her misery.”

“What? No! That’s not — but you don’t really think she’d want to go out, do you? With me?”

Draco consulted the heavens for patience not to reach for his wand.

“Put it this way,” he said, jumping up the steps to Hagrid’s front door. “If all she wanted to do was chat about quidditch, she could talk to Roger Davies.”

Harry didn’t have time to process what was apparently a mind-shattering revelation, because the door swung open, and Draco was nearly flattened by several stories of Frenchwoman. Madame Maxime unfolded herself from the cabin and swept her gaze haughtily over the four of them, including Draco, who was very lucky he hadn’t uttered the first jinx that leapt to his tongue.

“Thank you for ze drink, ’Agrid,” she said, as he appeared to escort her out. Hagrid had brushed his hair and was wearing a fur coat so large four or five bears must have been slain for its sake. “I do so appreciate Scottish ’ospitality. I ’ope to come back many times.”

“Pleasure’s mine,” said Hagrid gruffly, “an’ yer welcome back whenever, trust me. On’y — don’ go tellin’ everyone, alrigh’?”

“Of course. You may trust in my discretion,” she purred, and slunk out of the pumpkin patch with a very sneakish affect, for someone with so much of herself to sneak.

“Wow,” said Ron, after a moment. “I’m going to kill myself.”

“Granger,” said Draco, “I’m prepared to swear you a life debt if you can execute a minimally destructive Memory Charm.”

“We’re jumping to conclusions — we can’t assume — listen, it’s probably not what it looks like,” she muttered, apparently in prayer. “It can’t be what it looks like. They haven’t the *room.”*

“If you care for me at all, you won’t make me think about it.”

“What?” said Harry, baffled. “What’s everyone so upset about? She just had a drink.”

“You lot!” Hagrid noticed them at last, hauling a dreamy gaze away from the horizon. “What’re you doing here?”

“We were coming for tea,” said Draco, “but now we’re contemplating honorable ways to blow our brains out without leaving a mess on your pumpkins. We — I have never been more sincere in my life, professor — are *happy* to come back later.”

“No, no! Yer jus’ in time. Jus’ put a kettle on. Come in,” he said grandly, sweeping them into the hut. Inside a pot of tea still cooled on the table, with two teacups, and a terrified glance at the bed revealed it to be blessedly untouched. There was no evidence of furniture being knocked over, which further diminished the dread possibility, but Draco still fretted fearfully about lowering himself onto any flat surface absent certain assurances; ultimately, he elected to stand.

“I was missin’ the two of yeh in Care of Magical Creatures,” huffed Hagrid. He bustled to the cabinet and brought down a set of red clay mugs. “Dinnae realize the two of yeh didn’t like it no more.”

Hermione nearly cringed out of her chair. “We’re sorry. We wanted to take Care of Magical Creatures, we really did, it’s just—”

She looked at him desperately. He raised his eyebrows. He was intrigued and slightly impressed by her decision to lie, but he couldn’t help her. He had been prepared to tell Hagrid the full and simple truth, which was that he wanted to graduate with all ten fingers and toes intact.

“It’s just that Draco was desperate to take Muggle Studies,” she finished, and he marveled at how quickly the bus mowed him down. He would only jinx her shoelaces together for a few days, he decided, as encouragement for enterprising behavior.

“Did’ee, now?” Hagrid gave this excuse the suspicion it deserved, i.e., total. “Tha’s the firs’ I’ve heard of it.”

“Which makes two of us,” said Draco, or would have, but he was cut off at *two* by a sharp pain to his shinbone. He shot a daggered look at the innocent, blinking Hermione.

“No, it’s true,” said Ron, disguising a laugh as a honking sneeze into his napkin. “He’s really, er… turned over a new leaf, has Malfoy. Total mugglehead. You should hear him talk about sellyphones.”

The screech of the kettle filled the air. Hagrid filled everyone’s mug with strong dark tea, earthy and oversteeped, and set out mason jars of brown sugar cubes the size of galleons. A little tray of rock cakes and treacle tart followed this, the first of which could crack your teeth and the second which could glue them back together, a nice little therapeutic dessert course. Draco politely passed the tray over his empty plate; Hermione surreptitiously fed hers to Fang; Harry wolfed down both and asked for seconds. When there had been enough chitchat to throw a veil of plausible deniability over the visit, Draco set down his teacup and seized on the first beat of silence in the conversation.

“Professor, could I bother you with a question about the Forbidden Forest?”

Hermione glanced at him in interest, and he made a hand gesture to her under the table: *Explain later.* “Would you happen to know—”

“I don’ know anythin’ about anythin’ happening in the forest!” said Hagrid loudly, springing up to wash his cup. “Nothin’s happenin’! Where’d you hear tha’? Did someone tell yeh?”

“No, sir,” said Draco, serenely. “But I thought, if anyone, the Hogwarts groundskeeper must know everything that happens on the grounds, so I thought there was no one better to ask.”

Flattery of this type was too obvious to work on most professors, but on Hagrid, it was a tool so rarely deployed that it worked wonders. He flushed bashfully. “There’s almost always summat happenin’ in

the forest," he said. "Busy place. But there's somethin' special happenin' there *now* — not tha' I can say about, of course."

So it did have to do with the Tournament. Not surprising, but helpful to confirm. "That's fascinating, professor. Do you know — I mean, I'm sure you couldn't possibly say outright, but speaking in general terms—"

"What is it?" demanded Harry, blundering all over Draco's carefully calibrated gambit. Draco dropped his teaspoon and glared at him. "Do I have to fight something?"

"Can't say, can't say," said Hagrid, eyes a-twinkle. "Can't break me promise, oh, no. When the Ministry came in an' set it all up, I helped 'em, an' they made me promise not ter tell any students. Very strict, they were, about leaks."

"But you can still tell us, can't you?" said Hermione, with a hungry expression. "We're not going to report you, we're your friends. And after all, the rumor's clearly out already, so it's not as though they can trace it back to you."

"Tha's squirmy," said Hagrid, frowning. "I'm no' gonna break me promise jes' because they cannae tell I've broken it."

Hermione exchanged a look with Draco, sharing in his frustration over this irritating moral stumbling block.

"Hagrid," she tried again, in a more coaxing tone, "Harry's got to compete in this Tournament against his will, which is already unfair in a dozen different ways, besides which it's going to be incredibly dangerous, the school's mostly turned against him, and he's obviously not as good at magic as the other champions—"

"Love you too, Hermione."

"And we're doing the best we can to prepare him, but it'd be *really* helpful if we could get some idea of what to expect — even just a

hint—?”

“Yer a good girl to try it, but I’m no’ tellin’ ye, an’ that’s final,” said Hagrid gently.

She scowled and slumped in her seat, arms folded.

Frankly, Draco didn’t blame Hagrid. Hermione couldn’t manipulate her way out of a paper bag, and she had all the finesse of a rampaging wolverine.

An *endearing* wolverine, granted, but still not a politically-minded one.

“But,” he added thoughtfully, “if yeh wanted ter follow me on a walk or summat… well, it’s a nice night fer it, nae? And no one could say I’d done aught wrong, if I was jes’ takin’ me friends fer a walk.”

“Thanks,” said Hermione tautly, reaching for her bag, “but our evening’s quite full. I have a meeting with McGonagall about S.C.R.U.M.B.Y. and a Potions essay to finish, and then I have to dig up copies of the *Hogwarts Enquirer* from the last time the Tournament was played in 1891, which will be a joy, as wizards don’t seem to have a concept of archival science—”

“A walk sounds lovely,” said Draco abruptly. Her nose crinkled with indignation, and then understanding slackened her whole face, and she shot up like a pixie.

“Yes. Yes! A walk — Harry, Ron, come on, let’s go — Hagrid, that would be *wonderful!”*

“Jes’ a short one,” said Hagrid in alarm, as Hermione shot to the door and hauled it open. “There’s no rush — blimey, er, I s’pose we can go now, then.”

At just past five o’clock, the weak winter sun had drooped below the horizon, and darkness spread like melting syrup over the grounds.

Hagrid unhooked the lantern from his gate and held it high above them as they took the long path around the side of the forest, tracing the perimeter of the lake. They passed the pebble beach where he had stood down an army of dementors, the scarred trunk of the Whomping Willow — now swaddled in bandages, and fenced off with a twenty-foot perimeter of caution tape — and the thick copse of blackberry bushes where they had fled from a werewolf. Cold claws of dread trailed over his back. Hermione shivered. He shifted closer to the group, and took his wand out.

When the castle towers disappeared around a bristle of pine trees, faint shouting emerged from the darkness. The flicker of bonfires pressed through the trees, and Hagrid, after a quick check over his shoulder, veered hurriedly into the forest, leading them down a narrow dirt path that winnowed up to the peak of a steep cliff, and beneath it, a huge hollow in the earth where the forest fell away into the river valley. A barbed-wire fence ran along the top of the cliff, ostensibly to keep people from toppling over it.

Draco opened his mouth to demand where they were going, but whatever he was going to say was swallowed by a distant bellow and screech of a vast angered beast. A jet of fire erupted into the sky above them, and they reared back, their faces painted red by the intensity of the jet. The sound was unmistakable.

“It’s dragons,” said Harry, awed.

“Of course it’s dragons,” said Hermione miserably.

“Aren’ they magnificent?” sighed Hagrid. “Go on an’ have a look!”

He clapped Harry and Draco on the back, buffeting them forward, and nearly tripping Draco into the dirt. “They cannae hurt yeh from here. There’s containment spells all over.”

Holding an *Aguamenti* on the tip of his tongue, Draco crept to the edge of the cliff and peered down.

Four grown dragons prowled around the dirt pit at the bottom of the hollow. From above they made a wall of pitted jeweled backs and leathery crests, their scales fitted so closely they moved like liquid metal. Their eyes were hollow pits of molten light, ringed by the leathery black skin of their face, and venom dripped from the crescent blades of their teeth, like arakhs. They were all screaming and lunging at each other, only to be hauled back by the rattle of chains, as if it were only shackles keeping them from ripping each other to pieces.

At least thirty wizards, seven or eight to each dragon, flew around on broomsticks, hauling on the chains connected to heavy leather harnesses. How those had ended up on the dragon's bodies had to be a matter of suicidality or immense wizarding skill. One dragon leapt into the air and freewheeled above the others, its red scales flushing in the bath of fire it released from its throat.

"Keep back there, Hagrid!" yelled a wizard near the fence, straining on the chain he was holding. "They can shoot fire at a range of twenty feet, you know! I've seen this Horntail do forty!"

"Code blue!" yelled another wizard. "Stunners on three!"

"Charlie?" cried Ron. The wizard did a double-take and zoomed down to meet them.

He landed and whipped off his cap, revealing a flushed, disheveled redhead with penumbral volumes of eyeliner and a pair of piercings dotting his lip. He grinned and stuck out his tongue at Ron, revealing a barbell piercing through the tip of that, too.

"Charlie!"

"Ronniekins!"

Ron hauled his brother into a thumping hug. "I didn't know you were at Hogwarts! You tosser, you never said!"

“Been busy managing these four divas, haven’t I! And they’re needier than you are! Sorry I stink like ash! Norberta’s teething.”

“Norberta?” said Hermione faintly. “Who — which — is that?”

Charlie beamed and pointed. “The Ridgeback she-dragon, just there. Gorgeous, isn’t she? What a beaut! Hagrid knows her, doesn’t he, Hagrid — Hagrid?”

Hagrid had pressed himself to the wire fence. One of the dragons tore free of its harness, gave a violent shriek, and torched it to a crisp. A proud tear glistened in his eye.

Charlie whistled. “Aw, piss. Girlie doesn’t like the harness. We usually try to get them earlier, so they can acclimate, but, uh, Hagrid here had other ideas.”

“These are the First Task?” Hermione sounded furious. Draco sympathized. He didn’t realize the Ministry actively wanted their champions to die. “You have to kill a dragon?”

“Kill? What? No! Who said anything about killing? Berta’s endangered, nobody’s killing her!”

“Then what do the champions have to do?”

“Search me. If it don’t yell and spit fire, it ain’t my lookout, Mione. All we know is they want four young’uns, biggest we can get. The adults calm down a bit,” he added, as Norberta nearly clubbed a wizard out of the air with her tail, “but they’re too big to move overseas, and the Romanians’ll ride us like house-elves about it.”

“They get *bigger?”*

“Oh, loads. Also, hullo, Draco,” he said, grinning. “Good to see you. Excited for the show?”

“Like a gallbladder removal.”

“Why not use a Shrinking Charm?” Hermione asked, crouching over the precipice. She was kneading her hands thoughtfully. “Or a Transfiguration spell?”

“Good idea! Wish it worked,” he agreed, rubbing his jaw. His tone was exasperated and confoundingly fond, as if the creatures were an impishly clever little flourish of breeding, and not nature’s best attempt at a weapon of mass destruction. “Resistant to magic. Clever clogs! Takes about three Stunners to the eye to get the Shortsnout down for her Sleeping Draught, and that only buys you twenty seconds before you’re a meat toastie! Speaking of which.” He slung a leg over his broomstick and hopped into the air. “Gotta go.”

“Do the other champions know about this?” called Harry. “I mean — we’re lucky, thanks to Hagrid, but—”

“Thanks to *Hagrid?”* said Draco irritably.

“—but the others are going in blind, and if dragons are resistant to magic—”

Charlie laughed. “Give Warrington some credit, he’s smarter than he looks,” he said. “Bloke was down here last week. And just now, the big woman came out for a peek. Dunno but she was pure mad for them, wanted to know everything about them! Tried to chirp me, I think — poor girl, better women have tried — anyway, Wallace sent her off with a stern *no peeking.* Just like I’m about to do with you lot, come to think.”

“But hang on — how do you subdue them? Stunners? Multiple, simultaneous?”

“Aye, that’s one way. Probably shouldn’t tell you this, but if you want to know the truth, only the scales are spell-resistant. Inside they’re just like any animal, only huge. The trick of a Stunner is nailing the throat or the eye. ’Course, the eye’s your better bet, if you want to stay clear of the breath weapon — *whoops* , and she’s spitting mad, she nearly got Wally’s leg there! Better give him some help. Gotta

go! Good luck, Harry! We're all rooting for you! Dad's trying to get time off for the Tasks. And write soon! Mum misses you!"

With that, the wizard careened into the air, firing off a tricky double-barreled pair of Stunners.

Harry lurched away from the dragonpit like the ground beneath him was the deck of a capsizing boat. Ron noticed and dove after him, catching him before he buckled and was sick into a patch of daisies.

Then he straightened, wiped his mouth, and wobbled into the forest. The three of them tagged after him. Hermione cast one last intense look at the dragonpit behind her, calculating, before Draco sent an annoyed chirp at her, and she joined them.

"Harry?"

Harry swiped his hand over his mouth, walking fast. "What?"

"You alright?"

"Fine," he said. "Great! Great, actually. Couldn't be better."

"We'll figure it out, mate. It's just a big lizard, when you get down to it —"

"I don't want to talk about it," he said doggedly.

A muted roar shuddered the trees behind them. Harry picked up the pace, and soon they were loping across the lawns back to the castle, hugging the curve of the lake. The Durmstrang ship sat pale and ghostly under a quarter-moon's light, like a haunted vessel lifted from the deeps, its dragonhead mast huge and snarling.

At this hour, with curfew fast approaching, Draco didn't mind a bit of haste to get back indoors. So it bemused him when, instead of beelining for the castle, Harry swerved right and made for the beach.

"Potter? What are you doing?"

“Taking a midnight swim,” said Harry grimly. “What does it look like?”

“Drowning yourself, by my best guess,” he called, lagging behind, while Harry and Ron scrambled down the pebbles. “A rational impulse, but not one I can support, in this instance. Come up to the castle, we’ve got work to do.”

Harry pivoted, planting his hands on his hips. The resemblance to Molly Weasley was neither faint nor pleasant. “You get it, don’t you?” he said flatly. “You can count. How many champions know about the dragons? We just saw them; Warrington’s known for a week; and Madame Maxime was there earlier, which means Fleur will know by tomorrow, if she doesn’t already.”

“Obviously. So?”

“So what about Krum?”

“So what about him?” Draco lifted his hands, agitated. *“Bonne chance* to him and Karkaroff. Maybe he’s been there half a dozen times since Sunday, you don’t know.”

“Or maybe he hasn’t, and he’s the only one going in blind.”

Draco had an unfortunate premonition of the mistake that was about to occur, which, like most of his premonitions, happened too late for anything to be done about it.

“Potter. Be reasonable. He’s your competition.”

“We wouldn’t have known about them, either, if you hadn’t heard that rumor,” Harry said stubbornly. “That’s not a fair advantage, that’s just random chance.”

“Hardly random—”

“Anyway, it’s not fair. He could use the help.”

“He could also report you for cheating,” Draco said. “Inter-school conspiracy is against the rules.”

“No, it’s not,” said Hermione suddenly. She broke out of her reverie in time to thwart him, which was just really typical. He glowered. “It’s implied to be, and you’ll be docked points if you collaborate during the Task. But they don’t say anything about preparing together. Or trading information.”

“Have none of you ever heard ‘it’s the spirit, not the letter’?”

“Yeah, and so what? What’ll they do, disqualify me?” Harry grinned with his teeth, a new and slightly frightening expression. “Stop me from competing? Oh, no.”

“Potter, this is a bad idea. A bad one, do you hear me? Listen! Don’t — Merlin’s blood, there he goes.”

“It’s sort of nice how you still try to stop him,” said Hermione fondly. Draco muttered mutinously, and kicked a rock.

Harry scampered up the gangplank and rapped on the door. Several moments passed, in which Draco aged several years, and as he approached his late twenties a small Durmstrang student poked his head out the door and squinted at Harry in understandable consternation. The two had a short exchange, and then the student disappeared.

Draco was well into middle age when it opened again and Viktor Krum ambled out of the ship. He was in what must have been nightclothes, wearing a peasant tunic and brown drawstring pants, arms folded and hip cocked in the age-old stance of skeptics and disturbed nappers. Standing next to each other, they could have been mistaken for a vaudeville act. Harry barely came up to Krum’s collarbone. The sight did not fill Draco with confidence.

Harry spoke for perhaps twenty seconds, gesturing vaguely and pointing to the sky. Krum’s expression waxed from suspicion to

confusion to surprise. When Harry finished he paused, deep in thought, and then said a few words. Harry nodded. Krum opened his mouth, scowled, and then bracketed his chest with his hands in the universal symbol for ‘big.’ He cocked his head. Harry nodded again, harder.

Krum said nothing. Then, silent, he extended his hand. Harry shook it.

The Durmstrang champion disappeared into his ship, and the Hogwarts one jogged back down to the lawns.

“What’d he say?” said Ron eagerly. “Did you ask for an autograph?”

“Yeah, ’course, popped my collar and told him to do it right across the chest — no, mate, what the hell?”

“I was just asking! He’s a celebrity! Could sell that for a killing, come to think.”

“He didn’t know about the dragons,” Harry said, as they climbed back to the castle. “I was right. He was surprised.”

“I suppose his headmaster can’t flirt it out of Hagrid,” muttered Hermione.

“Close-minded of you,” said Ron. “Karkaroff’s not bad-looking.”

“No, but a tad small,” she murmured, and Ron threw back his head and cackled.

Draco cleared his throat. “That reminds me, Granger. We need to revisit the conversation about Obliviation. There are images in my head where there should not be images.”

“I think it’s sweet,” she tried valiantly, the dear little liar. “I imagine it’s hard to find companionship, if you’re looking for… you know, anyone who can understand…”

“Right,” said Draco crisply, “good, thank you, that’s the last call for tonight. My eardrums are closing until the next business day. Thank you for your contributions, but I’ll be hearing from you all again in the morning.”

Harry and Ron laughed at this, which was how they discovered themselves the unwitting victims of a Tongue-Tying Jinx; and the blissful half-hour of peace that followed was well worth having to sprint up all fourteen flights of stairs to Gryffindor Tower.

-ABSTRACT: Snape and Mad-Eye have a staredown in the corridor while their students rapidly try to reevaluate the Hogwarts power structure, ranked by level of intimidation, and finally resolve that the two must occupy a joint deputy position under Minerva McGonagall.

-Writing Mad-Eye is never not absurdly fun. Sure, he hasn't used Unforgivables on kids (yet), but that doesn't mean he's not willing to test their reflexes.

-Can't believe it took three books to get a scene in the Slytherin common room; it's a marvelous place, and by far my favorite common room of all four. For preference, of course. Gryffindor Tower is pretty unbeatable, for coziness.

-Charlie Weasley forbidden character: unlocked. Draco doesn't know the words for "snake bite piercings," but I do, so you get to know that's what he has. He just takes them out when he goes back to the Burrow, because his mum's still grappling with the fact that Bill has an earring, and they'll cross that bridge when they come to it.

-Thank you to those who commented, and to those who've come to chat on tumblr! Makes one feel quite welcome. A bouquet of your favorite non-allergenic flowers to every one of you.

-Next chapter: "Read All About It." And with it, an introduction to the wonderful world of Wizarding journalism.

Read All About It

Chapter 40: Read All About It

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

[img: https://i.postimg.cc/QtF6JWVF/Skeeter-R-From-Chosen-One-to-Champion.png]

[img: https://i.postimg.cc/yYPnZzTg/Skeeter-2.png]

There really was no spell quite like *Levicorpus.*

“Are you awake, Potter? Indicate. Else I shall advance to intermediate methods.”

Harry floundered in an upside-down pirouette from his suspended ankle. The wanker made a sound that did not signify consciousness so much as a lot of breath being discharged at once from an inverted windpipe and blundering into the vocal cords on accident. Most people would have accepted it as proof of consciousness.

It was a defining feature of Draco’s character that he was not, nor ever would be, ‘most people.’

“I didn’t hear that.”

Assembled in the Gryffindor dorm, at what Ron judged the “arsecrack of morning,” stood Draco and his proud legionnaires: Ron, in tattered paisley pajamas; Neville, in purple silk jimjams; Dean and Seamus, in faded muggle tee shirts; and Hermione, in a pink bathrobe. It was a worthy squadron, armed to the teeth with wits and wiles and whatever the hell Hermione’s bathrobe was made of, and also about five copies of the *Daily Prophet* between them, which, by Draco’s estimation, were more than enough to beat someone to death, if you put your back into it.

“Well, I gave you a chance. Anyway, no one can say I didn’t, and that’s what matters.”

“What?” said Harry blearily, and he enjoyed a few moments of reacquaintance with the surface of his mattress before the pair of them were joined by a deluge of cold water.

“Initiating intermediate methods.”

“OI! FINE! I’M AWAKE!”

“Do you think he’s up?” said Draco, yawning, to Ron. “I’m a bit deaf. Need a second opinion.”

“Nah, mate, I can’t hear him,” said Ron sadly. “Think he’s in a coma.”

“Drat. You know, if you can take over the *Aguamenti,* we might be able to engineer some sort of spit-roasting situation—”

“Piss *off,* both of you,” gasped Harry, thrashing to the edge of the bed. “Is the castle on fire? What’s happening?”

Two copies of the *Daily Prophet* hit him in the face, more or less concurrently. Draco exchanged a firm handshake with Seamus to congratulate his timing.

Hermione gave him his glasses and a sympathetic look.

“Mrph,” said Harry, reading. Then: “Ugh.” And, moreover: “Oh, God.”

Then, at last, with mortal fear: “Hermione, I swear—”

“Oh, Harry, I actually thought it was rather sweet,” she said, covering a yawn. “I’m sending a copy to my mum. She’ll be really excited that my name's been in the paper.”

She was useless. Draco gave her a look that conveyed his disappointment in her lack of vitriol.

“Don’t look at me like that! I made it very clear I was here under protest. You know perfectly well that Harry didn’t say any of this.”

“I’ll hear that from him, first.”

“Er — I did say some of it,” Harry admitted, “but it — hang on! No! Listen! Skeeter took it all out of context, and she left loads out. She brought up Hermione, not me.”

“Did she,” said Draco. He twirled his wand through his fingers.

“Since when were you a top student?” hooted Ron. “You been pulling O’s when my back was turned?”

“I never said that! She made that up!”

“She did quite a bit of that, it seems,” said Draco.

“Yeah! She did! Like here — I never *winked* at Fleur! She’s three years older than me and barely knows I exist, and anyway, I wouldn’t — I can’t even wink! And I did *not* give her a ‘flirtatious grin’!”

Ron lifted his paper up to the ceiling light as if to christen it. “Lads. Advice. I’m thinking of getting ‘watch out ladies, he’s trouble’ tattooed on my back.”

“Can’t, I’m already doing it with Seamus,” said Dean.

“Bastards. Then can I have ‘the longing touch of a thousand teenage girls’?”

“No, *I’m* doing ‘the longing touch of a thousand teenage girls.’”

“Damn you, Longbottom. Fine, I’ll take ‘an aggressively deliberate raggedness,’ but nothing less.”

Harry stood up and found himself far closer to the point of Draco’s wand than he had been previously. He sat down, to reestablish distance with it.

“‘Stunningly pretty’?”

“I don’t know where she got that,” he said immediately. “Not that it’s wrong — or just, not that no one would say it, I just wouldn’t — I mean, but not like that, Hermione, you’re pretty, really, I guess—”

On many different levels, this was the wrong move. It was the wrong move to Hermione, who stiffened and gave an awkward, crooked little smile at the backhanded compliment; it was the wrong move to the assembled boys, who groaned like they were watching a bad quidditch play; and it was very much the wrong move to Draco, who was struck by a wave of meanness so acute it was painful, a prickling impulse to do something petty and vicious. He fingered the grip of his wand instead of saying what came to mind, which was a jinx he’d only ever read once in the margins of a book with three different warnings under it.

“I give up,” said Harry loudly, climbing back into bed. “I’m going back to sleep, and maybe when I wake up, this will be over. I don’t even know why you’re mad at me! It makes me look like a ponce.”

Hermione was slowly mummifying herself in fabric, descending into a chrysalis of pink-and-brown fuzz. She really was half hair, when you got down to it — hair and eyes; big mean doe-eyes full of wonder and cunning, like nature’s Stunning Spell, so intense they ought to have been classified as a weapon. If you were going to call her pretty, it would be because of the eyes. The rest of her face, while not unpleasant, simply got lost in the comparison. A liberal smear of freckles trailed lazily from ear to ear, like whoever made her face had elected for a garnish. A nice chin, a wide nose. A mouth, if you paid attention to that sort of thing.

Stunningly pretty might not have been the first phrase a reporter would choose, if they’d seen her, but that wasn’t for lack of pretty. It just wasn’t how a stranger would realistically describe Hermione’s face. *Stunning* was closer. Or other strong attributive verbs: *Staggering. Startling. Imposing.* Words conveying force, basically. She spoke with an unconscious gravity that hauled everyone’s

attention kicking and screaming into the ambit of her voice, where she held them until she was finished.

It was hard to describe, but he couldn't imagine walking into a room and not knowing she was there. Her presence clicked a light on in the back of his brain.

"I don't care what she says about me, you know," Hermione said waspishly, mistaking his attention for pity. This was a classic Granger mistake, and it hauled him straight back to earth, which was a relief, since he'd been somewhere strange and woozy; possibly he'd been hexed. "It's a tabloid puff piece. The muggle world's full of them. It doesn't mean anything, I know that."

"I never said it did."

"You're acting like it did."

He shrugged. "Good for a laugh," he said carelessly, and jinxed his copy of the *Prophet* on fire.

Gryffindor Tower, being a highly mature and even-tempered collection of wizards, found the article hilarious. The next few days saw it papered over every unlikely combination of doors, walls, ceilings, toilet stalls, shower curtains, and so forth. Lavender and Parvati made name tags that said 'HARRY POTTER'S WINSOME WITCHES' and distributed them, giggling, among the girls of Gryffindor Tower — with the exception of Ginny, who, in a fit of pique, pitched the whole lot in a bin after Romilda Vane cracked a joke about harems. Lee Jordan charmed a plaque that read 'HOME OF THE CROWN PRINCE OF HOGWARTS' beneath the Pink Lady, and Fred and George staged nightly dramatic readings of the article around the common room fire.

This was funny until it wasn't. Outside Gryffindor, people gave Harry the kind of dirty stares you might well be inviting, if you honestly claimed to be the 'crown prince' of anything, or sent 'sly looks' at your interviewer in print. There were whispers when he stepped into

a room, and more whispers when he stepped out of it. Someone accused him of misogyny for winking at Fleur Delacour; someone accused him of bigotry for not winking at anyone else. The politics of it all were inscrutable and bad.

Perhaps worst of all, some of the backlash splattered Hermione. Having any part of your appearance described by a major news organization was taken by most people as an invitation to loudly and publicly pass judgment on it, which was good news if you happened to be a supermodel and/or deity, and terrible news if you were anyone else. Someone approached her after Transfiguration and demanded to know if she was “the *pretty* Hermione Granger,” which gave Draco a chance to try out the Ear-Shriveling Curse they’d learned that morning, and gave Hermione a chance to shout a lecture on the importance of critical media consumption into their rapidly desiccating ears. Undeterred, or perhaps uninformed, another person appeared after Potions the next day, inquiring if she “had ever heard of Sleekeazy Serum,” and proceeded, without waiting for an answer, to explain what it was: this individual was rescued by Hermione herself, who deflected what Draco thought was a rather apt Hair Loss Curse with her Shield Charm, and then hauled him out of the dungeons before he could think of any other thematically appropriate punishments.

He had received three detentions, all from an increasingly exasperated Professor McGonagall; the fourth one, he earned after he made eye contact with her while dangling Ernie “Well, For A Muggle-Born” Macmillan by his ankle over the third-floor banister.

“Morning, professor.”

“Good morning, M— *Mister Malfoy!* What are you doing? Release Mr. Macmillan at once!”

Following this instruction to the letter would have sent poor Ernie on an expeditious visit to the bottom of the staircase. Draco was generous, however. He left him dangling from a sconce.

“Same time tonight, professor?”

“Spare me your attempts to be amusing,” she said plaintively, and hurried to get him down.

As November drew on, the less Harry seemed to care about his reputation, and for good reason: if he didn’t come up with a way to best a dragon, he would have very little time to worry about his reputation at all. Hermione carted a N.E.W.T.’s worth of reading back from the library, and doling out assignments, the four of them assembled for marathon reading groups in the common room, trawling for information through the eyewatering depths of *Dragon Breeding For Pleasure and Profit,* and *From Egg to Inferno: a Dragon-Keeper's Guide.*

“To wit,” said Draco, “most of these are books on dragonkeeping, the main thrust of which seems to be keeping the animal alive.”

“Yes, but the only other books were in the Restricted Section.”

“That’s where the ones on killing them will be,” he said, stretching his back with a catlike twist of his spine. They had been reading so long that the light from the window was pointing in a different direction than when they’d started. “They won’t give books on dragonslaying to first years.”

“Charlie said you weren’t supposed to kill them,” objected Harry. “Norberta’s endangered, and Hagrid hatched her. He’d never forgive me.”

“Fine. Subduing them, then. Although, between you and me, if you get the chance, one less dragon in the world—”

“I’m not killing them.”

“I assure you, they don’t share your reservations.”

“‘Dragons are extremely difficult to slay, owing to the ancient magic that imbues their thick hides…’ very helpful, thanks,” muttered Hermione, and tossed aside *Dancing With Dragons.* “Doesn’t anyone know how to slow them down? A Stunning Spell is one thing, but it takes about four to knock them out, and it would take a miracle for Harry to land one in the eye from the ground.”

“Feeling great, team,” said Harry. “Keep that positivity rolling.”

Ron planted his elbows on the table and ruffled his hair, as if he could shake a good idea out of it. “Maybe there’s a trick to it, innit? Think of it like a game… What’s the most dangerous part of the dragon?”

“Fangs,” said Hermione.

“Fire,” said Draco.

“Claws.”

“Tail.”

“Size.”

“Bloodlust.”

“That doesn’t count.”

“Like hell.”

“It doesn’t!”

“Does.”

“You can’t kill something with bloodlust alone—”

“Can, and I’ve seen you try.”

“Oi,” said Ron loudly, banging his *Standard Book of Spells* like a gavel. “Not the time! Can we get the Swot Squad on something useful, thank you? What can Harry use to get close to the eye?”

Hermione screwed up her nose in thought. “We could try Transfiguration,” she suggested. “A Shrinking Charm—”

“Spell resistant,” said Draco, balling up a bit of parchment for a shot on the bin.

“Or Harry could make himself bigger? An *Engorgio?”*

“He’d need to do quite a bit of engorging before he was anywhere near their size, and that spell is patently horrifying when it goes wrong. *You* remember what happened to Finnigan’s toes.”

She cringed.

“I suppose,” she said, hesitatingly, “we’re doing Containment Circles in Runes; if you could slap down a ring before it got to you… but I don’t know where you’d get the blood…”

“The blood?” said Harry, alert at once. “What blood? Whose blood?”

“Goat’s,” said Draco, waving lazily, “usually. Calm down. Though, to the point, Potter could always use intravenous.”

“Wrong, Dark, and illegal,” said Hermione, scribbling something in a margin, “not to mention unhygienic.”

“So’s dying.”

“But I haven’t taken Runes,” said Harry flatly. “Whatever a runic circle is, I’m not going to be able to pick it up over the weekend. And I don’t want to do anything with blood. Mine *or* goat’s.”

“Close-minded of you.”

“We’re going at this wrong,” decided Ron, shutting his book. “We’re all thinking about how Hermione would do it. Including you, Hermione, no offense. But we should play to his strengths, yeah? Nothing fancy, just plain, simple stuff Harry can do.”

Draco had the opportunity to say something rude, then, but he refrained. For this not even one person applauded him, and it was perturbing. “We might start with practical magic,” he suggested. “Flying, magical artifacts, et cetera. And you’ve got reflexes. If one of the tasks were to catch a Snitch, for instance, or to duel one of your competitors, one on one — I mean, you would have a better chance. But they’re not going to make it that easy. This will be about cunning. Strategy. Precision.”

“Are you campaigning? Because I can’t actually let you and Hermione do the Task for me, like tag-team boxing.”

“I don’t know what that is. No, don’t tell me, I don’t care. And of course you can’t, I already looked into it.”

“That was a joke.”

“What about his broomstick?” said Ron, epiphanous.

Draco lifted his head from a restorative sojourn on the table and squinted. “...It exists. It flies. What about it?”

“Think, egghead. How can we get it to him?”

“Shrinking Charm, in the pocket?” Harry offered.

“Can’t take anything with you but your wand,” muttered Hermione, paging through the rulebook.

“Er… transfigure something?”

“And who will be executing this transfiguration?” said Draco, mildly intrigued. “Yesterday, he struggled with the Beetle-Button Charm.”

“Hey, I did it, didn’t I?”

“Depends how many legs you like on your buttons.”

“Summoning Charm,” said Hermione absently, turning a page. “That’s how he could get it into the arena. Summon it.”

The three of them stared at her.

“That’s a bloody great idea,” said Ron, after a moment. “Why couldn’t you come up with that earlier?”

She looked up, nose wrinkling. “Because it wouldn’t work,” she said. “He’d have to Summon it through at least one wall, which would probably break it. Or hit someone, though I’m sure that’s not as much concern to anyone here as breaking a blessed broomstick—”

“Obviously not. Potter’s broom is a collector’s-edition vintage Nimbus, we’re not risking it on some mangy first year’s skull,” said Draco incredulously.

“Okay, but — but! We could plant it somewhere near the arena! Or one of us could sneak it in through the stands!” Ron was eager.

“Logistically unfeasible. Also, spectators can’t interfere.”

“It’s not interfering if he Summons it off us, is it?” Ron’s tone waxed sly. *“We* haven’t done anything.”

“It’s a good thought,” agreed Draco, who more than anyone could admire a slimy technicality, “and your loophole is, admittedly, robust, but we won’t have the chance.”

“Why not?”

“Because if any of the administrators have a fraction of a brain, there’ll be Anti-Enchantment Shields on the audience, so stray spells won’t hit spectators,” said Hermione, slamming the book shut. She scribbled something in her journal, frowned at it, and threw down her

quill as if it had offended her. “Nothing Harry casts will touch us. Or anything outside the arena.”

“Okay, so, not to be ungrateful or anything — and thank you guys, again, for your help, really — but just taking stock,” said Harry patiently, “as of right now, we have: about half a dozen things I can’t do; one that I can, but won’t be able to; and nothing — again, just checking in — nothing, yet, that might actually, feasibly, work. To defeat the dragon.”

He spread his hands inquiringly.

“That’s about it, yeah,” said Ron.

“Right. Cool. Which leaves us… where, exactly?”

“Precisely nowhere,” sighed Hermione, shoving back her chair. “Which means it’s time to go to the Restricted Section.”

The hour-bell interrupted them with the unwelcome reminder that they did, in fact, go to school, and while Harry was fully ready to sacrifice Divination to keep preparing, they agreed that removing the joy of Arithmancy from Hermione’s day would be like kicking a niffler. Draco lived to regret this. An hour of work with Professor Vector, who was dragging them through a grueling unit on number ciphers, would ordinarily have been a pleasant intellectual exercise, but his brain was already wrung-out from the effort of preparations, and so he missed a frameshift that made he and Hermione do the whole thing twice over.

“It’s still better than Divination,” muttered Hermione, as they packed up their papers and abaci. “Ron says Trelawney’s in rare form. ‘Oooh… When the trine of Mars meets the sextant of Venus, and the tropic of Capricorn is waxing gibbous, a Leo with meteorological scarring will suffer a violent end…’”

“Why, Granger, you never told me you had the Sight.”

“Those with great powers must use them sparingly,” she said loftily, and they snickered their way to dinner. It was a good night: he managed several spoonfuls of a truly delectable lobster bisque before Hermione lost patience and dragged him to the library.

Give him some sort of disorder, she would. Madwoman.

The library was nearly empty at this hour, its towering aisles shadowed and vacant. Dancing spots of torchlight that skittered here and there like mice on the Turkish carpets. Abandoned desks lay strewn with scratch and books, chairs askew, evidence of their users’ hasty desertion at the dinner bell. Their footsteps creaked on weathered floorboards. At this time of night, the windows were a dull, dark blue, sinking swiftly into nightfall, a reminder of curfew’s approach.

“Where’s Madam Pince?”

“At dinner, with everyone else,” she said. “We should be able to get into the Restricted Section with *Alohamora,* we’ll just have to be quick. I should’ve taken the Cloak… I *can* forge McGonagall’s signature, in a pinch, but I’d prefer not to.”

“Lovely,” he said. “Unrelated, but do you remember when you yelled at me and Potter for getting detention, back in first year?”

“I was eleven. And terrified of getting expelled. Are you still sore?”

“I’ve found it in myself to move on,” he said nobly, swirling a *Muffliato* over their shoulders. “Thinking of how times change. That’s all.”

The Restricted Section was a small chamber of polished cherry wood, fragrant with wood lacquer and the dry earthy scent of old books. The sight of it elicited from Hermione a soft happy sound, like a bird returning to its nest, and Draco bit down on his cheek to keep his face from doing anything in particular about it.

Ten minutes later, there were no such sounds to be heard. The section on dragons was empty, its shelves gaping with missed volumes like a string of lost teeth. There was nothing to read but imprints in the dust.

“You’re joking,” said Hermione, dumbfounded. “What kind of person —?”

“Warrington.”

“The Head Boy? No.” She sounded far from certain. “He wouldn’t.”

“Yeah? Who else?”

“I — maybe one of the Tournament officials came through, and removed them—”

“Just because he’s a ponce doesn’t mean he’s entirely brainless. I’ll bet you a hundred galleons that the minute he knew it was dragons, he came straight here and cleaned them out. It serves him, and it keeps the other champions from learning.”

She rolled her fingers together with a frustrated thoughtfulness. Turning on her heel, she remarked, “It really should have been Cedric.”

He snorted.

“What?”

“Do you think Diggory wouldn’t have done the same?”

“Cedric wouldn’t have done anything this underhanded. He’s a good sport.”

“And you’d know, would you?”

“Surely you can see that you’re being irrational,” she sighed, sweeping out of the Restricted Section.

“And you’re refusing to see reason.”

“Oh, but I expect you’ll instruct me.”

“Diggory is just as competitive as anyone else.”

“I don’t know why you’re so prejudiced against him—”

“Prejudiced? Prejudiced!”

“Yes, prejudiced, because he’s handsome, I suppose—”

Her remark sent a firestorm of bad prickles up and down his arms. He stopped. Hermione, lost in thought, marched on for several feet before she noticed. She pivoted, her hands lodged firmly in preemptive judgment on her waist.

“All right. What is it?”

He spoke slowly and coolly, polishing his signet ring on his robe. “Even if he were, supposedly, ‘handsome’ — which I don’t see, frankly, he’s got a mouth like a dead fish and wears enough pomade to grease an axle — you’re the one who’s always bringing it up. Maybe it’s you who can’t see past his looks.”

“Oh, come off it,” she said in amazement. “I never said anything—”

“Liar.”

“What — that? It was a joke! Ginny was being embarrassingly obvious. You can’t be that delusional.”

“Says the witch who thinks his hair’s perfect,” he said, clipped, and stalked past her.

Her jaw dropped. Danger grazed its fingers down the back of his neck, like the premonitory jitter of a thunderstorm, and a little eagerness. She took a deep, noisy breath, fueling up for a proper go at him. They hadn’t rowed properly in a while.

He was mounting up for a daring Granger Distraction Ploy by way of academic inquiry, possibly followed with a patented Malfoy Routing Maneuver via theoretically dubious suggestion, when some irrelevant wanker cleared his throat and stepped into the aisle.

“Zdraveĭ,” said Viktor Krum.

They froze.

“I am sorry to surprise,” said Krum stiffly. “I did not mean to sneak.”

“It’s not your fault in the slightest,” Hermione assured him. “We apologize for disturbing you. You’ve caught us in the middle of something.”

“Something private,” said Draco.

“Ah,” said Krum.

“Not *that* private,” said Hermione.

“I see,” said Krum.

“Reasonably private,” said Draco, through gritted teeth.

Krum tilted his head at an angle communicating maximum confusion. He gave a surly, unimpressed grunt, and then pointed at them with a finger and pinky.

“You,” he said, “are Potter’s friends. I have seen you with him, when he comes to the ship.” He pointed at Hermione. “I have read papers. His girl.”

“His *what?”*

“His girl. Potter’s girl.” He cocked his head even further. It was becoming apparent that his surly look, which Draco had mistaken for misery, was in fact a mask of deep confusion at many bizarre conspiracies of the world, one of which, assuredly, was the idea that

Hermione Granger would ever allow herself to become romantically affiliated with Harry ‘T for Tried’ Potter. “Top marks?”

“No. I mean, yes, that’s me, but we’re not — I’m his friend. There’s nothing — it’s really not, I mean — he’s nice — but friends! Only! Do you understand? Just friends!”

She leapt up an octave apiece on the last three words. Draco, who was enjoying the conversation about as much as he would a haircut with a rusty trowel, looked at Hermione in frank wonder at this verbal explosion. She glowered at him.

“Not his girl,” Krum said, frowning. “But you are — Herm-ee-own?”

Draco laughed. Loudly. They both stared at him for a moment.

“Right, so, no,” she said bravely. “It’s Her-my-onee, actually. Like *my-own.”*

“Her-my-own.”

“Her -mio-nee. Oh-nee. Nee, nee.”

“Nee. Nee. Hermione.”

“Yes, good.”

Krum’s scowl cracked and flickered into a dull little smile. “Yes? That is good?”

“To be clear, the grading curve is obscene,” said Draco. “It’s flat as a carpark. We’re wrestling on the knife-edge of ‘pass’ and ‘fail’ here.”

“A good name,” said Krum. *“Her-* mione. Strong name. Hearty.”

“Well, thank you,” said Hermione, perplexed and pleased in equal measure. She gave a sly, awkward smile, and Draco had a premonition that he was about to hear something terrible. “I suppose anything’s heartier than, er — a Crumb.”

Draco touched his throat in appalment. He did consider walking out of the library, but it would leave the two of them alone, a conspiracy that might well conclude in the heat-death of the English language.

Krum peered at her for several seconds, which crawled by as eons.

He threw his head back and bellowed a laugh that shook the dust from the rafters.

“Funny! That is funny! Very good!”

“No, it wasn’t, you idiot,” Draco hissed, “and pipe down, or Madam Pince will hear, and if I get detention because you’ve never heard a bloody joke before—”

Heedless, Krum hunkered down over his knees and continued to laugh for a full minute. When he straightened, he carefully shuttered his expression back into a glower, but his eyes were bright, and his cheeks were red.

“You,” he said, “are funny. But I must go.”

“Thanks,” said Hermione, so smug she might have broken into a purr. “It’s been a pleasure talking to you.”

“Yes. It has. Goodnight, Pale Man and Hermown.”

He pivoted on his heel and marched out.

“Oh,” called Hermione, “Oh, actually, it’s not — well, never mind.”

With a flourish of a fur cloak, he was gone.

“Granger.”

“He liked it,” Hermione said loftily. “He thought it was good.”

“He’s a quidditch player,” said Draco. “He’s been regularly concussed for years.”

“Or maybe I’m funny.”

“Maybe brain damage is infectious.”

“In fact, I’m hilarious.”

“You’re in want of a good pinching, is what you are.”

The green banker’s lamp still glowed at the desk Krum had abandoned, and a few books sprawled lasciviously over the desk. Lazy sod hadn’t even cleaned up his misses. Draco drifted close enough to inspect them, hoping for some indecorous reading, and found instead a headachy box of Cyrillic script. It had to be Krum’s, then.

A nosy witch pressed up against his shoulder. “What was he reading?”

He passed the book to her, and she cradled it like a baby in the crook of her arm. “No idea, it’s foreign. He must have forgotten to take it with him.”

“But it’s got the Hogwarts stamp,” said Hermione curiously, tapping the inside cover. She flipped to the title page. “That’s interesting, though, I wonder if he can read English… ‘The Golden Fleece and the Heroes Who Lived Before Achilles’? By Padraic Colum? What’s his interest in that?”

“Hello.” His eyebrow lifted. “Since when can you read Russian?”

“It’s not, it’s Bulgarian,” she said. She expertly slipped her thumb along the pages and found one that was dog-eared. “I read that dictionary you bought me. I’m not very good, but ‘Achilles’ is translated phonetically, and the rest is literal… you can sort of… infer… aha.”

She dumped the book on the table and stabbed her finger at a urchin-shaped black splotch in the margins. When she swiped it, a

trace of ink clung to her index. “It’s fresh,” she said, with deep satisfaction. “He must have spilled it.”

“Well done, Constable Granger. We ride at dawn to draw and quarter him.”

“Don’t you see? That means he was reading it,” she said eagerly, wiping her finger on his shirt. He squawked and slapped her hand away, tempted to remind her of the number of organs she would have to sell to afford a replacement. “And taking notes. So he thought it was important. Come on, keep up, Malfoy.”

She flashed him a lightning grin, altogether too evocative of Harry, as was *Malfoy;* he didn’t like the sound of it in her mouth at all.

This was why no one ought to laugh at her jokes. It gave her ideas.

“Fine.” It was surly. “Can you translate?”

“Some. I’d need more time to do it all.” She fumbled out her English-Bulgarian dictionary, which, he was gratified to see, made a home in the same poor prolapsed bookbag that had carried all her other textbooks for three years. Since it could scarcely fit another teaspoon without ripping at every seam, this was great flattery.

“Loan me a quill and parchment. I’ll help.”

“You don’t read Cyrillic.”

He sniffed. “Then I’ll figure it out, won’t I? I broke Vector’s Playfair cipher, and this can’t possibly be worse.”

In fact, it could. They bracketed the Colum book with pages of script, sharing the dictionary between them, and putting their heads together engaged in their second daily dose of codebreaking. It had all the hallmarks of a study session — the squabbling for use of the book, muttered consultations on dangling participles, nitpicking the other’s choice of notation — with none of the academic pressure.

They were racing each other, naturally, because whoever finished first — well, they finished first. It was like competitive extracurricular homework.

One would have to be a deeply diseased individual to take pleasure in any part of it.

Draco threw his quill down first, snapped: “Ha!” and leered at her.

“You did not!” She snapped up her head, caught sight of his finished page, and tossed her quill away. “Damn it!”

“Don’t take it personally, Granger, I’m something of a savant.”

“No, you kept hogging the dictionary!”

He sat back, lacing his fingers behind his head in adulation. “Mmmno. I think I’m just really that good. Greek, Latin, French, Bulgarian… what can’t I do?”

“Fit your head through a doorframe,” she said flatly, hoisting the paper towards her. “Let’s see if any of this is actually legible, shall we?”

For all their efforts, the translated passage was rather short.

Then Jason saw something that was like a cloud filled with the light of the rising sun. It hung from a great oak tree. In awe he stood and looked upon it, knowing that at last he looked upon THE GOLDEN FLEECE.

His hand let slip Medea’s hand and he went to seize the Fleece. As he did he heard a dreadful hiss. And then he saw the guardian of the Golden Fleece. Coiled all around the tree, with outstretched neck and keen and sleepless eyes, was a deadly serpent. Its hiss ran all through the grove and the birds that were wakening up squawked in terror.

Like rings of smoke that rise one above the other, the coils of the serpent went around the tree — coils covered by hard and gleaming scales. It uncoiled, stretched itself, and lifted its head to strike. Then Medea dropped on her knees before it, and began to chant her Magic Song.

As she sang, the coils around the tree grew slack. Like a dark, noiseless wave the serpent sank down on the ground. But still its jaws were open, and those dreadful jaws threatened Jason. Medea, with a newly cut spray of juniper dipped in mystic brew, touched its deadly eyes. And still she chanted her Magic Song. The serpent's jaw closed; its eyes became deadened; far through the grove its length was stretched out.

Then Jason took the Golden Fleece.

"Always thought he was a bit of a pig, Jason."

"Hm? Why?"

He reached over her arm and tapped the name *Medea.* "That's his lover," he said. "A witch. She helps him steal that glittery bit of couture, and then he forsakes her to marry a king's daughter."

"Oh." Hermione sounded quite sad for her.

"Buck up, she hardly took it lying down. She gave his bride a cursed wedding dress that burned her to death, and the king died trying to save her. And Medea killed her two sons with Jason for fear of retribution."

Hermione pressed a knuckle to her mouth.

"Overkill," she decided, though she sounded like it was a hard call.

"Not to the Greeks."

“You know, I’m not sure what I’m supposed to gather from that story.”

“That’s fine, it’s less important than what Krum’s gathering. Why do you think he’s been reading up on the Colchian Dragon?”

“For the First Task, naturally,” she said, impatiently, “but I don’t see why. This is a myth. It’s not practical advice on taming dragons, it’s just a story.”

“And you’ve never picked up some good advice from a story, have you?”

“What do you mean?”

It was a rare triumph when he thought of something before she did; he celebrated, in fine spirits, by dangling the page in front of her face. “Come on, Granger. Keep up. What’s she doing?”

She snatched it out of the air. “Singing, obviously,” she snapped. “Singing a magic song to put it to sleep, which, having heard Harry in the shower, is a long shot at best—”

“Not just singing. What does she do to it? Cite your sources.”

“Someday I’m going to skin you, really, truly, I will,” she muttered. “Let’s see… ‘with a newly cut spray of juniper dipped in mystic brew, she touched its deadly eyes.’ Oh, good.” She slapped it down on the table. “She touched it with a stick! How enlightening.”

He pulled out his wand and rolled it through his fingers. He was still trying to learn Mad-Eye’s trick with the knuckles.

“Indeed. If only we had a special stick of some kind,” he said, spinning it around his thumb. “Capable of producing supernatural effects. Or perhaps even a mystic brew.”

“Oh my God.”

“Ah, here she comes.”

“It’s a wand.”

“Ten points to Gryffindor,” he said, flipping his wand in the air and pocketing it. “And five more, if you noticed where she casts the spell.”

“I’ll snap my wand if it isn’t in the eyes.”

“Merlin, but it’s good to be brilliant. What would you even do without me, I wonder? Die, I suppose.”

“Are you done? I mean really, are you quite finished?”

“Oh, never. Now, tell me your idea. If you let me continue I might accidentally revolutionize wand technology or solve Linear A or something. And I don’t need you plotting to slit my throat from jealousy, or to jinx my bride’s wedding gown, or some such Grangerly vengeance.”

“Why would I bother with the gown? She’s marrying you. I can’t do worse to her than that.”

“Zing. Talk.” He kicked the leg of her chair. “You’ve had a full fifteen seconds to come up with something, I have high expectations.”

“It depends on how quickly you can brew a Sleeping Draught,” she said, already reaching for her notebook.

He cocked his head. “Under what conditions?”

“Non-ideal. Assume you don’t have a vent, a stovetop, or a stasis chamber.”

“So this is a bathroom operation?”

“Hypothetically,” she said, a touch defensive.

“Dreadful. Forty-seven minutes. Plus time to cool.”

She paused. Her expression was redolent with eyebrow.

He disgorged a piece of lint from his sleeve with extreme prejudice. “What?”

“Professor Snape gave us two hours of class time.”

“That’s his business. Forty-seven minutes, unless the valerian’s dry, in which case, an hour.”

“How strong can you make it?”

“In standard ‘strength of potion’ units? What kind of question is that? It’ll work.”

“How well?”

“Very!”

“On a scale from one to dead?”

“Catatonia.”

She blinked. “Really?”

He rolled his hand dismissively. “I didn’t spend all my summer perfecting the Wronski Feint.”

She smiled. In her face glowed his own prickling eagerness, a whetted appetite for unsolved puzzles, an unfinished challenge. “Good,” she said, tearing open a blank page in her notebook. “In that case, we’re about to take a lovely stroll down memory lane—”

“Absolutely not.”

“To Myrtle’s bathroom,” she said cheerfully.

Her excitement phased rapidly from inspiring to horrifying. “Pardon me, I want a clarification. Even presuming Potter has the most mind-

numbing Sleeping Draught imaginable, which, of course, he will, he'd still have to administer the potion. To a dragon. Trying to kill him."

"Oh, he won't," she said, annotating furiously. "We will."

"...Will what?"

"Give it to the dragon," she said. She speared the inkwell like she was staking a vampire and whisked back to the page. "Before the task. It'll be slow and sleepy, much easier for him to hit with a spell. Then all he has to do is hurry and finish the challenge before it wears off."

He stared at her.

"What?" she said.

"Oh, it's very good and everything. Potter stands a very low chance of being eaten. I do, however, wonder who will stop the dragon from eating *us."*

"But it'll be easier for us," she said patiently, "because we haven't got to follow the rules. We can bring the Invisibility Cloak. Dragon eyesight is terrible, you know. I read it in—"

"From Egg to Inferno, yes, I remember. You might also remember their eyesight is compensated by a rather exceptional sense of smell."

"It's only for a few minutes. We'll be in and out."

"You're serious."

"Perfectly," she said, and stabbed a full stop into the paper with great relish.

"Granger. Look at me. You want me to fight a dragon."

She lifted her head, blinking away the fog of inspiration. “I don’t want anyone to fight it,” she said. “They’re endangered, and anyway, that’s Harry’s job. We’ve only got to make it a little easier.”

“And you still don’t think this is somehow an inappropriate thing to ask? Of me? Draco Malfoy, a supremely talented, but nevertheless regrettably mortal man?”

Hermione looked at him with the blank stare of someone who had never heard of such a thing as dying before.

“I can ask Ron,” she suggested, hesitantly. “If you don’t want to.”

Of course he didn’t want to. On the order of things he didn’t want to do, this was skyrocketing past setting fire to his Nimbus and sharing a bed with Neville. It was establishing new hemispheres of Things He Didn’t Want To Do.

But on the other hand. On the other hand, however.

Hermione had a certain way that she looked at someone when they’d done something that made her really, exceptionally happy, like she wanted to blow trumpets and hang posters of their face on every wall in the known world. And the less often she looked at anyone like that, the better it would be for his mental wellbeing.

“You might as well kill him yourself,” he said, massaging his eyes. “He’d mistake it for butterbeer and drink it.”

“I could try—”

“Don’t bother. We both know you couldn’t last ten seconds on a broomstick with a knife at your throat.”

She rubbed a writer’s callus on her third finger. “Well,” she said, “I still won’t make you, if you’d rather not.”

“My recommendation is that you stop talking before my good sense returns from its smoke break and flips over all the furniture in my

brain in a rage-induced frenzy," he said wearily. "In the meantime, you get the cauldron, I've got to go nag Longbottom for some valerian. But we're brewing in the empty Charms classroom, this time. I am sick to death of bathroom smell, and I am not going to spend my last week alive listening to Myrtle complaining about blockages in the pipes."

-This chapter was brought to you by PhotoPea. PhotoPea: "When you're too cheap for PhotoShop."

-Interesting fun fact about formatting images and special media on AO3: it is bad! And it makes me suffer.

-Note on the illustrations! Many headcanon Harry's appearance differently from the movies, and I am in fact one of those people, but the stills were just a convenient resource for the article. I don't necessarily imagine Harry looking like Daniel, so if you're like me, and it bugs you, please consider the newspaper clippings a piece of extracanonical fanart (just one made by the author).

-Someone in the comments for last chapter mentioned reawakening a latent crush on Charlie Weasley, and I want you to know that that is exactly what I intended. One of the core tenets of writing fic is that everyone's favorite character must be hot. It doesn't matter who they are. They could have all of three lines, one appearance on page 492 of Book 5, a name-drop in a non-canonical appendix, it doesn't matter. You deserve to have your favorite character look hot in print, and goddamnit, I'm showing up to deliver.

-This chapter's a bit shorter than usual — apologetic shoutout to that one person who told me to not cut anything, you are an enabler and I love you — because it's sandwiched between two hefty neighbors: "Norberta" (10k) and the upcoming chapter (11k). This three-chapter sequence was originally two, but when I went back to chop them up, I realized that it needed another cut for pacing, and 40 ended up getting squished. I don't have any reservation about posting long chapters (the Yule Ball chapter is currently around 16,000 words, so,

you know) but in a serial piece of fiction, throwing in chapter breaks allows the material to settle, and hopefully draws attention to smaller elements that would otherwise get overshadowed by set pieces, or just washed out in all the dialogue.

-That being said: the next chapter will be called "Trial By Fire."

-As usual, thank you to everyone who commented! Seriously, I read them all, and if I haven't replied, there's a non-negligible chance I'm hoarding it jealously in my unreads as a treat. I hope that sometime today, you hear your favorite song playing somewhere you didn't expect it.

Trial by Fire

Chapter 41: Trial by Fire

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The last week of November left in a capricious flutter of brown leaves and late nights. At mealtimes, he drilled curses and jinxes with Harry and Hermione until his palm ached. In the evenings he ran through batches of Sleeping Draught until he could brew it blindfolded by touch and scent, and then he ran through a dozen more, experimenting with stray rats that Crookshanks fetched him from the Owlery. The night before, Ron and Harry snuck down to the kitchens and brought back a raw slab of beef for a more palatable infusion. This was wrapped in paper and twine, and tucked in a satchel, which made him feel like nothing so much as the village errand boy.

The preparations distracted him from the assurance of doom that loomed over his head. Or, at least, this was what he told Harry, who kept badgering him not to do it, as if some part of him understood that this was the one way to assure that Draco inevitably must.

“It’s not safe.”

“You’re kidding.”

“You shouldn’t do it.”

“I fully agree.”

“I won’t let you.”

“That’s a good joke.”

“You could get hurt.”

“Occupational hazard.”

“Of what?”

“Keeping you alive,” he said irritably, and twitched the hangings of his bed shut.

December of 1994 was born on a bright, beautiful morning, and Draco woke up wanting it dead. He dressed in silence while Harry did the same, avoiding awkward eye contact at all costs. At breakfast, they had a formal standoff: everyone agreed that everyone should eat something, but no one wanted to touch a bite.

To get the ball rolling, Hermione took two slices of toast and started buttering them with enough force to skin a rabbit. “So. Harry. How are you feeling?”

“Excellent,” said Harry. “Might pop down to the pitch and have a quick friendly before.”

Hermione poured herself a cup of coffee. The pot rattled. “Think of it this way. In 1871, the First Task was to capture a Giant Boar in the Forbidden Forest. The champions disappeared for three weeks. One died, one went mad, and the boar was never found.”

She took a bite of toast and held it in her mouth, pensively.

“Hey, Hermione?” said Ron. “If I ever seem like I need a pep talk, just remember: I don’t, okay?”

“No, it’s good,” croaked Harry. “Maybe the boar will come back and take out the dragon for me.”

She turned to Draco. “What about you? How do you feel?”

“Ready to embark on a promising career in animal control.”

But this was a poor bluff. He’d woken up at four with his stomach in knots and staggered to the bathroom, where he spent an hour resisting the urge to empty his guts of what little dinner he’d managed the night before. Sleep deserted him, and so he dressed

and waited with Harry in the common room, turning his wand over and over in his hands, while people trickled down to breakfast with excited choruses of “Good luck!” and “Don’t muck it up!” and “Thrash ’em!”

At five minutes to nine, Cedric Diggory came over to the Gryffindor table, trailing a coterie of moon-eyed Hufflepuffs, and shook Harry’s hand.

“Good luck, Harry,” he said warmly. “Everyone’s terribly excited to see you show up today. Give ’em the old what-for, for Hogwarts, yeah?”

“Thanks,” said Harry awkwardly. “I — listen, Ced, it should’ve been you.”

“Nah,” he said, smiling with only a touch of regret. It really was disgusting, thought Draco, how fair he was being about the whole business. “If it should’ve been, it would’ve been. And anyway, now I get to have a bit of a sit while you and Warrington do the hard part.”

“Warrington’s not going to win bugger-all,” said Ginny. She forked a kipper across the table and popped it in her mouth. The letters R-Y and P-O marched in bright red paint across her freckled cheeks; Fred and George, on either side of her, wore ‘H-A-R’ and ‘T-T-E-R.’ They had all constellated around Harry at breakfast like a praetorian guard of redheads. Fred was busily piling eggs onto Harry’s plate, while George fussed with the strap on his glasses.

“I like to think it’s not about putting anyone down,” said Cedric. “Everyone’s just trying to do their best for their school.”

“Maybe the others are,” said Fred, shoving a tray of kippers at Harry. “Harry’s here to thrash them.”

Cedric gave a polite laugh and he turned back to Harry. “Hey, listen. It’s easy to feel sort of alone out there,” he said. “But we’re all on the

same team. You're still the Hogwarts champion, and we're behind you. I'll be cheering for both you and Warrington."

"Oh. Thanks, mate."

Draco privately thought that it was kind but utterly addled of Cedric to infer that Harry was nervous about feeling insufficiently supported by his schoolmates; a fat lot of good school spirit would do him, if he got ripped limb from limb. They shook hands again, and then Cedric crossed the Great Hall, to the Slytherin table.

"Merlin, what's he doing?" said Ginny incredulously. "He's not going to—"

"He's trying to shake Warrington's hand, too," said Hermione, who didn't sound much surer than Ginny did. "I suppose he's — trying to be a good sport."

The operative word was trying. Cedric reached Cassius' seat, said something, and extended his hand — and there was a long, dangling beat, where no one at the Slytherin table moved a muscle — and then Cassius slowly, painstakingly stood up, enclosed Cedric's hand with his fingers, and gave it a jerk.

"He's making a hash of it," said Ginny crossly. "You can't support both. You might as well be on Warrington's team, at that point."

"Warrington doesn't have a team," said Hermione primly. "That was Cedric's whole point, wasn't it? That we're all here for Hogwarts."

"If he thinks so, he's fooling himself, Mione," said George sagely. He sealed the end of the strap with a knot and settled the glasses carefully back over Harry's ears. "You look around and tell me there's not teams. It's like Christmas in here."

It was: red and green peppered the four house tables like Christmas baubles, hanging from the necks and shoulders of bedecked supporters, stamped in paint across the faces of eager young

Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, some of whom Draco didn't even recognize, and must have been too young to know who Harry or Cassius even were. It was a horse race for them. A competition, fun for fun's sake. Pick a team and cheer. Place your bets.

Draco wasn't sure why it felt like more than that. It shouldn't have. For all that it was dangerous, it was still only a game. An extracurricular activity. Like quidditch. Like the House Cup.

But he'd never seen a Ravenclaw wear a Slytherin scarf, before, either.

Professor McGonagall appeared behind them. She wore a pair of red earrings, which by her standards was an outrageously political move. "Potter, the champions have to come down onto the grounds now. I shall accompany you."

Ron leapt to his feet in a seizure of silverware. "Can we go with him?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Weasley." To her credit, she did sound it. "Champions must receive instructions alone."

"Okay. Just to the pitch. I can come with him to the pitch, can't I?"

"If Mr. Potter allows—"

"Yeah," interrupted Harry. "I mean yes. He can come. Please."

He got up and floated after McGonagall with a strange, distant expression, like he was sleepwalking. Ron followed half a step behind, with an anxious spring in his step. As they passed under the archway, McGonagall placed her hand on Harry's shoulder, and he leaned towards her, as if to ask a question. Then they were out of sight.

"That means — we haven't much time," said Hermione, haltingly. "If you're finished—?"

“God, yes, this is intolerable. Let’s go.”

As they walked into the bright December sunshine, he wondered how his father felt on the morning of his trial.

The thought dropped errantly into his head, and lingered there, troubling the waters. He didn’t think about his father often. He thought about him abstractly, as the person to hold the Malfoy title before him, and as a personage whose dignity and reputation was to be maintained, and, occasionally, a tall and pine-scented presence lingering in the background of several fond memories. But he hadn’t often considered how Lucius would have *felt* about something. The idea of him as real, as a person that lived and breathed and sweated from nerves, was so foreign it was like the Hogwarts castle having a personality.

“Did you sleep?” said Hermione. Her voice broke the monotony of leaf-crunching.

“No.”

“Neither did I.”

“Why not?”

“I felt sick.”

“Whatever about?”

She folded her arms and scowled.

“What? Not me, surely.”

“Of course I did,” she said tautly. “If you got hurt, I’d be a perfect mess.”

The morning light was falling warm and buttery on her hair, which she had bound back in elastic, and she had rolled up her sleeves for some reason. It was like she’d prepared herself for battle.

“A perfect mess?” he repeated, and was dismayed to find it didn’t sound mocking at all.

“Yes, obviously. You’re— oh, of course it’s *here.* I have come to altogether hate this place, you know.”

The Quidditch pitch had been repurposed for the occasion. From a distance, he could hear the spectators rumble, the floodlights up and blazing to cut the sun. A tent had been erected around the players’ entrance, leading through the enclave under the stands usually reserved for smoking cigarettes and whatever it was Fred and Angelina did after practice.

“I’m what?” he said, but the moment was lost, gone, strapped to the tracks while her train of thought thundered over it.

She darted up to the side of the champion’s tent, and crouched down, out of sight. He bent next to her, his knees brushing the wet sheen of dew. After a moment, the flap flickered, and Harry slipped out.

Hermione piped a short whistle around two fingers. Harry ducked down with them in the grass.

“Alright,” he said queasily, rubbing his hands. “I haven’t got a lot of time, they think I’m out to piss.”

“That’s fine, just tell us which one you’ve got.”

“The Hungarian Horntail. It’s black, with these big barbs—”

“The big one?”

“Draco, they’re all big,” he said, speaking from the bad edge of panic. “Krum got the Shortsnout, and Warrington got Norberta. Fleur got the nice green one without any teeth. Think she might’ve passed out from relief.”

“That’s the Welsh Green, and they spit acid, in addition to breathing fire,” said Hermione. “She won’t be celebrating for long. When’s your turn?”

“Last.”

“Perfect. Alright. Harry, you remember the key is to *keep moving,* right? Don’t stop moving. Ever. If you can do that,” she said, “all you have to do is—”

“Battle the dragon?”

She lurched forward and hugged him.

Harry yelped in surprise and toppled over on his bum, which led to: “I’m sorry! I’m sorry,” and “No, my fault,” “I thought you’d be stronger,” and, finally, *“Oi.”*

Harry grabbed Draco’s shoulders. “Don’t die,” he intoned, and then, to Draco’s surprise, did something he’d only ever seen Harry do with Ron: he delivered a short, hard headbutt to the top of his skull.

If this was meant to convey fraternal love and affection, it failed. It hurt like hell. He was left yowling and clutching his head while Harry hurried back into the tent.

“This is the thanks I get for risking my life? You get a full embrace, and I’m stuck with a concussion?”

“Boys,” she said fondly.

“Disaggregate me from that category immediately. I did not consent to that interaction.”

“Not so loud, you’ll hurt his feelings.”

“He hurt my frontal plate!”

“You’ll recover.”

They skulked around to the back of the dragon paddock, where they scaled a hastily erected wooden fence, dispelled a few Repulsor Charms, and a minute later stood on the edge of a wide, sandy hollow in the earth, as if someone had reached down and scooped out a place for the dragons to roost. Iron bars lay over the hollow, sealing the winged creatures off from any escape to the sky, and if that failed, the chains that shrieked and rattled as they prowled around their shaded chamber ought to have done the trick. Everything reeked of sulfur and charred flesh, except for his mouth, which suddenly tasted like metal.

Hermione drew her wand and leaned out over the edge. The height must have impressed itself on her quickly, because she drew back with a squeak. “You’ll — er — need your broom,” she said faintly.

Apparently she wasn’t going to offer him a hug, like Harry; that was fine. He didn’t like them.

He withdrew a small case from his pocket and cast *Finite Incantatem.* The Nimbus swelled to its usual size, and he carefully removed it from its berth.

“You can drop it from a height,” she added. “They’ll smell it. You don’t have to get too close, is what I mean.”

“And here I was trying to conduct a dental inspection.”

He slung the satchel around his shoulder and mounted the broomstick. It hummed to life under him, lifting up, and he braced himself with one foot on the grass. Hermione shook out the Invisibility Cloak, and he draped it over his shoulders. When he looked down he saw nothing but the ground under his broomstick, and the sight brought with it a bleary wave of unreality, like dreaming.

“Where are all the attendants?” Hermione murmured. “I don’t like this.”

“Moving Fleur’s Green into the arena, I’d wager. We’re not rich in time.”

“Yes, but — Draco, be careful.”

He looked at her. She had pressed her fingers into a tiny knot and was applying pressure like she was trying to achieve nuclear fusion inside it. Drawing on the slender reserves of his remaining confidence, he smirked.

“Ready to be amazed, Granger?”

“No!”

“Too bad.”

The Horntail sighed a huge curtain of smoke. Now that he was above it, he could see the glitter of embers in its throat and nostrils, the places where magic met chemistry and became death. It *was* bigger than the others, damn him, the poor sot couldn’t have drawn anything else. Bigger and more horrifying, with ashen filmy bat’s wings crested with bone-white claws, trunk-like legs covered in fat hanks of plated muscle, a trapjaw of teeth that jutted out of its very skull for want of space. It sniffed the air and gave a mournful shriek.

Air rippled past in a bath of heat. Draco instinctively veered, but it was only breath, no fire, all sound. The other dragons heard it and took up shrieks of their own, chains groaning and warping the metal fastenings.

He circled the Horntail, considering his approach. The good news was that the dragon didn’t seem to see him, between the smoke and the Cloak and its tiny pathetic rage-filled eyes. It knew something was there, but it couldn’t find him, and it worked itself into agitation snaking its head to and fro. The bad news — and it was very bad news — was also old news: it was, in fact, a dragon. A big old ugly fire-breathing dragon. And as it reared back his head, an electric jolt informed him that he was about to find out why.

A column of fire erupted from the pit. It broached the bars and leapt skyward like it sought to melt the sun. Draco threw himself sideways, almost lost his grip, and veered away from the Horntail's chamber. This saved his life. Unfortunately, it also brought him veering over the other dragons, who gave screams of their own, and let out a pair of answering jets of fire.

He looked over the guttering geysers, blinked, and saw a row of floating yellow cones, rising through the pale morning fog of a brutal six o'clock practice. Blinked again, and they were gone.

He had never been so grateful in his life for Oliver Wood. He'd have to buy out Puddlemere and give him a raise.

He hauled his broom sideways and wove between geysers of fire. The air was a blur of red and yellow and white. The heat crackled against his face and he could smell something burning — the best he could do was pray it wasn't him — as he rounded the last flame column and shot back to the Horntail along the side of the pit. Heat prickled the back of his broomstick, but the wind whisked it away.

"Draco!" Hermione cupped her hands around her mouth. "It's not a continuous jet! They need time to accumulate ethylene in their bronchi, remember? From *Egg to Inferno?"*

"Yes, that's *exactly* what's on my mind—"

He swept past her and rounded in for another drop, but there was so much smoke that the Horntail was barely more than a shadow swirling around in the pit. Smoke curled and billowed around his ankles. When he crept out over the Horntail pit and there was no fire forthcoming, he took a deep, bolstering breath — stupid goddamn mistake, now his eyes were watering — and sank down over the pit.

"The longer it stops, the bigger the jet!"

He wished dearly that she would shut up. Dragons didn't have great vision, but their sensitive ears could most certainly pick up the

shrilling of a noisome fifteen-year-old girl who apparently wanted him dead.

A muffled roar came from the stands. The indistinct prattle of commentary echoed behind it. Fleur had done something. Get eaten, possibly.

He was about to ask Hermione what was so damn important, anyway, when the Horntail lunged. It seized the bars of its cage and beat itself against them like a rabid engaged animal. Draco shouted and whipped up into a breakneck incline while the dragon's clubbed tail battered itself deafeningly against the bars and its claws carved great glistening slivers of metal from the lattice. A premonition of heat on the back of his neck was his only warning. He hauled backwards into a hairpin U-dive, cutting down towards the pit, while a bellow of flame roasted the air where he'd been a moment ago.

"Wait for it to end," Hermione was shouting. "Wait! *Wait!"*

For the first time he heard what she was saying. Ethylene buildup from their respiratory processes produced the fuel for their breath. Discharging created a temporary vacancy where the flame would be inert. He'd have an opening. Ten seconds of one, at least, which was an opening in the same way that a fourth-story window was technically a fire exit.

When the flame ended, he took another foul breath, put self-preservation out of his mind, and dove. The smoke parted like shredded silk.

The Horntail peeled open the bony clamp of jaw and screeched at him, drenching him in heat so thick it stung his skin like acid. A bead of red glowed at the back of its throat. Its mouth yawned. The Horntail screamed, and the crowd bellowed, and though he knew the two were unrelated for one glowing moment he imagined they were cheering for him.

The bead of red spread to a glitter, and then started moving, wobbling like flame.

He wound back and pitched the bag like he was making a shot on the goalhoop.

It plummeted between the shipwrecks of its teeth and winked out of sight down the tunnel of its throat. He bent low on his broom and wrenched sideways as a final pillar of fire pierced the gray clouds behind him.

Self-preservation, which had been hammering furiously on the door to his brain ever since he ejected it, battered down the door and stumbled drunkenly back in. Fear followed belatedly, like a tardy partygoer trying to overcompensate, and wracked his body with an involuntary shudder, which entirely ruined his suave landing. He stumbled badly on the dismount, tripped on the Invisibility Cloak, and dropped hard into the dirt. His Nimbus skittered to the side and gave a hiss of steam where it connected with the dewy grass.

People were applauding. Someone was shaking him. He rolled over onto his back and got a full eyeful of sky for three honestly comforting seconds before it was occluded by a faceful of hair and panic.

“Draco! *Are you alright?”*

“Mmgh,” he said, as his body downshifted from immovable terror into fear-drunk jitters. “Mmhgrnyn.”

“You’re on fire!”

“Thanks,” he said distantly.

A harsh word slipped between her teeth, and she was wrestling out of her cloak, despite the windchill. She threw it down over his leg and tamped it down, and when the sensation returned to his legs he realized that the only thing he felt below the right kneecap was pain.

“Merlin’s f—”

“Hold still.” When she peeled back the cloak, there was a mess of char and something sticky along his leg and he gave a wild, high sound of shock more than pain — he couldn’t actually feel it too well — and she slammed her hand over his mouth.

“Quiet!”

“You keep quiet! My leg—”

“It’s not a bad burn,” she said. She was a good liar. He always forgot that, somehow. “Hold still. I can heal it.”

“Are you bloody well *sure?”*

“Yes, but you’ve got to let me work. Molly showed me this one, it’ll fix the tissue better than *Episkey.”*

“Suppose those came in handy,” he said thickly, “raising the twins.”

“She really is a very powerful witch, you know,” said Hermione, as if that were even in the first fathom of things he could give a damn about. “I mentioned her to Professor Moody the other day, and he said she was one of only three Order members who ever beat him in a duel. The others — you might want to hold on to something, if you’re squeamish. *Ascepiomys.”*

A strange bubbling sensation rolled up his ankle, and he flinched away from it — or would have, if she hadn’t braced her weight on his thigh with her knees. “That’s horrid,” he gritted, arching his back against the ground. She patted his stomach absentmindedly.

“Yes, I know,” she said. “It’ll be more horrid if we have to amputate, though.”

“What.”

“Joking! Joking. Trying to relieve the tension.”

The prickling sensation abated, and he sat up in a bruising crunch. His trouser-leg had been shredded to ashy thread, but the skin underneath it was smooth, with only a thin bridge of scar tissue where the worst had been.

“How does that feel?”

“Fine.” He rolled it this way and that. It was a remarkable job. Almost no stiffness at all, though the skin was faintly shiny, and when it pulled, his leg twitched oddly.

“I couldn’t see you.” Hermione seemed to be having trouble getting enough air. Her lip was bleeding. She said unevenly, “I had no idea where you were. Or what was happening.”

“Your loss. Just picture someone devastatingly attractive and fantastically daring, and add fire—”

“Shut up. I didn’t distract you, did I?”

She had, a little.

“For some reason,” he said, “the dragon was remarkably good at holding my attention.”

“Oh, good. God, that was so much worse than quidditch. Broomsticks are actually evil. I’m sorry about your trousers, by the way.”

“I’ll put them on Potter’s tab.”

A bout of applause echoed from the stands, and Hermione swayed to her feet. He clasped her hands and hauled himself upright, an exertion mostly on his part, because she lacked the strength Merlin gave a house-elf.

The gate to the enclosure shrieked open, and shouts swelled. Wizards swarmed the Shortsnout’s enclosure and hauled back the gridded ceiling of its cage. One with bright red hair jogged around

the others, shouting and directing with his hands, and they lifted the dragon, flapping and thrashing out of its pit.

“Charlie,” gasped Hermione. “Hide—”

“Cloak—”

“Quickly!”

She threw the cloak around their shoulders, but it tangled in her haste, falling short-ways instead of long — there was an ungainly scramble of limbs and elbows in bad places — and she shoved them together and whipped the hood over their heads. At their age the Cloak was quite simply not big enough for two people, and she solved this problem by crowding into his chest like she intended to camp in his ribcage, apparently forgetting there were quite a few tender organs who had the idea first.

“Ow. Ow! Quit!”

“Then move!”

“You move!”

“I’m trying!”

The dragonkeepers wrestled the Shortsnout out of the paddock. His back connected painfully with the fence. There was an elbow in his spleen and a hipbone digging into his pelvis and hair bristling all up the side of his face, and it was hot, both residually, from the dragonfire, and inevitably, from the juxtaposition of two warm bodies in a tight space.

After the gate shuddered closed, Hermione sagged like a loosed bowstring. “Thank Merlin,” she murmured, mostly into his collarbones. “They didn’t see us.”

“Suppose they were rather busy with the creature trying to kill them,” said Draco, “good mate, that dragon,” and then she chuckled and

looked up at him and his stomach vanished to another dimension.

He had failed until now to appreciate certain details of their physical situation. She was all spread up against him like jam on bread, connected from their tangled ankles to the flush of their chests, and his hands, which had grasped her elbows to extricate them from his kidneys, still braced her loosely by the arms. Under the Cloak it was muggy and acrid and somehow it still, impossibly, smelled like her hair, citrus and flowers and a tang of salt from sweat, cutting through the fug of smoke. It was so close he couldn't see her face altogether clearly, but through the haze of curls he could see the vague shape of her hard, intense little face, her passionate eyebrows, the bloodied flower of her mouth. A stroke of ash grazed her cheek.

His hand twitched, for no reason he could understand — inside his skull it was warm and humid and he was focusing on the suddenly difficult task of breathing — but in an apocalyptic feat of good fortune, this snapped her to attention, and she tore away like she was ripping off a bandage.

"It's a curious sensation," he said, surprised and pleased by the ease in his voice, "having one's pancreas introduced to one's appendix."

"You are such a baby."

"They're getting along, I think, but only because of induced fusion. Your elbow was doing a glorious job of mediating."

"An *utter* baby, at that. And about the oddest things, too." She sounded relieved. She picked up the cloak and looped it over her arm.

"I beg your pardon. I think facing a dragon entitles me to whinge."

"By all means, whinge away. You won't, though," she said, with offensive confidence. "If you happened to amputate yourself and stub your toe at once, the whole country would know about the toe by sundown, but it'd take a week for the arm to even come up."

Which was such a forthright and blatantly disrespectful analysis of his character that he retracted into sullen silence, reflecting on the severe disadvantages of allowing oneself to be understood.

The pitch brimmed with people. He'd never seen it so packed, even for a championship game. It oughtn't have fit that many people. Surely there was lap-sitting concerned somewhere.

On the way into the match, they were nearly flattened by a stampede of people coming up the stairs — the interlude between champions had been taken as license for all of bloody Europe to hurtle its way to the loo — and Draco nearly turned Theodore Nott into a green stain on the floor.

They scuffled apart, Theo's hair tousled, Draco's — it didn't bear thinking about.

"What happened to *you?"* Theo demanded, with extreme and offensive judgment. Hermione twitched her robe to cover his ripped trouser leg, but he suspected it might have been too late, because Theo's eyes lingered.

"Detention," he snarled. "With Hagrid. Rectal exams on a blast-ended skrewts. Nott, excuse me—"

"Did you see what happened to the Frenchwoman?" he interrupted.

"What?"

"Delacour. Her strategy. I don't think it falls within the parameters of wizarding magic. Pans was suggesting she should be disqualified; me, I take a more sanguine approach. I say, let her do the next one without a wand, if she doesn't need it." He glanced at Draco, searchingly, and Draco flattened his expression. Theo couldn't read what they'd been doing. The whole place smelled like smoke, anyway.

“No, we didn’t see it,” said Hermione loudly, “since, as Draco pointed out, we were in detention. Pardon us, but if we don’t move soon we’re going to miss Krum—”

“What’d you get detention for, brains?” said Theo casually, leaning against the wall. Hermione set her jaw.

“Chronic lateness,” she said, and sidestepped him neatly into the stairwell.

Ron had done his best to save as much space as possible for them, but these advantages were on the order of inches, not seats, and they ended up crammed against the front of the spectator’s box, jostled by the slightest quiver of the crowd.

Gone was the slate of grass and three-pronged posts. There instead lay a barren rock pit, undulating and pitted like a lava field, sculpted at one end into a kind of nest. The only glimmers of green were strains of browned moss that laid thin over some of the rocks, smoking faintly. The sun had mounted the sky and fell in blinding waves over everything, making it impossible to see above the uppermost box.

“OI! YOU MADE IT!” Ron had to bellow to be heard. “GLAD YOU’RE NOT DEAD — FLEUR NEARLY WAS!”

“How’d she do it?” Hermione shouted, wedging her fingers in her ears.

“WHAT?”

“HOW DID SHE—”

“CHARMED IT! SHE SANG A SONG AND IT CALMED DOWN! MIONE, I THINK SHE’S PART VEELA!”

“Yes, Ron, we all know you think she’s pretty!”

“NO, I MEAN LITERALLY, SHE — never mind, talk later — LET’S HAVE A HOLLER FOR HARRY POTTER—”

The Gryffindor students had rallied into a group and were having a skirmish with the Slytherins: for each roar of “CAS-SIUS WAR-RING-TON,” followed by clapping, Fred and George launched into another, louder rendition of Harry’s theme song, which after several repetitions acquired the same quality as ‘A Hole in My Bucket.’

A podium of judges sat beneath the judges’ box, stocked with three unhappy faces and one equanimous Albus Dumbledore, who alone among the headmasters appeared undisturbed by the presence of several dragons in immediate proximity to his students. The fourth judge was the senescent Mr. Crouch, who seemed to have aged considerably since Draco had seen him at Halloween, though perhaps the light was merely less forgiving.

Ludo Bagman took Lee Jordan’s usual seat, his cheeks stretched like taffy in a cosmetically preserved grin. “LADIES! AND! GENTLEMEN! I TAKE YOU NOW FROM THE SUMMER FIELDS OF FRANCE TO THE FROSTY VISTAS OF THE HINTERLANDS… PLEASE! PUT YOUR HANDS! TOGETHER! FOR—”

He was cut off. All words vanished in a boom of cheers as Viktor Krum strode into the arena, his wand outstretched in the hostile grip of an advancing duelist. A red firework boomed and detonated over the pitch.

“VIK-TORRR KRRRRRRRRRRUM!”

The Shortsnout, aggravated by the noise, leapt into the air and shrieked. It had a thinner scream than the Horntail’s, close to a whistle, and it was feathered along the back and tail with a row of pale quills. Krum’s eyes went very wide, then constricted to slits.

“What’s he got to do?” shouted Hermione.

“YOU SEE THAT EGG THERE? UNDER THE LEGS? HE’S GOT TO GET IT!”

“Why can’t he just Summon it?”

Apparently Krum had the same thought, because after a moment, he lassoed his wand in a textbook execution of a Summoning Charm. The egg gave a thrilling leap toward him, but the Shortsnout slammed its foot down and crushed it to the ground with another piercing scream.

“THAT’S WHY,” said Ron.

The dragon did not take kindly to having its eggs jostled about. It bulked its throat and issued a jet of blue flame. Instead of dodging, Krum swept his wand and deflected them into a nearby rock, which blazed red from heat.

When the jet dissipated he broke into a breakneck run across the field, clearing a hundred yards of pitted ground with unexpected grace.

“There he goes! There’s the athlete of your generation, dear fellows, the seeker for the Bulgarian National Team, as you well know, and damned fast, I suppose they keep them fit over there. My, but he’s getting close to it! Very daring! Watch out, though!”

The dragon had flicked its tail, and a row of quills thudded into the rock behind Viktor. He ducked and slipped to the side, taking cover, and lashed two jinxes over his shoulder. They ricocheted off its scales and shattered two nearby rocks to rubble.

“WICKED!”

“Ron!”

“What? I’m still rooting for Harry!”

Krum flipped over the rock and scrambled up the side of the shelf. Another volley of quills narrowly missed him, and he sidestepped a jet of fire, rolling effortlessly under its wing. He was so close that he had to leap over its tail and dodge the sweep of its hind foot, deflecting it away from his head with a Locomotor Curse, and now he was out of its eyeshot it gave a snarl of aggravation. He danced back from another volley of quills, and it chittered forward, snapping its jaws at him.

“Luring it out! Getting it off the egg! That’s one way! But it takes some nerve!”

He snapped his wand like a whip, and ropes lashed around his wing, pinning it down. While it wrestled against the ropes, he dove for the egg, but then it gave a yowl and whipped its head around to snap at him, faster than vision, its teeth snapping. Bagman didn’t have time to do more than gasp.

Draco’s vision flickered and for a heartbeat he left the stands and watched a werewolf sink its teeth into Daphne’s neck, and then he was back and it was still happening, it was going to happen again, not again, not *again.*

Krum barked and punched it squarely in the nose.

The crowd bellowed. The Shortsnout recoiled, more stunned than hurt. Bagman was making noises of incoherent joy. Krum dodged a swipe of its claws and shot a red curse straight into its eye. Then he slid under its belly, vanishing for a moment under the curtains of its wings.

It tipped over in a squealing thrash, and slipped from its nest, falling thunderous to the ground. The shockwave sent Krum tumbling off his feet, and it looked like his head clipped the rock; someone screamed; it was impossible to make out what happened to him.

“DID YOU SEE THAT!” Fred, George, and Ron were all shaking each other like maracas. “DID YOU SEE IT? HE PUNCHED IT! HE

PUNCHED IT IN THE FACE—”

“IN THE FACE!”

“IN THE FACE!”

Gasps erupted. Hermione seized Draco’s arm and squeezed until he could count the individual tendons under her thumb.

When Krum scrambled up again, he had a cheek full of blood, a leg full of quills, and two hands full of egg.

He raised them and gave a shout. A klaxon split the air. So too did a thundering roar from the stands, and no one stayed on their feet, not even Draco, for there was no hard-hearted Hogwarts loyalist who could fail to appreciate such an incontrovertible spate of badassery.

“He’s got it!” cried Bagman. “And in good time, too! A tidy five minutes, seventeen seconds, to Miss Delacour’s nine thirty-four! Of course, time won’t be dispositive — the judges score holistically, and he’ll lose a point or two for injury, I think — but nevertheless, well done! We’ll have a moment, while they take care of the beast…”

Dragonkeepers scurried onto the field and lured the Shortsnout away. As it staggered under one of the gates, another slid open, and the Ridgeback exploded onto the pitch with a shriek and a burst of fire.

“Good Lord, it’s hideous,” said Draco.

Ron cuffed him gleefully. “Don’t be rude! That’s Hagrid’s daughter, you git!”

“RETURNING YOU NOW TO THE BONNIE LOCHS OF SCOTLAND… THE FIRST HOGWARTS CHAMPION… I GIVE YOU… THE IRREPLACEABLE CASSIUS WARRINGTON!”

The champion’s gate opened, and Warrington strode onto the pitch, his wand held in a perfect western underhand. Slytherin all but put its

voice out cheering for him. He smiled and tapped his temple in a salute to the judges' box, though Dumbledore gave no sign of having seen him.

He ignored, or perhaps did not near, the small contingent of Gryffindors that had started jeering. A few Hufflepuffs, including Hannah Abbott, joined in.

Cassius made it two steps inside and he leapt aside to dodge the flames.

When they abated, Norberta closed her mouth with a sort of satisfaction, and raked her claws over the rock in violent invitation, skittering sparks. Cassius took two quick steps back, eyes wide, and twitched his wand in an almost instinctive shield, over his chest; it was oddly human, for someone so polished. Then he rallied and shook out his hand, grimacing.

The first slash of his wand erected a wall of rock in front of his body, intercepting a jet of flame before it could charbroil him. The flames surged and burst against the black stone like a wave breaking on a dyke, flickering in a wide ring, and the edges blazed red. Cassius stepped around the side of his shelter and lashed his wand again, and something small and black began to pour from the air in front of it: a fluttering, writhing mass of feathers and claws that gradually took form as a flock of ravens.

"AVIS!" Bagman seemed perplexed. "That's a N.E.W.T.-level Conjuring spell, very dynamic, quite complex, and by all means, impressive — easily the most sophisticated spellwork we've seen yet — but it's not clear what he wants to do with them, unless it's to owl for help!"

Laughter pittered from the Gryffindor stands. Cassius sent a sour look at the judge's box, but shook it off and finished conjuring the flock, which rose in a fluttering cacophony of rancid shrieks. As the Ridgeback gave another scream, he ducked around the other side of the rock wall and lashed his wand at it.

The flock lifted, like it was of one mind, and soared at the dragon. The Ridgeback arched its neck and issued a yellow ribbon of fire that seared a full flank of the flock out of existence; but there were still more left, and they swarmed its head, their small bodies slipping through the irked lashes of its claws and tail.

“Oppugno!” Bagman had transformed from confusion to delight. “Well, there you are! Quite clever! Just the thing, too! Now she’s well and distracted.”

Cassius darted across the field, making good time over the uneven surface. Slytherin was roaring for him; Ravenclaw was roaring for him; even most of Hufflepuff, at this point, was pleased at the elegance with which he had distracted the dragon, which swayed and snarled, trying to claw away the black cloud of feathers that encircled her head. They were pecking at her face, claws scrabbling on the hard lacquer of scales, beaks jabbing around for a chance at the eye — the leathered skin of her eyelid snapped shut, and she gave a shriek, struggling back from the ravens’ claws.

“And there he goes! Off to the races, right up the rock face, and the dragon still distracted, but he’ll still have to get the egg, and time’s a-ticking, Mr. Warrington!”

Cassius was scaling the nest: neat short flicks of his wand carved footholds in the stone, and he mounted them, quickly, each crumbling at the touch of his foot. At the top he dropped to the ground as the dragon’s tail came whipping around and nearly beheaded him; the stands gasped; but he staggered up again and pointed his wand at the eggs, his mouth moving.

Norberta snapped up the last of the birds in her mammoth jaws, and then whirled around, in time to see Cassius’ spell shatter the entire nest, scattering shards of egg like shrapnel.

Only the gold egg remained untouched, sitting in a white bed of rubble.

“No,” said Hermione faintly.

Norberta nosed at the crumpled shells and gave a panicked scream. She whirled and spat a spear of flame that almost grazed Cassius, but he did a neat deflection with a backhand flick of his wand and pointed his wand over his head, conjuring something — a shimmer in the sharp morning light — resolving gradually into the misty shape of an egg.

“He’s conjuring a decoy!” Bagman was speaking in a whisper, like the dragon might hear him and catch on. “Luring her away… that’s another piece of very hard magic, illusion magic… Mr. Warrington is giving us a bit of an exhibition, isn’t he? Hogwarts’ best and brightest, to be sure!”

“It’s not *that* difficult,” muttered Draco. “Bagman’s a quidditch player, how would he even know?”

But Hermione appeared not to hear him; she was still shaking her head.

“He destroyed the eggs,” she said thickly. “That’s not—”

“They’re not real eggs, Granger.”

“I know that! *She* doesn’t!”

Norberta screamed and surged, but Cassius twitched the illusion out over the cliff face. She buckled and gave a low, almost plaintive whine, her tail thrashing here and there, but as he lowered his hand, her head dipped with it.

“Dragon taming!” Bagman was thrilled. “That’s a technique right out of Darrian Dragonsbane’s classic compendium! Clever as anything! Of course, a dragon has terrible eyesight, so they’re very susceptible to illusion! Shows a real appreciation for the history of the thing, too.”

Norberta scrabbled through the shards of her false eggs with her claws, wailed, and made a sudden leap for the illusion. Cassius waved it out of existence, pivoted, and cast it again in the air to her right; she beat her wings and rose, her shackle rattling, to desperately swipe at the retreating illusion of her egg, which was thin and disappearing in the bitter midmorning sunshine.

When she had strained her shackle to the very limit, baying and flapping her wings, Warrington calmly strode forward and collected the egg from the nest. He twitched his wand over his shoulder.

The illusion disappeared; Norberta gave a scream of grief.

“It’s horrible,” said Hermione thickly. “It’s just — horrible.”

“It’s all fake,” said Draco tightly. “He got the egg.”

“Yes, but she’s heartbroken!”

“Nonsense. She’s a dragon.”

“Listen to her,” she said, and she wasn’t wrong: the sounds coming from Norberta’s throat were miserable and vile. She sank in a crumple of wings and scales to list on the broken nest, nosing desolately at the shards beneath her, while Warrington hopped down from the nest and strode over to the mediwizards, who barely gave him a once-over: he hadn’t taken a single hit.

“At five minutes, twelve seconds, that puts Warrington in the lead, with respect to time — again, not dispositive, but certainly looks good for him, doesn’t it? With *zero* injuries, and flawless execution on every spell, methinks the judges will have quite the hard time finding a reason to deny Mr. Warrington his due!”

“Listen to him, he’s drooling.”

“He shouldn’t speculate,” said Hermione, frowning.

“He’s not incorrect,” said Draco. Both of them shot him dirty looks, but he rolled his eyes and shrugged them off. He was right. Cassius hadn’t done anything they could dock him points for.

“A hard act to follow... But not impossible! Let’s have our last champion of the day, and we saved the best for last — well, in the dragon department, the jury stays out on the champion — but our second Hogwarts contender, you know him and I know him, the Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One, the man you’ve all been reading about in the papers: HARRY POTTER!”

Harry tottered out of the gate on none-too-steady legs, gazed stupefied at the audience above him, and then took his wand out, apparently as an afterthought. Gryffindor gamely screamed for him.

Hermione turned around and put her hands over her eyes.

The Horntail limped in at the other end of the enclosure and hunkered over its clutch of eggs. It might have been wishful thinking, but it was slower than the others had been. Its eyes were lidded. Its tail dragged listlessly over the stone, and when it snorted fire, it came out in tiny puffballs, not the long bursts.

“It worked,” whispered Hermione. She was peeking through the lens of her third and fourth finger.

“Well, now you’ve jinxed it.”

“Don’t say that!”

“Merlin. Joking.”

The Horntail cracked its jaws and spat a bolt of flame at Harry. He dropped on his belly and popped back up with a springy push-up that would have made Oliver Wood applaud. Three years of square meals and a summer of work at the Burrow had started to give him Wood’s sort of frame, and when he straightened up, hard-faced and

squinting, it suddenly seemed remarkable that he could have ever been small.

Bagman cleared his throat. “He’s got strength! That’s clear enough!”

Harry was avoiding his wand like there was some sort of fungus on it. He darted across the pitch with remarkable agility, flexing the full suite of his athletic skill, which would have been impressive if the Tournament was a tumbling competition, and there wasn’t anything that he actually needed to do. It was possible, to Draco’s very credulous dread, that Harry had been so flabbergasted by the piss-worthy fear of Big Bloody Dragon that he’d forgotten about the Task altogether.

“I don’t think they let him take coaching, Granger.”

The pressure of her nails left pink splotches on her face. “What’s he *doing?* Why won’t he just use his sodding wand?”

“Performance anxiety,” he suggested, gripping the handrail. “He didn’t land it, those last few times.”

“That doesn’t count. By then the mice were all dotty anyway, you could hardly tell. Oh!” Harry leapt over a lazy swipe of the dragon’s barbell tail. He soared through the air and landed neatly in a crouch, hopping across the lava field with quick canny footwork.

“Fun fact about Harry Potter, he’s also a seeker,” said Bagman conversationally, as Harry fled the Horntail in a vaguely slapstick chase around the arena. “Youngest player on the Gryffindor team in some years, and recently a champion of the House Cup, a natural prodigy, as I’m told… ooh, good jump… by jove, the Horntail doesn’t seem quite bothered with him, does she?”

This, in Draco’s opinion, an insulting understatement. The dragon very much wanted him dead, but it was having some logistical trouble getting there. It limped after him, wobbling drunkenly on her

legs, and sent weak snarls of fire that always flickered out shy of his feet.

Harry took a flying leap and slammed against the side of the nest, hauling himself up by his arms. The Horntail limped after him, groaning sluggishly.

When he reached the top he spun around, and the Horntail reared up on its hind legs, shuffling forward. Finally, finally, Harry lifted his wand.

The tail whipped around and caught him in the side.

“POTTER!” roared Bagman, leaping out of his seat. “Great Scott! Someone get him! Please! Look out! *No!”*

He sounded beside himself in distress. Mr. Crouch leaned over and said something sharp to him, frowning, and Bagman cut himself off, hands wringing anxiously.

Harry flew. The stands screamed. He caught a full ten feet of air and then slammed against the rock, a bad landing. When he stood up there was a rash of blood running from his temple to his neck and the right side of his uniform lay in tatters. He swayed, hard, and then dropped to his knees and fumbled for something on the ground—

“Glasses,” moaned Hermione. “The strap— I *told* him—”

The dragon shuffled over towards him, grunting and nosing the ground.

“POTTER! UP, BOY! MOVE!”

This, in Draco’s opinion, was far beyond the pale of a commentator’s purview; Bagman had the microphone in one fist and appeared to be trying to swallow it; he was not really commentating so much as attempting to give Harry directions.

Harry fumbled across the rock.

“THAT’S RIGHT!” Bagman was hysterical. “THAT’S RIGHT! JUST THERE! NOW GO, GO ON — WATCH IT THERE, POTTER— LEFT! LEFT! *GO LEFT!”*

There was a squeal of feedback, and his voice died; Barty Crouch sat back with a cold expression, holding the severed cord of the microphone in one hand, while Bagman mouthed furiously and silently into the inert mouthpiece, his voice swallowed by the roar of the stands. The two men immediately bent towards each other and started arguing.

Always receptive to good coaching, Harry rolled left, and narrowly avoided another sweep of the creature’s tail.

The Horntail flicked open its leathery wings, swept its head down and opened its jaws. The telltale ripple of heat twitched the air before her face, blasting back the hair on Harry’s head. But it was slow. Just slow enough.

Something glinted on the ground under the Horntail’s wing. Harry dove for it and threw himself into a somersault. When he came up, he was holding a wand in his hand, and his glasses sat on his nose.

The dragon swiveled its head, and now he was so close that even a weak jet of fire would immolate him.

He shouted something, and a yellow jinx darted into the center of its throat.

The dragon reeled back drunkenly and fell, swiping feebly at the air. It rolled to the ground, and was still, its side moving in the slow deep breaths of unconsciousness.

Harry scrambled into the nest and snatched up the egg.

“...YES! YES! YES! HE DID IT! AND THE FIRST TASK IS FINISHED!” Bagman’s voice swelled back into being, projected from the tip of his wand, while Crouch bellowed at him and tried to

repossess it; but Bagman gleefully danced out of his reach. “Harry Potter, coming in with a time of six minutes and twenty-one seconds, with the strongest magic we’ve seen yet today! To think! Fourteen years old, with a Stunner that takes down a *Hungarian Horntail* — I’ve seen four men try the same, folks, with no such results — haven’t seen its like since Dumbledore himself — a remarkable, *remarkable* thing!”

A surge of movement hurled Draco against the railing. The fresh scar on his leg twinged stiffly, and he threw an elbow with juvenile menace at the nearest head. Gryffindor was screaming. So were the other houses, mostly. It was hard not to.

Professor McGonagall was rushing onto the field, along with some more dragonkeepers, who had not the slightest trouble shepherding the dizzy Horntail back to its paddock. Behind her, Professor Karkaroff followed with Krum in lockstep, and Madame Maxime and Fleur kept graceful stride; at the rear of the pack, Cassius strolled along, waving indulgently at the roar that greeted him.

McGonagall reached Harry first. She bent over him, saying something fierce and quick that was lost in the roar, and Harry nodded back. Then she clapped his shoulder like she was driving a spoke into the ground, and he stumbled into the arms of the mediwizards, grinning.

Cassius shouldered his way to the front of the pack and extended his hand to Harry, ignoring the coat of grime and moss on it. He said something; he wasn’t smiling, but he didn’t seem angry, either. After a beat of palpable confusion, Harry shook it. Somewhere, a flashbulb ignited.

Once the handshake was completed, Cassius pivoted and did not look at Harry again, though perhaps that was because McGonagall had hauled him back into the arms of the mediwizards. Krum and Fleur were chatting in a sort of idle way behind Karkaroff, Fleur gesturing with her wand, Krum nodding; both of them seemed rather relieved to have it all over with. Every so often Krum had to swipe a

dribble of blood off his forehead, with such absentmindedness that it seemed more a nuisance than injury.

Students were flooding out of the stands, now, and while teachers blocked most of them from entering the pitch, a few slipped past and managed to duck the bouncers: a sleight girl of perhaps ten shot out of the competitor's tent, her golden hair bouncing, and draped herself around Fleur's shoulders like a delicate porcelain mantle. A few Durmstrang students came out and formed a fluttering cocoon around Krum, who batted off their attentions awkwardly. Dumbledore remained at a distance. He dipped his head at Harry and Cassius, each, in turn, but he did not come forward, as the other headmasters had done, to comfort either champion; and Draco was grateful. He wasn't sure which would have been worse.

Then Crouch, Bagman, and the headmasters had drawn away and bent their heads together. At first, there was much collective nodding, as if there were little disagreement. Karkaroff said something; Dumbledore seemed to agree. Maxime, though obviously displeased, shrugged and nodded. The next round of deliberations made Karkaroff's expression grow pinched, but when he raised his voice, Crouch looked at him and said something that made everyone in the circle fall briefly silent.

"I wonder what's taking so long," said Hermione intently, watching them. "I don't suppose there's any way for us to hear…?"

"Fleur scored low," said Draco, watching Maxime sulk and pluck at her shawl. "Krum did well, but not as well as Karkaroff wanted him to. They're trying to decide Potter's score."

"How do you know?"

"Just look at them. Besides, Potter's the only one they haven't had time to grade yet."

Dumbledore broke the tension with a calm remark to Bagman. Crouch began saying something else, but then Bagman interrupted

him, once, then twice — they broke off into a private conversation, and had a brief, heated argument of whispers, while the headmasters gazed on in confusion — and then they turned back to the circle. Crouch said something.

Maxime let out a high, furious cry. Dumbledore reached out to touch her shoulder, but she slapped it away, and stalked off, leaving the judges to stand awkwardly in an incomplete ring. When they broke apart, none of them looked particularly happy.

“The judges have come to a conclusion,” said Bagman brightly. “Scores are allotted out of fifty; each judge has ten points to give. I will note that the outcome is terribly, terribly close! This is still very much anyone’s game, as they say.

“In fourth, with a composite score of thirty-six: Fleur Delacour.” The Beauxbatons students applauded weakly and jostled their champion. “In second, with a score of thirty-nine points: Viktor Krum.”

Ron was bellowing again before Bagman had finished with the second-place announcement. Draco sighed and delicately inserted his fingers into his ears.

“And tied for first, leading by two points, with a score of forty-one points each: Cassius Warrington and Harry Potter!”

Krum’s mouth puckered. Karkaroff scowled and broke into a heated exchange of whispers with Crouch.

“Embarrassing, Potter,” shouted Draco. “Underperforming, as usual!”

Harry whirled around, clutching his head, and made a spastic gesture with his hands. Ron was so excited that he had to start slap-boxing Seamus.

“Well done, all of you!” Bagman cried. He was beaming. Draco got the feeling he would’ve worn the same expression if the dragon had eaten them. “You’ll get a nice long break before the Second Task, on

February twenty-fourth. Whereas the First tested your courage and daring, the next will test your reason and ingenuity. If you look down at those golden eggs you're all holding, you'll see that we've already furnished you with a clue."

Fleur raised her hand. "Excusez-moi," she said clearly, pointing at the egg. Her voice was faint, and tinny, but clear. "What eez zis for? Why do I 'ave to carry it?"

"Well, I can't tell you that," Bagman said indulgently. "It wouldn't be much of a puzzle if I did! Any other questions?"

"The egg's a puzzle?" breathed Hermione.

"Down, girl," he said. She turned pink.

Fleur had handed off the egg to Madame Maxime, apparently uninterested in it. Krum had shuffled away from the group and Karkaroff followed him, muttering aggressively, though Krum didn't seem to pay much attention.

"No?" said Bagman. "Well, good! Off you go, then! And congratulations, again, to every one of you!"

They were bundled up in the gridlock of the crowd and swept down the narrow wooden staircases, caught in a frenzied babble of theories and verbal replays, reenactments, and exhortations of joy. A trio of third years were singing Harry's song. A pair of Ravenclaws were furiously debating the technique of Cassius' illusion. Fred and George were passing out POTTER POWER pins for three sickles apiece, and Draco was quite sure Harry would never see a knut of it.

And as they were spilling out into the sun-drenched afternoon, he overheard Lavender Brown saying to someone: "Not that I'm not happy for him, but it was a bit lame, wasn't it, Harry's dragon? Thing was practically falling asleep."

“First place! Not bad, Harry! Not bad at all! Tens from Dumbledore and Bagman, a nine from Maxime, seven from Crouch, and a five from Karkaroff. Five!” Ron tossed a bit of popcorn in the air and caught it in his mouth. “An’ he only wen’ tha’ low because Dumbledore gave Krum an eight—”

“Which, frankly, is more than he earned,” interrupted Draco. “Trying to wrestle a dragon down is like using a sledgehammer when the task is opening a door.”

“They’re nutters!” Harry lolled back in his chair. His legs sprawled over the armrest, and he nursed a flagon of butterbeer and a sported paper crown lopsided on his head, like a heavily discounted young Arthur. “I thought Warrington would take it for sure!”

“For what? Between Warrington breaking the eggs and your Stupefy of the century, things must have shaken out even,” said Draco. He had stolen a hot toddy from one of the seventh years and was enjoying it in the comfiest corner of the leather sofa, with his feet sprawled on an ottoman firmly in range of the fireplace. He was wearing a silk lounge robe and altogether enjoying himself tremendously. The party in Gryffindor Tower had petered out around one or two in the morning, when Fred and George performed a rendition of “Save a Broomstick, Ride a Seeker” that brought McGonagall hammering on their door.

“Nah. Bagman loved you. As for Karkaroff and Crouch, they don’t even pretend to be fair. Five points off for timing? Don’t make me laugh.”

“I’ll say Bagman loved him,” said Draco. “I think he was about to leap in and try his hand at the dragon, himself.”

Harry grinned and scratched the back of his neck. “Yeah. I dunno — he tried to give me advice ahead of time, too,” he said. “He was telling me this story about using the Conjunctivitis Curse to deal with a ‘fire wyrm,’ and he’d expect a fourth year could do it, no problem — really not subtle at all, I reckon he thinks I’m pretty thick.”

“But that’s against the rules,” said Hermione, aghast — so caught up in her indignation at maladministration, apparently, that she appeared to forget she had conspired to cheat.

“What’s more, it doesn’t make sense,” said Draco. “Potter’s no one to Bagman; if anything, he should be pulling for Warrington. He’s the Ministry favorite.”

“Maybe he likes me,” said Harry. “I’m a likable person.”

“Oh, I know,” said Ron, sounding surprised as anyone. “Gambling. Ludo Bagman’s a huge gambler. I bet he’s got money riding on Harry.”

Hermione made another scandalized noise.

“Apart from how horrendously unethical that is,” she said, “it doesn’t make any sense — I mean, I love you, Harry, but you’re not exactly the safe bet—”

“No, that’s consistent,” said Draco abruptly, nodding to Ron. “You can get better margins with the underdog. Hardly anyone will wager against Warrington, he’s slated to win—”

“—and you pay a premium if you bet on the favorite,” agreed Ron. “Since it’s likely. But with the underdog, if there’s an upset, you can get really big payouts — two-to-one, three-to-one, even, the more unlikely it is — and you don’t necessarily have to bet on Harry to *win* it, either—”

“Just to lose it by no more than a certain threshold of points.”

“Right, yeah. Fred and George went through all this for the World Cup,” explained Ron. “This is how they made all that money on Ireland. Of course, Bagman still hasn’t paid them back—”

“Oh, well, that’s it, then,” said Draco lazily, gesturing with his drink. “I expect he’s got outstanding debts from the Cup, and he’s put his

money on Potter to get them back. No wonder he's so eager; it's been months. His creditors will be rather anxious."

"I don't think they should be judges at all," said Hermione firmly, wrapping her arms around her knees. "If you're right, Bagman is breaking the law *egregiously,* trying to bet on an activity he's moderating. And why are three of five judges British? That's hardly fair."

"Thank God they are, if it gave Harry a leg up," said Ron. "But I reckon we should keep an eye on Karkaroff. He'll be judging again for the Second Task, and I bet he's got it in for you, now, Harry — since you beat Krum."

"Potter will have to simply perform so well he can't mark him down without showing himself corrupt."

"Easier said than done," Harry pointed out. "Hey, speaking of the Second Task."

He handed the egg to Hermione. "Merry Christmas," he said. "I fought a dragon for it. Dunno how to open it, though. I dropped it, but it didn't crack."

"You *dropped* it?"

"Sometimes I despair of you entirely," said Draco. He reached for it, and she handed it over with proprietary reluctance, as if she'd laid the thing herself. "To be clear: the judges said it was a test of reason and ingenuity, and our daring champion's first move was to whack it against something."

"Hey, it's an egg," said Ron. "How do you open eggs? You crack them."

"Am I to assume you gave counsel on this strategy?"

“Nah, Seamus came up with it. Anyway, it didn’t hurt, see? Hasn’t got a scratch. That tells you something, doesn’t it?”

“Most certainly,” he said. “Now we know it’s idiot-proof.”

“Bad luck for you, then, since you’ve got to open it,” said Harry. Draco made a rude gesture, which he returned. “I don’t want to think about it. In fact, I’ve got three months before I even have to think about the Tournament. It’s lovely.”

“And it’s that kind of enterprising spirit that will steer us to victory, Potter.”

Harry stuck out his tongue.

“If you ask me, it’s a riddle,” said Ron. “‘How do you open an egg? You crack it.’ Makes enough sense, I reckon.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose. “That’s not a very good riddle,” she said. “And I hope it’s not, in any case. It’d make the whole thing much more difficult. Riddles are notoriously opaque. ‘How is a raven like a writing desk?’ I don’t know, because the author wanted to sound clever.”

“Thought swots liked riddles,” said Ron, tweaking her ear.

“Not particularly. Most of them are illogical and meant to make you feel stupid. Case in point: how *do* you open an egg?”

“I dunno,” he said, “maybe the Second Task’s to make an omelet—”

He was interrupted when Hermione gave the clasp a hard wrench. It gave with unexpected ease, and the egg drooped open along its glowing fissures. Inside a small blue bulb like a pearl radiated an intense iridescent glow, like a small concentrated bead of moonlight, surrounded by a fan of golden petals that had been its eggshell.

Draco marveled at its beauty for several pleasant seconds before it attempted to deafen him.

It was the screech of several hundred cats being slaughtered by several thousand angry violinists. It was the screech of something that absolutely hated whatever it was screeching to, and the sentiment was well taken and reciprocated. Hermione slapped her hands over his ears.

The moment she released the clasp, the egg snapped back together, and thunked into the carpet.

It lay innocently in a puddle of Turkish embroidery. Draco loathed it afresh.

“That was the worst riddle I’ve ever heard,” said Hermione. Ron gave a hoarse laugh.

Draco snatched up the egg and peered at it. “What the devil is wrong with it? Potter, is it defective?”

“How should I know!”

“Merlin, that was awful. Should plant that in Filch’s office, it’s not fit for anything else.”

“Do you see those marks?” said Hermione curiously, crawling across the sofa to peer at it over Draco’s shoulder. “All those little engravings? They must be the clue to decoding it. I think we have to solve them first, and they’ll tell us how to use the egg. They look runic.”

“They’re not runes from our alphabet.”

“It just reminded me of a runic circle, because it goes around—”

“I know what you mean, but it doesn’t translate.”

“We should go to the library. I know some books that’ll start us off.”

“I quite agree. First thing in the morning.”

“I thought you’d want to get a head start,” she said innocently, “before Warrington swoops in and steals some more books.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. She was getting cheekier by the day, was Hermione.

“But,” she sighed, peeling herself off the couch, “if you’d really rather sleep, we can manage with his leftovers. It worked the first time.”

“Listening to you attempt manipulation is almost embarrassing enough to be its own compellent.”

“What do you mean, stealing books?” said Harry.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Draco,” trilled Hermione, while he glowered, “is of the opinion that Cassius Warrington is trying to sabotage you.”

“Damn, really?” said Ron. “Git.”

“Ron, don’t be silly—”

“Nah, but I reckon Draco’s right,” he said, to Draco’s immense gratification. “That’s the right thing to do, innit, from his perspective? He’s a Slytherin. He’d probably go for Harry’s kneecaps, if he could get away with it.”

“But he shook my hand,” said Harry, frowning. “And he told me — he said, ‘That was well-done.’ He seemed to mean it, too.”

“Oh, well, if he gave you a compliment,” said Draco acidly. “And in front of the press, too? Surely he’s a good egg. Suspicion retracted.”

“Hate to say it, but he makes a point,” said Ron. “He’d want you to think he was a good sport, right? To throw you off.”

“Or,” said Harry, stubbornly, “and get this: he might actually be, you know, a good sport. Not all Slytherins are bad, are they? You know

—”

“Lord help us, he’s getting into the politics.”

“—just talking about it, but isn’t it *a bit* possible that Warrington might not be a *total* git, if the Goblet chose him to represent Hogwarts? Anyway, Daphne’s a Slytherin,” he said, “and we all agree she’s not a git.”

“They’re right, Harry,” said Hermione, and Draco enjoyed the double gratification of being recognized, twice over. It very nearly compensated for not getting any applause. “We’re not dealing with Cedric here—”

That put him right out again. “What’s this and your obsession with Cedric? He would do the same.”

She cut him a narrow look. “I was *going,”* she said, highlighting the part where he’d interrupted her, “to make a point about sportsmanship, which we know Cedric has, since he tried to forfeit the match against Gryffindor last year.”

“But he didn’t, did he?”

“What do you mean?”

“He didn’t forfeit,” said Draco, folding his arms. “Hufflepuff won the match.”

“So what?”

“He didn’t exactly pitch a fit, did he?”

“He caught the snitch before he saw Harry fell! That’s not his fault!”

“Right, and he just happened not to see Potter falling out of the sky, I suppose—”

“It was raining! And pitch black!”

“Nah, mate, you’ve lost me,” said Ron, yawning. “Ced’s a Hufflepuff. Warrington’s a Slytherin. Totally different case.”

Hermione rolled his eyes, and shot a knowing look at Draco, who received it with a minimum of smugness. It didn’t do to gloat.

Much, anyway.

After more rounds of drinking and post-round congratulations, Hermione announced her intention to retire, and it was another hour of conversation after that before she got anywhere with it. All told, it was almost three o’clock when Draco stumbled back to bed, and the very residual pearls of adrenaline still skittered around his system. In his limbs there was a lingering weightlessness, and when he laid back in his four-poster, his whole body was loose and easy, like he was breezing along on a strong tailwind.

-Hello! And that wraps on the First Task. I remember this chapter took like three weeks to write, because there were so many different set pieces.

-In which Hermione realizes that the Invisibility Cloak is not so large as it used to be, and deals with the consequences. The consequences being, namely, a simultaneous case of "Oh Boy I Hope This Won't Awaken Anything In Me."

-I can't remember because I don't think it comes up until OOTP, but I was unsure whether Mad-Eye could see through the Invisibility Cloak. Supposedly the eye can pierce all surfaces, but the Invisibility Cloak is a Hallow, so there's an argument to be made for it being a special case. Not that it's relevant in this chapter. (Probably.)

-Dear, dear Cedric. He really is such a good sport, it's just he's in rather the wrong story for it. I'm hoping to bring him more to the fore in coming chapters.

-For every comment, a very beautiful slice of seven-layer cake, with buttercream frosting and candied roses. The kind that Dobby would make.

-Next chapter goes up on Friday — it's called "The Viennese Affliction."

-A.K.A. "we're finally doing the Yule Ball arc." Je vous aime, mes amis. À bientôt!

The Viennese Affliction

Chapter 42: The Viennese Affliction

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

It was the queerest sensation: sitting down one afternoon to bang out a Transfiguration essay, looking up, and finding that November's sleet in the window had transformed to the first tepid snowfalls of December.

He did not know when, if at all, Cassius or the other champions were finding time to study the egg. McGonagall and Sprout both doubled their homework assignments in the last weeks of term, claiming — wholly erroneously — that the tournament had set classes behind. The result was chronic aches of the brain and tiredness of the soul. He and Hermione had cleared out the library shelves on rune systems, to no avail; Hermione suggested at one point that it might go faster if they got Harry and Ron to help, which showed that puberty was doing wonders for her sense of humor.

"We'd do a lot better with more eyes."

"Not theirs."

"They can recognize symbols, you know. They're not entirely useless."

"If that was all it took, Longbottom could ace the Runes O.W.L."

Hermione opened her mouth to say something in the boys' defense — she was always doing that, it was rather irritating — and the portrait-hole swung open. She began shoveling pages of runes under her Arithmancy homework as if they held nuclear codes, but it was followed by the spurt of brash laughter: Harry and Ron ambled into the common room, brushing gray crystals of frost from their hair

and robes, and dumped their wet cloaks in soggy bundles near the fireplace.

“It’s called a coat rack, you know,” said Draco. “That big wooden thing, with the arms? It isn’t a bomb.”

“I’ve got a letter from Padfoot,” announced Harry.

Hermione surreptitiously directed her wand at his cloak and levitated it. Draco angled his wand across hers and hit it with an Itching Jinx.

“What?” said Harry, a bit tetchily. “Nothing?”

“Ignore them, they’re sore you broke up their Arithmancy,” said Ron, slumping into the chair next to Hermione. He poked his head over his shoulder. “Or demon summoning.”

“Heaven’s sake, Ron, it’s only numbers. Anyway, that’s wonderful, Harry. What’s he said?”

“Not much. But he wants to Floo me tonight, in the common room.”

“You can Floo into the Gryffindor commons?” Hermione arched an eyebrow. “Isn’t that a security risk?”

“No,” said Draco and Ron at once. Ron gestured lazily at Draco.

“You can’t travel. The headmaster’s office has the only operable Floo grate in Hogwarts. If you try to fit more than head-and-shoulders through the common room fires, it’ll sever the connection. It’s so students can communicate with their families.”

“If their parents are wizards, that is,” she muttered.

“Buy your parents a bottle of Floo powder,” he suggested, draping his arm over the back of his chair. He gestured at her with his quill. “Pay them a call.”

“My parents aren’t going to stick their heads in a fireplace, no matter what I tell them it does.”

He twirled his quill, equal parts exasperated and amused, as always, by the bizarre neuroses of muggles. “And what exactly do they think you do here?”

“They know very well what I do, but it’s one thing to know and another thing to understand, and it’s not as if I can show them any of it over the summer.”

“Fine, but you must admit that’s their fault. No one’s stopping them. You can lead a muggle to water, and so forth.”

“They’re not s— never mind.” With a huff, she turned to Ron. “When have you used it, then? I haven’t seen you do it once.”

Ron cleared his throat. “Er — I mean, they know I’m alright,” he said. “It’s a busy line, the Floo, and everyone’s always trying to get on… Ginny calls home often enough, and Percy used to have weeklies with Mum…”

“Ronald Weasley, don’t you call your mother at *all?”*

“Draco doesn’t call his!”

“Excuse me, my mother’s been traveling this year, and we write letters. Don’t you enter into a pissing contest over filial piety with *me,* young Weasley.”

Ron sulked.

“Are you supposed to call your parents often?” Harry asked thoughtfully.

This was such a well-crafted indicator of tragically orphaned obliviousness that it pitched them all into a uniform silence of horrified sympathy. Draco suspected that this was on some level intentional, because a moment later Harry snapped into a smile, and

said, “Blimey, I can’t wait to tell him about the dragons. You’re all invited, of course,” and trotted upstairs to change out of his wet robes, as if he knew very well that he had ended their bickering, and was plum pleased about it, too.

“Do you know, I think he’s getting smarter,” said Draco, mildly impressed.

“Yeah,” said Ron, with foreboding. “Reckon so. Better watch out, us three.”

That evening, they had the pleasant task of clearing the common room for Harry’s call. Ron stole a dungbomb from Fred and detonated it at the foot of the girls’ stairwell. The resultant combustion so polluted the air that the prefects erected Siphoning Charms across the top of the stairs and had to shout punishments down at Ron through the billows of pungent green smoke, while he grinned and sheepishly lifted his hands. Hermione cast *Muffliato* on the fireplace and a Notice-Me-Not charm on the grate itself, got nervous, and re-did them both twice. Draco put his feet on the ottoman and read a book.

“What if he’s forgotten?”

“Mm. I expect he’s probably distracted with his other godson.”

“But what if he doesn’t call?”

“I don’t know. Did you two discuss funeral arrangements?”

The clock struck eleven, and Harry blinked not once in the next five minutes he spent watching the fireplace. At the turn of the sixth, he stood up and announced: “I knew it. He’s not coming,” and, thusly tempted, the fire blazed green.

“Thank *God,”* said Draco, tossing his book to the side.

Sirius's head came nosing out of the ashes and announced himself with a furious sneeze.

"God, I hate the Floo," he said, and spat a gob of cinders onto the carpet. "What kind of a worthless addlebrained warlock thought, let's all dunk our heads in ashes, *there's* a way to communicate. Do you know where you have to stick your head in order to use a telephone, these days, Moony? Nowhere! They invented wireless ones while I was in the clink! Muggles! Anyway, I hope I've got the right grate; Monty and Phemes were always ringing up the Hufflepuffs by mistake—"

Harry shot out of his chair. The three of them were treated to the amusing charade of watching a boy try to figure out how to hug a fireplace, and wilt when he realized it could not be done.

Sirius had changed. In fitness, he had made great progress from nail-thin to pencil, and the ragged mat of curls á la Hagrid had been pruned to a choppy mane. The hollows under his face had been paved with fat and muscle, and when he grinned it glittered with mischief, not murder.

"Harry! Wotcher! You're the size of a tree!"

"You think?" Harry consulted his frame with pride. "I grew a lot at the Burrow."

"Molly will do that for you," he said sagely. "For a while there she was feeding the whole Order on about four potatoes and a box of cornmeal every week, and I never ate better in my life—" A muffled noise came from somewhere behind him. "What do you want me to — he's bigger now. Yes, exactly like him, it's sort of w— *fine.* For a *minute."*

He burrowed back into the flames, and was nosed aside by a second face, this one bony and long-nosed, with jagged scars bisecting his cheeks.

“Remus!”

“Harry!” He swept his eyes ravenously over Harry and beamed. “Good to see you! Great, in fact! You look well! How are you? How are your friends?”

“Oh, we’re fine. The First Task is over. We fought a dragon the other day—”

“What?”

A piercing grumble came from behind the flames. Remus twisted over his shoulder.

“He said he fought a dragon!”

A high-pitched sound.

“Yes, a dragon — no, I didn’t — oh, fine, you jealous old goat. Harry, I’m sorry, I’ll be back in a moment — your godfather’s a nosy narcissist, and he can’t stand being left out—”

“You had him for a whole year, you hog!” Sirius’s face came wrestling back into the ashes, wedging Remus out of the grate with a yelp of surprise. “This was my idea! You, Mr. ‘Risk Management,’ can go watch the door! Thank you! Goodbye! Alright, Harry,” he said, breathlessly, “that’s stark raving. Bloody incredible. I wish I could’ve seen it. I’m sorry, but we haven’t got long here — broke into a wizarding house to use the fire, they could be back at any time. But I reckon I’ve figured out who put your name in the Goblet. It’s Karkaroff.”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“He was a Death Eater. He was in Azkaban with me. They released him in exchange for names. Not very *good* names, of course, nobody they didn’t already have — Mulciber, Avery, Bulstrode—”

“But Karkaroff tried to stop me competing. He argued with Mr. Crouch—”

“He had to, in front of Dumbledore, didn’t he? Listen. Things are getting dicey out here, Harry. The things I’m hearing… Death Eaters at the World Cup… the Dark Mark… people are going missing, have you heard about this? At the Ministry of Magic?”

“Like Bertha Jorkins,” said Hermione, wrapping her arms around her knees. Her eyes were dark. Draco rolled his wand restlessly between his fingers, irritable at the wind for howling, irritable for no reason at all. “Percy mentioned her. She works in Games and Sports, doesn't she? She would’ve known about the Tournament.”

“Exactly right. And she disappeared in Romania. That whole region is a mire for Dark magic. It’s not a safe place for muggle-borns, especially not alone.”

“She was muggle-born?”

Sirius paused uncomfortably, like a man just noticing a crushed egg under his bootheel.

“She was,” he allowed. “But not like you, Hermione. She wasn’t… she had no brains at all, I mean, very easy to fool. She’d walk right into a deathtrap and complain about the upholstery.”

“Oh, good. So long as it’s only the stupid muggle-borns who have to worry,” said Hermione acidly. She stalked over to an armchair and sat down.

Sirius grimaced.

“What about the Minister?” whispered Ron. “He could have it in for Harry, doesn’t he? He’s with Nott, and Nott was a Death Eater.”

“Yeah, but Runcorn wasn’t,” said Sirius, frowning. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, you lie down with jarveys, you’ll wake up with nargles, but

Runcorn's too young to have been much more than… what, twelve, thirteen, during the War? He might've supported them, but even at the peak of the fighting, Death Eaters didn't take any younger than sixteen."

Hermione cleared her throat like a battery of cannonfire. "Obviously it's not the Minister," she said flatly. "First of all, if he wanted to kill Harry, I can think of a dozen ways easier than a live death match with a thousand witnesses. But more importantly—"

"Love this conversation," said Harry. "Makes me feel great, this conversation."

"More *importantly,* it's got to be someone from the Ministry. Whoever put his name has to have some sway there, because they'd have to have known that Harry would be made to compete anyway. Which means they either knew how the Ministry officials would rule beforehand, or they *were* one of the Ministry officials."

"Who? Ludo Bagman?" snorted Ron. "Barty Crouch? That's your big guess?"

"Well, why *not* Crouch?"

Draco was in the difficult position of agreeing with both of them: Ron's idea was terrible, but so was Hermione's. "Granger. Don't take this the wrong way—"

She snorted. "This is going to be good."

"But if you'd known who Crouch was — speaking as someone who perhaps has more of an an appreciation for his reputation—"

"An *appreciation,* yes, of course, let's have it for another rendition of 'Things Only Purebloods Understand'!"

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

She sat up, eyes blazing, and that feeling skittered down his spine again — heat and danger and prickling eagerness, and he wanted to hurl all his irritation and watch her crack it cleanly in half on her own. The feeling was knotting up under his skin and the pressure was generating heat, pressing all his thoughts into diamond-sharpness, and he just knew if they fought they'd both be magnificent.

But she gave a queenly sniff and curled up in her armchair, like the conquering general of a territory she'd not even touched. He leaned back on the carpet and marveled at the fact that apparently you could be as irritated by *not* fighting as by fighting itself. And in the middle of all that, he still wanted *her* not to be upset.

She caused feelings that ought to have been listed with psychiatric disorders. She gave him migraines. He really didn't know why he was so attached to her.

"He's not a Dark wizard, Hermione," Sirius interrupted brusquely. "Take it from me. Aside from Moody and the Order, he's the only man in the Ministry I'd trust with your lives. Got the personality of a splintery knob, but I'd trust him."

"Maybe we can ask him for help with the Second Task," said Harry blandly. "'Say, do you want me to die? Reckon not, right? Well, can I offer you a look at this egg?'"

Hermione practically erupted out of her chair. Draco startled and hiked his legs out of her way. *"Runes!* Of course! Sirius, can you put Lupin on? We need him to look at something! Harry, where's the egg?"

Sirius turned. There was an uncharacteristically long pause, a *bang!,* and a muttered curse, and then Lupin's head appeared in the fire.

"Sorry," he gasped. "Got to run. They're coming home now. Hermione — whatever it is, write me, alright? And Harry — you, too — take care of each other — I love you — talk soon!"

He vanished. With a pop, the flames waxed yellow, and dwindled to their normal size, and Harry sat back on his haunches, looking bereft.

The last day of classes brought a fleeing gasp of sunshine, which Harry and Ron got to see none of, having put off their homework until the last possible moment. This meant Draco and Hermione had an early breakfast to themselves, sneaking mouthfuls of fried eggs and toast between helpings of Ancient Runes, and when Harry and Ron did stumble downstairs, they looked like they'd been dragged homework-first through a hurricane: smears of ink decorated their wrists and one blotted Ron's eyebrow.

"That was a nightmare," gasped Ron, toppling down next to Hermione. "If I never see a cauldron again, it'll be too soon. What does Snape think he's doing, assigning all that?"

"In your case, not much," said Draco, mostly into his teacup.

"Oi! Wanker."

Harry merely grunted. He was moving bacon into his mouth as if they were about to make it illegal. Hermione subtly Vanished a splotch of ink from his chin.

"Any progress on the egg?" said Ron, peering at Hermione's worksheet.

"What does it look like, Ron?"

"Hell if I could tell you. Come to think of it, are we sure it's Runes?"

"There's nothing else it could be," she said impatiently. "The inscription has to carry a clue, because there's nothing else on the egg that could explain how to open it, unless Harry's right, and you're really supposed to just smash it on something. But that's stupid, so it can't be—"

They were interrupted by someone saying, at a volume terribly unfit for that hour of the morning: “Hail and well met, you chaps!”

It was Daphne. And Daphne wasn’t well. A sweep of pincurls sat under a lacquer of hair gel, a bouffant with volume most purebloods would bathe in maidens’ blood to attain, and a face painted in reds and blacks and pinks so vivid that she looked like she’d bathed in formaldehyde. Her scars had been caked in with powder, giving her face a gravelly, poreless sheen that made it look like her cosmetic surgeon had withdrawal jitters. The overall effect was supreme prettiness and extraordinary misery.

“I don’t suppose any of you would mind if I squeezed in, did I?” she said. “Draco once made a terribly daring voyage to the Slytherin table, and I realized we never repaid the visit.”

“You look different,” said Ron.

Her smile grew pained. “Stop, really, I insist,” she said, strained. “Flattery will get you everywhere.”

There was a pause like a dropped glass.

“Goodness, I understand why you haven’t many visitors, if this is how you greet them.” She wet her lips. “But of course, I shouldn’t dream of intruding.”

“Er — sure,” said Hermione, shuffling her Runes out of the way. “Sorry.”

Daphne closed her eyes for a moment, and exhaled through her nose. Then she piled herself into the table and planted her elbows on either side of her plate, and said, through a thousand-watt beam: “Thanks. So! What’s on the schedule for the Gryffindor foursome, eh? The Golden Quartet? The Chosen One’s Chosen Ones! I feel so cool and rebellious. I think it’s the banners, they make me want to skip class and break all the rules. Shall we set off some fireworks? Raid the kitchens? I know a secret way into the tunnels—”

“Greengrass, what are you doing here?”

Her mouth was frozen ajar in anticipation of another percussive vowel; she slowly sealed it up. “Paying a visit,” she said. “I know it’s hard to explain, but some people do desire your company. Mostly because they’ve never seen your table manners, one supposes!”

Ron let out a delighted guffaw. Hermione shushed him.

“If you refrain from any further remarks like that, you’re welcome to stay,” he said tartly, “but for all your charms, this isn’t your table. I can think of at least two people wondering where you are.”

“Teddy and Pans are making great progress in their object permanence. They’ll manage a breakfast without me. You know, I always wondered why they had us eat by table? Isn’t the point of inter-house unity to make lots of friends? And except for classes we never see each other, so when else are we supposed to get a sense of unity, I mean, we’re in competition for practically everything else…”

“That’s actually an interesting question,” said Hermione. “It’s quite recent. The Great Hall was destroyed during a duel in 1919, and when it was rebuilt, the architect put places to hang the House banners overhead, but they didn’t mean for them to indicate— well, never mind. I don’t suppose you’re actually interested in this, are you?”

“Oh, please finish,” said Daphne, throwing her hand across the table. It landed on Hermione’s, who jumped and spilled her pumpkin juice onto Ron’s lap. “Tell me everything.”

She was doing her best *you are the smartest person I, Daphne Greengrass, have ever met,* which would have been suspicious alone —Ron was so dazed he barely noticed the loch of pumpkin juice forming over his groin — if it hadn’t also been far more flirtatious than anyone had a right to be at half eight in the morning, especially when Hermione was looking like four hours of sleep with a

garnish of jam on her chin. This bemused no one more than Hermione herself, who said: “Er. That’s it, really,” which was a relief to Draco, because the mere thought of her falling for Daphne’s pucker-mouthed eyelash-fluttering made him want to go Obliviate himself in the bathroom sink.

He put two and two together, and found it made four.

“Is something wrong in the dungeons?”

Daphne jerked her head, not a yes, not a no, just a cut of movement that answered the question.

“Of course there is. What happened? Where’s Theodore?”

“Theo’s fine,” she said. “Theo’s perfect. Theo’s lovely and diplomatic and never makes anyone mad. God, I love Theo, he’s such a wonderful person, I think we should all get together and have a party for him!”

“Oh,” said Harry, eyeing the pumpkin juice lake. “Alright. So, he put his foot in it, then?”

“Theodore,” she said, “has been a perfect gentleman. He has conducted himself in ways immaculate and unimpeachable by any involved. He has made many sacrifices for my sake and for others’, as it does so *tickle* Pansy to remind me, and, to wit, dear *Theodore* has most recently made me a very kind suggestion that would have solved a lot of problems.” She stabbed a large sausage. “And if I don’t kill him for it, it’ll prove him not merely a good man, but a lucky one.”

“So… he was… nice to you?” said Harry weakly. “And now you’re angry at him?”

“I’m not angry at him!”

She sawed into the sausage with so much force it split the plate.

There was a beat of silent appreciation. The Hogwarts plates were solid bronze.

“Accidental magic!” she cried. “At my age! I’m so embarrassed.”

“Daph,” said Ron slowly, “why don’t you just… have some toast, say? Don’t even need a knife, for toast. Can just go at it. No faff.”

She stared at him miserably. “Why is it,” she said, “that whenever I see you, you’ve dyed some of your hair?”

He checked his reflection in a spoon and hastily scrubbed his eyebrow with a napkin. “Honest mistake,” he admitted. “I would’ve asked, but seems like you were pretty busy with your meltdown, and what-all.”

She gave a hoarse honk of a laugh.

“Millicent told her father I hit her,” she said.

“You hit her?” said Hermione, baffled. “With your hand?”

“With my hand,” confirmed Daphne. “It was a good hit, too.”

“You’re lying,” said Ron. “Millie Bulstrode? With the warts? The one who sat on Ginny?”

“That was an accident,” said Daphne primly. “She felt bad about it later. But yes. And I can’t even be mad at her. I’m the dummy. I slapped her silly, and I *knew* her daddy was a Board member, I knew it. And it’s not like she was the only one saying those things. Poor Millie didn’t even start the rumor, I just — couldn’t stand it.”

“But that’s great! Ten points to Slytherin!”

“No, it’s not,” hissed Hermione, “because, as she was just telling us, Millie’s father is on the Board, and he can… well, what *did* he do to you?”

“Nothing that will kill me, I assure you,” she sniffed. “He only had a… a bit of a chat, with me and Dumbledore and my parents, about me and his daughter, and… how he doesn’t quite feel safe, having someone so violent and aggressive living in the same place as Millie, so — but he wouldn’t want to deny another pureblood the chance at an education, of course—”

“Of course,” said Hermione dryly. She quirked an eyebrow at Draco.

“So they’ve arranged to separate us.”

Hermione set down her fork, frowning. “So you’re sleeping in another dorm? With the third years?”

“Nope!” she said brightly. “I have a room all my own, off the Slytherin commons. With a bed and a desk and my own bathroom, and everything. My parents agreed to it, it’s all quite civilized. They’ve been petitioning for me to have special accommodations for years, so this honestly isn’t even a punishment, for them, and they said it’ll give me a place for — well, if I ever need my space, because of the *urges.* I don’t know what ‘the urges’ are, but apparently I am well prepared for them! And I believe,” she added, shredding the crust from a piece of toast with her fingers, “the word ‘infection’ was also used, at some point, though in what context, I confess I couldn’t tell you! I wasn’t hardly listening, by then.”

He didn’t know what to say except that he was sorry for her, and he knew she would die a little to hear it, so he kept quiet.

“Many find this hilarious,” said Daphne. “You would be in good company to laugh.”

“Where are Theo and Pansy in all this?” he said, rendered uncomprehending by the possibility that they might not care. They were cold and callous and they had salt rinds where much of their kindness ought to have been, but they loved Daphne so obviously it was an embarrassment. Pansy! Who had schemed and connived her way into Daphne’s room fortnightly during a long and lonely

summer — Theo, who had sworn to kill Remus Lupin on sight, if he ever encountered him — who had lived in the Hospital Wing with her, ferried her homework, read to her, held her hand — he understood that. He thought he'd understood.

"Well, Pansy is owling her father about it, for what I do not know, less she expects him to kill Baxter Bulstrode in an honor duel. And I'm not talking to Theo for a year and a day, or some other mythologically appropriate amount of time, or until I decide he's been punished enough. Whichever comes first. Don't ask why."

"Why—?"

The hour-bell struck. Daphne swore and folded three slices of toast neatly into her mouth, one after the other, with such velocity that Ron peered at her in impressment.

"Training for the quidditch team?"

"Nf. I'm starving," she managed. "Is this what a working metabolism is supposed to feel like? I don't know how any of you get anything done. Anyway, got to run, chaps. Thanks for the toast. Ronald, I swear to Merlin, if you don't put your hair to rights by the next time I see you, I'm going at it with a Stasis Charm."

She liberated an éclair from his platter, braced it between her teeth, and rolled herself neatly out of the bench.

Her exit from the hall would have been flawless if not for Vincent Crabbe, whose arm connected with her shoulder, and knocked her so hard she nearly spun fully around; Draco and Ron both rose from their seats; but she stumbled upright, shoved off the Ravenclaw girls who stopped to help her, and ran out without stopping or looking at anyone.

"She should really talk to a teacher," said Hermione, in hushed tones. "Do you think if I spoke to McGonagall—"

“She’d never forgive you,” said Draco.

“I don’t care if she’d forgive me. She’s getting bullied. And clearly, Snape isn’t doing enough to stop it.”

“What do you want him to do? Have a sit with Bulstrode’s parents? Baxter’s on the Board.”

“Then move her out of there! House her somewhere else! It’s a big castle!”

“You can’t change Houses,” he said, watching Crabbe exchange a friendly jostle with Marcus Flint. He reserved the point that Daphne would never consent to a move, if offered. Slytherin was her home. It was that simple, and that difficult. “Things would only get worse if she tried.”

She stared as if he’d dyed his eyebrows in ink.

“You know,” she said, after a moment, “I never thought this before — I really did put off saying so — but I think I’m really starting to hate purebloods.”

He threw back the bitter dregs of a cold cup of tea, and it snaked past a twinge of pain in his throat. “Strong words,” he said briskly, standing up. “I recommend you delay judgment until you’ve been to one of our parties.”

On Fridays their breakfast preceded a visit to the airy, stone-capped cathedral of the Transfiguration classroom. All the desks, the chipped wooden two-seaters with age-gnarled clawfeet, had been swept out of their usual files and piled in a soldier’s barricade to one side of the room. Gryffindors and Ravenclaws milled around in pure bedlam, with neither chairs nor tables to assert the formal order of the classroom, and into this windstorm of murmurs swept Professor McGonagall, leading her hardy lieutenant Filch. The caretaker wheeled behind him a gramophone whose last performance could not have fallen during his lifetime.

“Attention! Attention! *Would you give me your attention, please!* Thank you. There will be no class today.”

A bellow of gratitude and goodwill broke out. Hermione’s hand shot up. Draco grabbed it and put it back down.

“Silence! No! You have not — Finnigan, *come back* — would someone go get him? Thank you, Thomas. For the next ninety minutes, I expect to enjoy the full breadth of attention you would otherwise bring to bear on Transfiguration,” she said, “if not, perhaps, more. It was brought to the attention of the headmaster that some of our students may require instruction pertaining to an upcoming event in which you will all be *strongly* encouraged to participate.”

Her accent turned her R’s into a spray of artillery.

Filch began fiddling with the gramophone, which reacted like an exceptionally old gelding being prodded with spurs. “The Yule Ball,” said McGonagall, and then jumped at a screech of feedback. Filch grunted.

“The Yule *Ball,”* she continued, only to close her eyes at another interjectory squeal of a needle on a record. “The Yule Ball is a tradit — *do you require assistance,* Mr. Filch?”

“I’ve gottem, ma’am!” Seamus wiggled through the crowd, joined by a sweaty-faced Dean. “Sorry! Jumped the gun!”

“Thank you for joining us, Mr. Finnigan,” she said thinly. Giggles circulated. “You may apologize for your haste by helping Mr. Filch. Now. The Yule Ball is a tradition of the Triwizard Tournament.”

She paused. “It is an opportunity to promote camaraderie, to cultivate professional friendships, and represent ourselves to our guests from abroad. It will be open only to fourth years and above, though you may invite a younger student if you wish. The champions and their partners will open the ball—”

There was a gasp. Lavender and Parvati had both rounded on Harry as if he were the last morsel on an island of dogs.

Draco would have felt sorry for the bloke, who was doing his level best to hide somewhere in Ron's pockets, if this hadn't also been the funniest thing that had ever happened to anyone, ever, in the history of the world. He might very well manage a patronus on the mere idea of it. Tall, scruffy-haired, God-awfully awkward Harry Potter, dolled up in dress robes with the stays done loose and wrong tie knot, stalwartly mashing some poor girl's toes, while Krum and Fleur and Warrington waltzed neat circles around him.

His shoulders were shaking. He put his hand to his mouth.

Hermione whacked his elbow with her Transfiguration textbook. "It's not funny! It's easy for you to laugh when you don't have to dance in front of the whole school, but if it was you in his place I'm sure you wouldn't be quite so amused—"

"Firstly, I would never be caught in this position, I'm a magnificent dancer. Secondly, the fact that it's Potter *is* what makes this hilarious, and thirdly, Granger, look at me and tell me you don't find this funny."

She stared at him with the anguish of a woman who knew very damn well it was. "It's not," she managed, all wobbly with suppressed laughter.

He grinned. "Convincing."

McGonagall had finally grappled the room back to attention. "On Christmas Eve — Miss Brown, hold your questions until the end, thank you! On Christmas Eve, we and our guests will gather — Miss Patil, I assure you, Mr. Potter will still be there when I am finished talking — and the same assurances to you, Mr. Weasley! — we will gather in the Great Hall for an evening of *well-mannered* frivolity. As representatives of the host school, I expect each and every one of you to put your best foot forward — and I mean this quite literally."

Seamus and Dean, having shouldered Filch away from the gramophone, gave a shout of victory, and a spatter of music burst forth from its ancient loins. A watery blossom of strings crested into the rolling three-footed trot of a waltz, slow and syrupy and punctuated with the occasional syncopation of static. Draco's mother would have been in spasms of ecstasy. He was in spasms of something else altogether.

"Very good! No commentary will be necessary! Thank you!" cried McGonagall. "Today's lesson — and you will find the door is quite locked, Mr. Boot — will prepare you all for the first dance, which is, traditionally, a Viennese waltz."

"All of us?" said Seamus, astonished. "Not just Harry?"

"Yes! All of you. Because, while some of you have had the opportunity to learn such things since childhood, many of you have not, and it is incumbent on us as teachers to make clear that such differences should not embarrass you," she said fiercely. "You may see me after class if you require further elaboration. Mr. Filch, will you assist me?"

Mr. Filch, ostensibly under duress of some arcane and vigorous threat, obliged her. She forcefully relocated his hand to her waist, sank the claw of her hand deep into his trapezius, and began steering him in tight mechanical circles around the room.

Draco, to his own pride, was not the first person to lose control under such circumstances; that honor went to Ron, who wheezed so loudly that it cut through the music, and nearly passed out.

"You each will find a partner, and practice — *is something funny, Mr. Weasley?"*

"No, professor."

"Indeed not! Miss Midgen, why don't you help Mr. Weasley find his feet? I trust it will be easy for him, since he finds this exercise so

amusing! And the rest of you, go on—”

A scramble ensued for partners. Eloise Midgen, who had an asymmetrical nose and a smile as persistent as her boils, pulled Ron up; Neville blushingly offered his hand to a Ravenclaw named Marietta Edgecombe; Lavender nearly punted Hermione to the floor in her haste to get to Harry, but she was beaten by Cho, who grabbed his arm and said, “Better stick with me; seekers are good with our hands,” and grinned when he turned pink.

“Granger.”

She jumped. She’d been knitting her fingers and raptly observing the floor, but at the sound of her name, she jumped.

“Yes?”

“I was going to ask you to dance, but if you’re having an attack of nerves, perhaps I’d better inquire after Patil.”

“Oh,” she said, as if this weren’t the most predictable thing he could have possibly said. “Yes. Well. I would. But I don’t know how.”

“There are these things called lessons,” he said. “Marvelous devices, really.”

“Shut up.” She lowered her voice, and he had to lean in to hear her, which was an inconvenience, to say nothing of highly uncharacteristic also. “This is sort of awkward, isn’t it? I mean, most of us aren’t going to be good at it.”

“You’re not supposed to be good at it, that’s what I’m for. Listen, do you want to dance or not? Because if you don’t, I’m not going to stand here trying to convince you—”

“I’m just warning you,” she said, glancing at her nails, probably to hide the lamentably obvious attack of nerves. “It’s for your benefit,

not mine. So I don’t get out there and do something stupid and then have you accuse me of entrapment or something.”

“Granger, it is plainly adorable that you think, after all this time, I harbor any delusions about your skills of physical coordination. That is entrapment like a box on a stick is an ambush.”

“You’ve made your point!”

Her shyness crumbled away under the pressure of indignation and pride, and he was pleased. He could do this, sometimes. He could poke a few levers and pull a string in her head, and she would come back to herself. He liked doing this. He liked that he could.

He held out his palm. She slapped hers into it and marched forward with a doomed finality. He followed, ordering the corner of his mouth to sort out what the hell it was about.

She planted herself in front of him, shoulders square, with so much confidence it took a beat to realize she hadn’t a single idea what to do. That amused him, too, and so he toyed with her a little — so what, it wasn’t a crime — by slipping his hands in his pockets, shifting his weight back on his heels, to see how long it would take her pride to ebb.

The answer was forever. The answer was one billion years. She stood there in the hex of swaying couples and the flush slowly gathered around her neck, spreading a rosy finger up to her jaw, while she ran her eyes up and down him as if figuring out which part she’d like to skin first. He put his tongue between his teeth and exerted a frankly ungentlemanly amount of effort not to laugh at her.

“Well?” she said belligerently.

He cocked his head. “Well, what?”

“What are you waiting for? Show me.”

“You’re supposed to curtsy, first.”

She snorted and folded her arms, rolling her weight onto one hip.

“I’m serious,” he said, amused. “That’s how it starts. For the traditional waltz.”

“Oh, yeah. And then I hop on one foot in a circle, rubbing my belly and patting my head?”

“It’s not part of the dance, but however the music moves you.”

“Draco!”

“What!”

“Show me how to waltz! Properly, I mean! If you don’t want to teach me, I’ll go dance with Neville, who seems quite competent, by the way, as he’s already doing spins with Marietta—”

“Fine,” he said sharply, sliding his hands out of his pockets. “I will. You ought to be glad of your own luck, by the way. My dancing tutor said I was the finest waltzer she’d taught in three generations.”

“After three generations, one has to question her memory,” she muttered, which he decided was the appropriate moment to teach her a lesson or two in hubris.

He twitched back his sleeves and swept into a low bow at the waist. It *was* tradition. When he came up he had a rising look at her slightly parted mouth, and her eyes, which had turned owlish. She looked like he had performed a dizzying aerial stunt on his broom.

It was, without exaggeration, incredibly satisfying.

He stepped into her space and took her hand. She tried to lace their fingers, and frowned when he didn’t let her, which turned into a thousand-yard stare of embarrassment when he guided it to his shoulder instead. He smirked.

It was a *great* day.

“Bend the elbow. You’re not erecting a perimeter. You’re supposed to be close to your partner.”

“What if my partner is annoying?” she said plaintively, but she did it, shuffling until the tips of their shoes touched.

“Alas, should’ve tried a gavotte. Hold my hand. Hold it, I said.”

“I am holding it.”

“My mistake. *Keep* holding, then, while I fix your footwork.”

He kicked one of her legs wider, and she stumbled with an indignant squeak. The nails on his shoulder bit down so deep it would leave a welt. “And leave as much of your partner’s blood inside them as possible,” he said stiffly. “That’s not a rule, it’s just good maintenance. Now. When I step with my left foot, you’re going to step forward with your right—”

“I know!”

“Oh, of course you do. That’s why you asked me to teach you, isn’t it, because you already knew.”

“Well, I haven’t *done* it. But I’ve seen it. I know the theory.”

“Then I expect you’ll be a natural.” He laid his hand on her waist.

Under the soft wools of her robe, her body was warm. Ridiculously warm, compared to her hands, which were tiny and also warm, especially for extremities, but not compared to her body. There was a hard curve where her waist flared into her hipbone, and above it, the first round of her ribcage, a slight edge of pressure under his thumb. There was a softness between fabric and bone that disappeared when he pressed, and she made a sound, not hurt, but startled, and he quickly stopped pressing. His fingers curved around to her back. He could span her rib to her hip with pinky and thumb.

“Right,” he said, casting around for a train of thought. He found one, not where he put it, but lingering around in a different region of his brain altogether, and hauled it back to the fore with some irritation. “I’m going to move.”

“Alright,” said Hermione, sounding utterly terrified.

“Don’t say it like — have a little — never mind.”

He stepped forward, pushing her back with the slightest pressure on her hand and her waist, and she stepped half a beat after she was supposed to. The second step was the same, her tagging belatedly where he moved, and on the third beat, she was faster, stepping nearly in time. She was not good at it; she was not even in the same hemisphere of skill with anyone who was, in fact, good at it; but she learned quickly where her feet were supposed to go, even if her actual feet stayed out of the loop on the subject. By the fourth or fifth turn, she was trying to steer them into tighter circles, leaning on their joined hands as if it was a rudder.

“You know, Granger,” he said conversationally, “I don’t know how it is for muggles, but here, traditionally, gents lead.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Which means — and I’m sorry to break it to you — but you are, in fact, going to have to follow.”

“Oh. Am I not?”

He gave a short, surprised laugh. She was so *earnest.* “No; in fact, most efforts at steering, pushing, or otherwise hauling the other person into your preferred figure—”

“Fine! Yes! I get it!”

“—are signs of leading, yes — besides which, a fellow likes to feel that he’s more than his partner’s luggage, if you catch my drift.”

“But — hm.”

“What?”

She worked her mouth around a question. He tapped the back of her hand with his finger, twice, like a knock on the front door to her mind.

“What if *I* want to do something?” she said, and the question had a certain philosophical intensity. He gave it fair consideration.

“Then you tell me.”

She tilted her head. “Really?”

“Yes. Now, I might not agree—”

“Oh, I knew it. You had me there, you know—”

“Wait a minute. If you want to move somewhere, you can tell the lead. Or show him. Move your arms, lean — *gently,* mind you — in one direction or another, he’ll catch on. If he’s not unpardonably thick, he’ll take a hint.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“If he doesn’t…? I don’t know. Then he doesn’t. Why would it matter?”

“Why would it *matter* if I don’t get a say? Really?”

“Yes, really. It’s not a binding contract. You can stop always dancing, if you don’t like it.”

“Hm,” she said thoughtfully. Then, upon great rumination: “Can we do a spin?”

“The question is: ‘can *you* do a spin.’”

“Prat! Try me.”

He thought it would be very funny if she said this and immediately floundered it, so he said nothing, but cut his steps and whisked her hand up into the pendulum from which she would twirl; she went under his arm quickly, did a shy little twist on her heel, and then came hurrying back into position. What it wanted for grace she repaid in enthusiasm.

“See? You see?”

“Well done, then. You very nearly didn’t trip.”

“This *is* fun,” she decided. The movement had driven some blood into her cheeks, and stirred hairs loose from the clasp at the back of her head, and her heart rate was up; it was a funny thing to notice, but he could tell, because it was rabbiting along under his thumb. “I get it. It’s sort of a game.”

“You could see it that way. It’s also a kind of sport.”

“You *would* see it that way,” she said, amused, and the maddening lilt in her tone put him in half a mind to assert that sport was the difference between man and beast — why, he didn’t know, he would figure out an argument for it while she was delivering her rant on why it wasn’t — but he looked down and found her gazing thoughtfully at Neville and Marietta. The pair had flown through the beginner’s steps and were now perambulating merrily around the gramophone.

“Alright, Longbottom.”

“He’s quite clever,” she said automatically. “And he’s kind, too. I helped him with his Transfiguration, once, and when he gets the hang of something, he’s actually quite… good to work with.”

“I know that. I only tutored him for three years.” Neville hadn’t asked again, for their fourth. His grade in Potions seemed to be buoyant for the moment, which was a relief, because between the Tournament and his own work, he hadn’t any idea where he would have found the time.

“I suppose he’s a pureblood,” she said. “So he’s had lessons and things.”

“He is. Of course, he’s not me.”

This finally dragged her attention away from Neville, but it was a pyrrhic victory, considering that she looked at him like he was fully stupid.

“I meant that he’s not some virtuoso of dancing. He’s fine at it. Had lessons, I expect. But I can do better.”

“If you weren’t saddled with me as a partner, is that what you’re saying?”

“No. First of all — you have a niffler’s nose for insults, you know, and it isn’t a good thing, but second of all — I could do better with *any* partner.”

“Oh, you’re just desperate for me to ask you to prove it, aren’t you?” She was far too cheeky; her voice on *desperate* pitched into some low, breathy mockery of yearning. It put up the hairs on the back of his neck.

“I’ve never been desperate for anything in my life,” he said coolly, and did a quick contracheck that had her stumbling. Good. “If I wanted to prove it, I would.”

“I’m not going to ask you.” She was still enjoying herself. Disastrous. Time for extreme measures. “If you want to show off, you’ll have to just do it, I’m not going to beg you like some— *what are we doing stop.”*

He laughed. He had switched directions and waltzed backward on his own rotation, drawing her forward instead of back, which was easier for her to fudge — it meant he had to dance everything backward, but he could do that like he could tie his own shoelaces — and therefore easier to go faster. Much faster. He swept into double-

and triple- time and whirled her under his arm and made her scream, a little, which was funny and also drew attention, even better. The motion slid her back into the curve of his arm and he put his hand on her waist and lifted — her feet left the ground, and she shrieked — after a spin he dropped her back on her feet.

“I told you—”

“Draco Malfoy, I’m going to *skin* you.”

“Marvelous, wasn’t it?” His heart rate was up, too. Maybe he ought to have kept training for quidditch. She wasn’t heavy, it shouldn’t have come up from just lifting her.

“It was,” she said, “many parts terrible, to *one* part, if at all, marvelous. Stop spinning.”

“I’m not.”

“Oh. That’s just the room, then.”

She leaned into his shoulder, vaguely gray. Her forehead met the point of his shoulder and rested there. He could see down into her hair, through the many volumes of static billow, where the gold threads latticed the brown, and the pearly thread of her part. Her fingers pressed little white indentations into his hand. With every breath, his hand moved in the lift and fall of her side. They were breathing together, he noticed. He’d forgotten if that was normal for dance partners. He’d learned so long ago.

Some people had looked over when she screamed, among them Harry and Ron and the virtuoso himself, Neville Longbottom. He fixed his mouth into a cool smirk and waltzed past them. Ron rolled his eyes so hard he ought to have strained a nerve.

Draco didn’t so much as sniff back at him. “We’re faster than Longbottom and Edgecombe, you know.”

“It’s not a competition!”

“So you think, because I’m winning it for us.”

“Poor Neville doesn’t even know what you’re doing, you realize that?”

“Longbottom knows what he knows,” he said vaguely.

“And it’s not winning if your partner’s sick.”

He slowed. He could always be moved by threats of mess.

She tipped her head back and smirked like she was laughing at him. He could twirl her again, just to teach her something about arrogance, but he didn’t want to. There were other things to consider. Ever since she’d had her braces off she’d been smiling more, and she had nice teeth, very clean and straight. There was a freckle under her right eye that moved when she smiled. It migrated around like an orbiting satellite. During a contracheck she folded neatly into the curve of his elbow and if he dipped down he could bend her further, and it was curious, how her body moved where he wanted it to go, how she let him do that. It was Hermione, letting him do that. The fact that she could let anyone else move her at all was a sort of revelation.

It was impossible not to wonder what she was thinking, when her eyes went wide and dark and curious, like telescopic lenses. Her mouth was parted and the full round of her bottom lip had a ridge of scars where she bit them; he wondered if the skin was rougher there, if it was soft everywhere else. There were ways to check.

He had the thought and then slammed the door on it, frightened, like something had come racing out of the dark.

Self-awareness crept along all the planes of his body like a slow-moving fire. It wasn’t his fault; she kept *looking* at him, like there were a thousand of her favorite secrets written all over his skin. She

made looking feel like something that it wasn’t. It had been too long since he’d said anything. There was a jerking double-tap against the inside of his ribcage. In the dust and the sunlight and the violin music the movement of his mind had slowed, and there was something easy about moving, like flying and running, letting the route machinations of the body roll ceaselessly into each other, while he drifted somewhere else.

The hour-bell tolled deeply over the syrup of strings. Filch cut the gramophone. Then he was holding her waist and her hand in a silent classroom in the middle of a giggling mass of embarrassed fourth years, standing halfway through a beam of the midmorning sunlight, waiting for the nerves between his brain and his fingers to reconnect.

Somewhere a synapse flared. He took his hand off her waist and stepped back. She curled her fingers off his shoulder and wrung them in front of her chest, working anxiously at the knuckles there, like there was an ache in them.

He bowed to her. When he came up her stare was gone and she snorted, muttered something about poshness, and shouldered past him to collect her bag.

Word of the ball spread through the castle like a disease. It infected all organs of society. The division of the sexes came down with unexpected force, and across that iron wall only the bravest soldiers dared climb. Girls traveled the castle walls in packs, boys in haggard defensive formations. Established couples swanned smugly through the halls, aware of the envy they incited from dodging the gauntlet altogether. Relationships in budding or nebulous stages, meanwhile, were punted into a hash of negotiations. The Gryffindor common room became a swamp of gossip, for the question of whom to go with was superior only to the other, juicier question of who was going with everyone else.

Draco considered himself by and large above it all. Of course he thought about girls, abstractly, in the way that most boys did, and

specifically, in some cases, because he was — well — see *teenage boy;* but that was a different thing from having anything to do with them. It would be a lie to say he hadn't noticed girls loosening their collars or rolling up their skirts. He knew what it meant when Saoirse O'Donnell asked if he was coming to Hogsmeade that weekend, and why Romilda Vane offered him her spare ticket to the opera. But the idea of doing anything with them, of taking them out, the way so many of the upperclassmen did every weekend — walking out with one on his arm, holding her hand, or giving her his cloak — did nothing for him. It didn't raise his pulse or turn his brains to soup, the way it seemed to do everyone else. Which was excellent luck, because with the exception of him and Hermione, it appeared all of Gryffindor Tower was cheerfully cartwheeling into madness.

Harry, as a champion, was an immediate target. It was bad enough that hordes of girls had apparently been longing for him beforehand, on charges of heroism and dashing nature — Draco had never known so many women suffered from acute blindness — but once it was announced that champions opened the ball, he became the prize ticket. This meant every meal became theater: as many as four or five girls might come up to ask him out, and once, hilariously, altogether, in the world's most awkward queue. Harry's answers were always so immediate and nakedly fearful that he spent the rest of the day paying it off in teasing.

Classes ended, and very few people went home. Draco, torn between the chance to see his mother again and the luring gravity of goings-on at Hogwarts, ended up writing a somewhat ungenerous and spurious letter offering to come home, only to be rebuffed, to his surprise, when his mother said she was still traveling, and could not possibly host him, but to have the best of times at the Yule Ball. She had attended hers with Draco's father, she said, wearing a gown of silver acromantula silk, with an emerald and peacock-feather brooch — see enclosure — if he was struck by the inclination to confer it, in turn, on some lucky lady. He shoved the brooch and the letter in his bedside drawer and swathed them with so many Notice-Me-Not spells that Ron, walking by, accidentally steered himself into the wall.

So even mothers were not immune to insanity.

Meanwhile, Hermione had found a new ax to grind, and which was good for her, since grinding axes was a beloved hobby.

“One more day of this,” she said, “and I’m going to beat them both over the head with a textbook.”

“Lovely. Business or pleasure?”

“A really big, mean, thick one, like Runes,” she added, with relish. It seemed to give her great joy to think about. “Or Arithmancy. *With* the appendix. I love them, and I treasure them, and they’re going to drive me mad, and so I’m going to beat them, with an Arithmancy textbook, with an appendix.”

“A good plan, well-researched. Is this cumulative retribution, or acute?”

She rubbed her eyes. “It’s this sodding *stupid* ball.”

“Ah. Both.”

“It wouldn’t be any problem if they could just shut up and *ask* someone instead of complaining, but of course, they won’t. And if they don’t find some mettle somewhere before the week’s out, they’re going to end up going alone, and they’ll complain even more. It’s a mess. At least Ron’s only passively complaining — but Harry hasn’t any excuse. You’d think he’d have landed *one* date, he’s only been asked out by half the girls in our year—”

“His hesitation is understandable, their taste is clearly dubious.”

“God! I *know.”* She slammed down the Runes textbook. They were in the library, their table nestled in a small ray of winter sunlight, as whorls of dust inside the window-light orbited in time with the whorls of snow outside it. Hermione was wearing a lush red scarf that fountained over her shoulders and a thick white jumper that made

her hair look like coffee spilling into cream, and she had tucked her wand behind one ear. He had tired of the Runes and started practicing Snowing Charms over her head, to see how long it would take her to notice.

“It’s getting ridiculous, honestly. Did you hear what he said about Susan Bones?”

“I would have preferred not to.”

Glittering flakes were starting to accumulate in her hair. She brushed it off absently, and it showered onto her shoulder; he smiled.

“And it’s even sillier, because obviously neither of them have even thought to ask me,” she said hotly, “when any of us could’ve gone as friends, and it would’ve solved the whole problem.”

“I’ll thank you to refrain from suggesting that sort of farce. Too much laughter is bad for digestion.”

“...Why is that funny?”

“Why? Why is it funny? Because you don’t want Potter to break your toes in front of three schools. Because you’d have to stand for pictures next to Ronald’s dress robes, which I can confirm for an abomination. Because neither of them are even remotely suitable partners, especially not for an international event. In fact, you should thank Merlin they haven’t asked you, and made you come up with an excuse to say no.”

“Why would I need an excuse?” she said coolly.

“Because unless you’ve another date—”

“Don’t I?”

“Do you?” he said, taken aback.

“There’ve been — offers.”

“Who?”

“Neville.”

“Longbottom?”

“Yes. He found me at breakfast, and told me that he assumed I had already had lots of invitations, but he wanted to ask me, in case I wanted to go as friends,” she said stiffly, turning a page with such force it nearly ripped. “He was very sweet.”

“So? Are you going?”

“No!” She did tear it, this time. Swearing, she whisked her wand out of her hair and traced a Mending Charm over the page. “I don’t like him that way.”

“As friends? Uncommonly cold, Granger.”

He sprawled in his chair, at ease. She cast him a glare. He smiled back, indolent and breezy.

“He’s a dear friend, in fact, I’m very fond of him. But I thought — you know, it really doesn’t matter. And anyway,” she said, with some venom, “at least Neville *has* asked someone. What have you done for the ball, besides sneer at other people trying?”

He snorted. “It’s not a sodding horse race. I’ll not go running after the first girl that’ll have me for fear of going alone. I’ll end up going with someone suitable, I expect.”

Hermione went still. Her fingers curled into crescents, like tiny sea-life retreating into their shells.

“Granger? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m thinking.”

“I know, it’s boring. Think louder.”

“I won’t, because it’s very stupid,” she said, with surprising anger. Rarely did he hear her wield that tone against herself, being normally reserved for the rare idiocy of Gryffindor boys. “I suppose I should’ve just gone with Neville, and been glad that someone asked me at all, instead of sitting around like — I’m as bad as Ron.”

“Don’t be daft. Just because Longbottom’s quick off the mark doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have a lady’s choice.”

She shook her head, muttering. He watched her swat some snow off her shoulders without much gentleness.

“Were you *waiting* for someone?”

“No! I didn’t even think about it, I just looked at him and thought — it was mean,” she said furiously. “It wasn’t kind. I only wanted to go with someone as friends, anyway, this date rubbish has everyone acting like beasts—”

“Hear, hear.”

“—and it’s bad enough, you know, going to bed and listening to Lavender brag that she’s got four boys waiting on an answer, but she’s holding out for Harry — she doesn’t even like him, she just wants to be the center of attention—”

“Four? Good woman.”

“It doesn’t *matter!* Lavender Brown and her perfect blonde hair and her stupid giggle and her snogging partners have absolutely nothing to do with me getting a date to the dumb ball everyone’s so mad about, where I’d have to bother with a dress and hair and figure out whatever it is about makeup I’ve never understood, which is more time than I’ve got anyway, since I’m pressed enough between nine classes and a club and the Tournament, so I don’t even know where I’d find the room in my schedule for three hours of garrulous *folderol.”*

He wondered if he ought to ask her.

The snow had started to melt and stained the emergent layer of her curls, gilding the rest in glimmers from the afternoon sun. One flake clung to the curly tip of a piece of fringe, swept over her eyes, and it irritated him like a dog-eared page or a misplaced crease, yearning for correction. Her hair never stayed up, was the problem, it always wanted adjustment. His fingers twitched.

They could go as friends. It would put to bed all this nonsense with Neville and Ron and Lavender Brown. He was by far the best choice. He knew how to dance and drink and comport himself, not to mention how to actually wear white tie, which put him head and shoulders above anyone else she knew. He wouldn't embarrass her. And it would be fun to put up their feet and chat about runes while everyone else frayed their nerves to shreds over dates.

He cleared his throat. She tilted her head at him, and a stroke of static blotted out whatever he was going to say.

Go to the ball with me was, apparently, a much more complicated incantation than anyone had let on, because his tongue went dead and he was staring at her like he'd never seen a sodding girl before.

She was staring at him. Her fingers fiddled with her quill, unconsciously smearing ink over her thumb.

"What?" she said. His eyes flickered down. The shape of the word '*what,'* which for some reason he'd never thought about before, was a sort of strange thing. It rolled off the mouth, like a blown kiss.

"What?" she said again. "You look like—"

A shriek split the air. Hermione jumped, smacked her knee on the table, and broke into a train of swearing that almost dwarfed the sound of the three Hufflepuff girls tearing around the corner. They ducked into the bookshelf, giggling and pawing at each other. One had a Bulgarian scarf knotted around her waist.

“—sodding bloody buggering goddamn pain in my arse, this is a *library.* What are they doing?” she snarled, and then, at him, sharply: “What are you smiling at?” which was a terrible shock.

“Quiet! Shut up! I think he saw us!”

“He did, I made eye contact—”

One darted her head around the bookshelf and squealed. “Wait! Wait! He’s coming by now—”

They fled to the next aisle and dissolved into cackling like a legislature of hags. Not much later, sharp footsteps swelled down the aisle, and Viktor Krum appeared, blinking in confusion.

“Herm-ow-nee,” he said, with dignified surprise. “Pale Man.”

“Hello, Viktor,” said Hermione politely. She massaged her knee. “Happy Christmas.”

“If you’re looking for your fan club,” said Draco, “they’re in the next aisle over.”

“Fan… club?”

“The admirers,” Hermione clarified. “The girls. They’re not here.”

“Oh,” he said, fervently, “good,” and to Draco’s dismay, he shuffled closer. This so happened to let him peer over Hermione’s shoulder at her notes.

Draco flicked his wand. The textbooks closed themselves with the same crisp *snap,* while the notes whisked themselves into piles and dove under innocuous volumes of Arithmancy.

Krum’s cheek twitched. “Is private?”

“Personal, actually. It’s nothing against you, but I’m sure you understand.”

“Ah.” He turned to Hermione and tapped the table. “Reasonably private? Eh? This?”

“Obviously,” said Draco.

“No,” she said, oblivious. “Why? Would you like to join us?”

Draco glared at her.

Krum broke into a lopsided, toothy smile. “Thank you for kind offer,” he said. “But I vill not stay. I am hiding from the girls.”

“Really? I think you could just wink at them, and they’d faint dead away.”

“No. You are vrong about this. They are always hiding when I am trying to talk to them,” he said, frowning. “I am suspecting this is the work of Warrington. He is having me followed.”

She was amused. “What, as espionage? An elite squadron of simpering third years?”

“He’s got a point,” muttered Draco.

“Ah. Right. You’re *both* ridiculous. Viktor, they want you to ask one of them to the ball.”

Viktor peered at her.

“The ball?” She rolled her hand expressively. “The dance, the Yule Ball? Didn’t Karkaroff tell you?”

“I know vhat the ball is. But vhy do they vant me to ask?”

“I suppose going to a ball on the arm of an international quidditch star who fights dragons is just the sort of thing some girls are interested in,” she said dryly, reaching for the textbook. “Did you bury my notes? Draco Malfoy, if you smeared them I’ll hex you silly, those were still wet.”

“They vould like it, you are thinking?” said Krum pensively. “Even from Hogvarts? Vhen ve are rivals?”

“If they didn’t have a heart attack first,” she said absently. “It’s not a real rivalry, nobody takes it that seriously.”

“Excuse *you.”*

“They are not thinking: ‘He is no good boy, from Durmstrang, dark magic’? Their families — they are not care?”

“Do not,” said Draco thinly, twirling his wand. The Knockback Jinx was tremendously effective at close range. “It’s ‘do not’ care. As in ‘I do not care to discuss this any further.’”

“Maybe they do,” she admitted, “but honestly, I can’t see why. And if they’re like mine, they’re muggles, so they don’t care one way or another.”

Krum nodded. “Thank you,” he said shortly. “I am leaving you to your privacy now.”

Draco ignored the look Hermione shot him as Krum left. His eyes followed the Bulgarian to the door, and thereafter he took care to cast *Muffliato* when they went to the library.

Sometimes he thought he was the only one in Gryffindor Tower with the slightest nose for subterfuge.

That evening, over a game of wizard’s chess with Harry, Ron lamented the deluge of work that had skated in over the deadline. Snape had assigned a take-home test on common antidotes in Potions, and both Draco *and* Hermione had refused to do it for him.

“Evil, he is,” Ron said bitterly that night in the Gryffindor common room. “Ruining the break with a lot of studying.”

Hermione turned her nose up over the edge of her notebook. “Mmm. You’re not exactly straining yourself, are you?”

“It’s Christmas!”

“It’s December nineteenth.”

The portrait-door whinged. Fred, George, and Angelina tumbled in, levitating a barrel of apple cider and a wheelcart of spiced fruitcakes, which the room greeted with a cry of appreciation. Ron stumbled up to help them, leaving Harry to puzzle out the four different ways he was in check.

“So. Harry,” said Angelina, flopping down in a chair. “Who’s our Hogwarts Crown Princess?”

Harry groaned, and a round of friendly jeering took up.

“Better hurry up, boy-o. It’s a big night. She’ll need time to plan her outfit.” Angelina leaned against the mantelpiece, grinning. “Besides, the good ones go fast, don’t you know.”

“Lay off him, he’s working up to it,” said Ron loyally. “We’re planning a strategy.”

“Does this strategy involve asking a girl to the ball?” said Draco. “Or is the plan to stare mournfully at the Ravenclaw Table until the idea transmits? Because so far, the results are uninspiring.”

Harry, sprawled despairingly spread-eagle by the fireplace, lifted a single finger. Draco fired off two in return.

“Who’re you taking, then, wanker?” yawned Ron. “At least Harry’s got a game plan.”

“I say again: can we confirm this plan involves eye contact?”

“He’s got irons in the fire! Leave him alone!”

“Ah, young love,” sighed Fred, perching on the back of the sofa. He clasped his hands over his heart. “Faint heart never won fair seeker, dear Potter. Go to her. Fly to her, serenade her — tell her she has

bewitched you with her broom-handling skills and robust arms — shower her in flowers and quidditch gear—”

“You are so full of shit,” said Angelina fondly, crossing her arms.

He grinned. “I reckon,” he said. “By the way. Nearly forgot. We’re going to the ball, yeah?”

“Are we! Are we, now! And just what do you expect to hear, Fred Weasley, Mr. Serenade Her, when you come up to a girl and say ‘we’re going to the ball’ like you’re taking me to buy broomstick ointment?”

“...Yes?”

“Yeah,” she admitted. “Reckon so. Wear pink, it’ll match my dress.”

“But Georgie wants to go twinsies.”

“Great, then he can match, too.”

“Fair ’nuff. Cheers,” said Fred, and wandered off to help Lee Jordan deface a poster of Viktor Krum on the notice board. Angelina gave a small pleased smile and went over to chat with Katie Bell.

Each day new decorations appeared in the Great Hall, like a coruscating countdown to ritual sacrifice. Long talons of everlasting icicles dripped from the banisters of the grand staircase, and thick robes of holly wound up the ever-shifting arms of the staircases above. Twelve fir trees of gigantic height emerged overnight in the Great Hall, decked in the colors of each Hogwarts house, and each topped with a moving porcelain figurine of a lion, eagle, badger, or snakes. The tiny roars and hisses of these little creatures were lost under the sound of Christmas carols, for the suits of armor had been enchanted to sing whenever someone passed by, and the acoustics of their empty helmets gave these songs a hollow, mournful quality, like they were being played from far away. The gloomy strains of “O Tannenbaum” echoed long and deep through the stone vaults of the

castle, and accompanied by the humming croons of the ghosts, as if the rock itself were singing.

It was a strange evening. Daphne was there. Ginny, too, had joined them late, bundling in beside Hermione and haughtily spooning lamb cawl into her bowl, so preoccupied with her own smugness she didn't even notice Daphne until the girl turned to her and said admiringly: "I say! How many of you are there? Your mother must be a drill sergeant," and she dropped a chunk of lamb into her pumpkin juice.

He interceded.

"Weasley, Daphne Greengrass. She's here on good behavior. Daphne, this is Ginevra. The terminal Weasley, or so one hopes."

"You're in Slytherin," observed Ginny.

Daphne levitated the lamb chunk out of Ginny's goblet. "And *you* have the loveliest hair I've ever seen. What is that color? Garnet? Copper? I should simply die to see you in green. You'd be mesmerizing."

Ginny, who had dirt on her nose and looked like she had never mesmerized anybody, flushed pink beneath her freckles. "Huh," she said suspiciously. "Thanks, I guess."

Satisfied that the risk of violence was low, he returned to Hermione's conversation with Harry, who was scraping a spoon listlessly across his bowl.

"Just tell her you like her, and want to go to the ball, she's going to say yes — honestly, you might do it now, she's coming in."

A set of Ravenclaws had indeed arrived from the courtyard, glazed in rain-drizzle, and Cho's dark hair shone amongst them. Harry groaned. Ron thwacked him on the back and he stumbled to his feet.

With a foreboding sigh, he went over to her group and mumbled something, his hands in his pockets. Cho blinked and then said something, and Harry let out a loud, wild honk of laughter, like a startled goose; and then both of them smiled very brightly.

When he stumbled back, he still looked like he'd been clubbed.

"Ah, no, she rejected you," said Hermione dryly.

"She *asked* me," he said, in disbelief at his own luck. "I brought up the ball, and she just… asked me."

"You're joking," said Ron.

He wasn't. Whatever poor overclocked angel was responsible for Harry Potter's good luck had burned the midnight oil down to its smoking wick, for Cho, trained in warfare on the cold mud of the quidditch pitch, had come out from the tall grasses and seized her man while the getting was good. Her reward was a burst of congratulatory shrieks and the full rights to extreme smugness. She settled at the Ravenclaw table like a cat that had glutted itself on cream.

Ginny, opposite, looked like someone had smashed the empty cream jar over her head.

Daphne squealed and fluttered her fingers on the heel of her palm. "Brava, brava! What a handsome couple! It'll make quidditch matches complicated, of course, but I suppose a bit of friendly competition whets the blood, doesn't it?"

"Nicely done, Harry," said Ron, only slightly strained. "Taken care of."

"Indeed. And who all are the rest you taking?"

There was a pause. Clearly, she had expected a more resounding answer, because she paled and glanced desperately around the

table, looking for someone to rescue her. Draco, who was not feeling terribly warm towards her at the moment, declined to do so.

“He hasn’t asked anybody,” muttered Ginny, jerking her head at Ron.

“Hey! Oi! At least I’m going! You’re not even invited, so why don’t you hop off—”

“Actually, I am going. With Neville, in fact.” She stabbed a carrot.

His jaw dropped.

“Neville? You’re serious?”

“Yes, I am! And what’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing! And I like Neville, but — Merlin, so *everyone* has dates but me, don’t they?”

“No, they don’t,” said Hermione patiently. “For example, Eloise hasn’t got a date yet, and neither has Parvati.”

“I’m not taking Eloise.”

“And what’s wrong with her?”

Ron rolled his eyes and put a finger alongside his nose.

“Ron!”

“Come on,” he said, tilting his head at her. He trailed off, and his stare waxed keen and contemplative, as if wheels were turning under that ruddy hair that had never known movement before.

Draco directed the full force of his attention to his baked potato. That was fine. Ron was allowed to look at Hermione, if he wanted.

“Hermione,” Ron said. It was soft and thoughtful. “You’re a girl, aren’t you?”

Said girl promptly coughed up half a goblet of pumpkin juice. Ginny thumped her mightily on the back, and the blockage vanished from her airway with a thoroughly un-girlish wheeze. The ginger shot a glare at her brother.

“Well spotted!”

“Right, right.” Ron kicked away Ginny’s foot, which was attempting to locate and terrorize his shinbone under the table. “Reckon you’ll — *quit it,* Gin! — reckon you’ll want a date then, won’t you?”

The shriek of cutlery on porcelain made them all flinch.

“I quite apologize," said Draco calmly, setting aside his fork. The baked potato was no more. “Granger, would you pass me—”

“You’ve just now thought of that?” she said disbelievingly. “Now you’ve exhausted your other options?”

“I dunno. I didn’t think about it before, to be honest.” Ron rubbed his neck, exerting the minimum of decency to look sheepish.

“Oh, that’s charming. Pray tell: didn’t think that I was a girl, or didn’t think I’d want a date?”

Ginny’s foot dealt a tremendously powerful blow to its victim’s kneecap, which, if received, would have surely silenced Ron as desired; unfortunately, the victim was not Ron but Harry, who wheezed and doubled over.

“Either, I guess.”

“Granger, I asked you to pass a new setting. You know how I loathe being made to repeat myself.”

She ignored him. “Because either way, Ron,” she snapped, “it’s pretty hard for a girl to feel wanted—”

“Feel wanted? Come off it! You’re our friend, and you might have offered, anyway.”

“Offered? *Offered?* Like an owl service?”

Realizing that he had stuck his foot in the bear trap, Ron set his jaw, girded his loins, and firmly wedged the other one in after it.

“You know what, yeah! I mean, not for nothing, Mione, but you didn’t ask me or Harry, either!”

Ginny was fingering her fork, gazing at Ron’s arm with savage intent, as if calculating the odds of getting a howler for puncturing her brother’s cephalic vein.

Hermione’s knuckles turned white on her knife. Draco eyed them with appreciative concern.

“That’s beside the point,” she said. “If you wanted to go with me, you should’ve asked me, and not waited until I was the last girl in eyeshot without a date.”

This bizarre bloodletting had gone on long enough. Entertaining as it was to watch Ron whale furiously at the bottom of the hole he was digging, Hermione was starting to look a bit genuinely hurt, and it took the joy out of the thing.

“Ronald, enough of this. Ritual humiliation is out of vogue, and it clashes with your complexion. Now, Granger, about the setting—”

“Well, I’m asking you now,” Ron said stubbornly. *“Do* you wanna go with me?”

Something cramped in Draco’s stomach. He set down his silverware and reached for his water, immediately relieved of appetite. He had never known the Hogwarts food to betray him before.

“I — you know what, Ron, actually, I would have,” she said flatly. He set down the waterglass hard and it splashed over the rim. The

cramp spiked, and now a hot little curl of irritation was snaking up his throat.

She was *lying.* Why was she lying to him? To make fun of him? She wouldn't have wanted to go with Ron, it would have humiliated her. What a joke that would have been, him hauling her around on his big oafish arm, wearing those ridiculous dress robes, embarrassing her, making her look *stupid—*

"—going with someone else."

"What."

Hermione and Ron both stared at him.

"I'm going with someone else," she repeated clearly.

The cramp was swiftly becoming awful. His stomach had folded into a small pitted stone and slithered down his abdomen, sending a roil of nausea up his throat. What she was saying kept slipping in and out of his focus, and so it took him a few seconds to process, by which time his stomach had landed painfully in his appendix.

"...not telling you, it's a surprise," she said, tucking her hair behind her ear. He stared at her.

She was being demure. She was being *bashful.* Hermione Granger, who fought a mountain troll and stood down a dementor and outran a werewolf, who brewed an illegal N.E.W.T-level potion in the girls' bathroom between classes, and shouted someone down about every other day, was fidgeting and curling her hair behind her ear because someone had asked her on a date.

He was really in profound pain.

"Who is it?"

She averted her eyes. "I just said it's a surprise."

“Piss off. Who is it?”

“Oh, never mind, since you asked so nicely.”

“Is it Finnigan?”

“No, he’s taking Lavender,” said Ginny. Harry had hidden his face behind his goblet.

“Fine. Thomas?”

“It’s not Dean,” she said, “and I wouldn’t tell you if it was, because, as I’ve said three times now, it’s a surprise.”

“But there’s no one else,” said Ron, after a moment. His expression was stunned and more than a little hurt. “Is that — are you serious? Because if you’re not — there’s no point to us both going alone. Listen, I’m sorry I didn’t ask you, okay? I should’ve done it sooner. That’s my fault.”

This dumbfounded her.

“You think I’m lying to *spite* you? Are you joking, Ronald Weasley?”

“Granger, forget about that. It’s irrelevant. Is it Jordan?”

“Lee?” she said, distracted by glaring at Ron. Her lack of priorities offended: she ought to have been glaring at him, if anyone. “No, he’s taking Katie. And stop guessing, you’re not going to get it.”

He wanted her to look at him. She seemed to be putting a lot of effort into not looking at him. What was her problem?

Ron stood up. “Fine,” he snapped. “No, that’s fine. I get the point. Literally anyone else, before me, right?”

“What? You’re being ridiculous! Come back! Ron!”

But he had stalked off. She stood up, and Draco hauled her back down.

“Don’t bother.”

“I never said that!”

“Of course you didn’t. Don’t be daft. He’s delusional.” His fingers fully encircled her wrist. He noticed this, involuntarily, and then threw away both wrist and idea in a fit of self-disgust. What was *his* problem, that was the better question.

The silence clambered down onto the table and sat in the worst possible place.

Daphne cleared her throat. “Please, everyone, try the treacle tart. I think the puddings are better here than our table. I blame the house-elves, I think they pick favorites.”

“Not a very close contest, when one house likes to enslave them,” snapped Hermione. Ginny snorted.

The silence turned around three times and resettled itself with one foot in the pudding.

“I envy your mind for politics, Hermione,” she said timidly. “I feel like I’m watching you go at it with swords whenever you talk. I should like to introduce you to some of Daddy’s friends at the Ministry of Magic; a lot of them ought to have their noses smashed in, and you seem like you could do with a good chance to smash some noses.”

Hermione tossed her hair back and blew out a short breath.

“I wouldn’t want to give them the pleasure,” she said, but it was less heated than she’d been a moment ago.

Daphne smiled at her with evident relief, and then set down her knife. “Steering the conversation back to something I’m good at,” she

announced, “I, er — well, say I’ve been inspired by Cho’s example. And I — this is a teensy bit embarrassing, but I haven’t got a date.”

Even distracted, Draco found this surprising. “Not Theo?”

“I don’t think so,” she said evasively. “We haven’t spoken about it, but I don’t expect much. I imagine he’ll want to take Pansy, and a girl doesn’t like to stick her foot in.”

“Reckon not,” said Ginny darkly. “If one half is Pansy Parkinson, you’d get slime all over it.”

“Yes, well. Pans is quite set on going. But you see, so am I, and I’m not of a mind to maverick, it’s not done. Quite proud of the girls who do, of course, all power to women, but I’m a lady of the old school. So. Draco. You won’t leave a girl hanging, will you?”

Draco looked up at the same time as Hermione dropped a forkful of treacle tart. It was hard to say who was more stunned.

“You want *me* to take you? Why?”

“Your natural abundance of charm, obviously,” muttered Ginny, sawing her lamb.

“Not if it’s such a chore as you make it sound,” Daphne said pleasantly, “but otherwise, yes, I’d be much obliged. You’re perfectly suitable.”

“Suitable,” repeated Hermione. Ginny watched him like he had the World Cup Final playing on his forehead. She seemed to be trying to communicate something with eyebrows and mouth movements, but unproficient as he was in the Late Weasley Dialect, it told him nothing.

He thought about it.

“Alright,” he said. Daphne beamed and nodded at him, and then tucked into her pudding.

“What,” said Hermione. “You’re just — like that? Because he’s ‘suitable’?”

“Why, yes,” agreed Daphne. “Though ‘suitable’ doesn’t mean half a hot toot to me. It’s just to make the families happy. I’m sure *I* shouldn’t care who I dance with; I’d go with a leprechaun if I knew my parents wouldn’t find out.”

“Because anyone who isn’t pureblood is as good as a non-wizard, aren’t they?”

Ginny sighed and started rubbing her eyes. “Had to, did you?” she muttered to Daphne, under her breath. Draco hardly caught it, being distracted by a mounting row, but Daphne must have, because she stiffened. “You just *had* to.”

Daphne turned pink, and looked at the table.

“Granger, it doesn’t actually mean anything. It’s a nothing-term. Anyway—”

“That’s not true, though,” she said loudly. “Is it? Because Daphne didn’t ask anyone, she asked you, and she said suitable, and you knew exactly what she meant.”

He couldn’t understand how she had ended up yelling at him. Under most circumstances he knew what he’d done wrong, but she’d never been this angry without some sort of understandable cause before.

He scowled at her, and she scowled right back. Well, that was fine. If it was yelling she wanted, she’d get it. She’d more than earned a row, anyway, she and her ‘surprises,’ the little sneak—

And there was still that troublesome whisper of eagerness — *are we going to row, now? Are we going to fight?* — that darted through the wall of discomfort in his stomach.

“I’m not suitable for most people in Slytherin,” said Daphne suddenly.

Hermione rounded on her. “Oh, *really?* You’re plenty suitable for a Malfoy, though, so I wonder where the line is? Not blonde enough? You can’t be pureblood if you don’t rank between platinum and alabaster?”

“No,” she said. She drew a finger across the scars on her face.

“That’s why I asked him,” she added, after a beat of silence. “Seeing as Draco doesn’t mind, and people won’t talk so much, if I’m spoken for. Sorry. I didn’t think it would be a problem, Hermione. I thought — well, you said you already had a date.”

Hermione was a quiet rictus of horror.

“I didn’t think,” she said. “I’m — I’m quite — I didn’t mean to. I mean —”

“My darling, I’ve already forgotten it. What were we talking about?”

It was a Herculean effort, truly, but it failed because no one stepped in to relieve her.

“I have to go,” blurted Hermione. “To. The library. I just remembered.”

They had spent three hours on Runes together earlier that morning; it was also almost nine o’clock at night, and the library would close soon.

“For what?”

She looked at him wildly, as if she'd never heard of such a thing as a library in her life.

“Charms,” she said. “I have Charms.”

She leapt up and carried this lie on swift feet out of the Great Hall. He stared after her.

“We have Charms homework?” said Harry miserably.

“No, we don’t.”

“Oh. Good. But what’s her problem, then?”

Daphne glanced at Draco, sipped her pumpkin juice, and said nothing.

“Harry,” said Ginny emphatically.

“What?”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Ginny, what?” he said, annoyed.

She hit the table and stood up.

“You know, I really hope all of you die alone," she snapped. She stormed out after Hermione.

It had started raining. It pattered against the tall windows and washed out the melancholy strains of Nearly Headless Nick and the Grey Lady singing “A Coventry Carol” among the candles overhead. The sound was dull and gloomy, and the Great Hall glittered like a bronze relief in the dark mirror of the windows. Someone down the table was saying the bad weather would last through Christmas, and Draco was of a mood to believe them.

“Goodness,” said Daphne worriedly. “Do you think she meant me, too?”

-Written to one of the hardest serves James Fitzpatrick and Patrick Doyle ever whipped up. Not nearly enough conversation about how those two provided for us after John Williams bowed out.

-They and Mike Newell also gave us the Weird Sisters as an all-male glam rock band, and personally I think you should be allowed to go to heaven for that.

-This chapter goes out in loving memory of my dance teacher, who would have been aghast at the mere idea of intentionally doing a contra check without communicating it to the follow. Jail-worthy.

-As has been litigated in the fandom, the scene of McGonagall teaching dance lessons does, in fact, imply an equivalent with Snape; however, since Slytherins are mostly purebloods and therefore expected in general to have some training in it, I think he probably doesn't, or he sends the few half-bloods and untrained purebloods to go sit in on a Ravenclaw lesson or something. (Covering the fact that I'm fairly certain Snape has never danced a step of anything in his life, and could not teach it even if asked.)

-It's a rare treat for me to get more Ginny. She's still a bit of a cipher, and I'm looking forward to more of her in fifth and sixth year. There's always a balancing act, in a series with this many characters, of trying to do everyone justice without spreading the attention too thin. I like the idea that she and the twins have this unique friendship — Ron's distant with her because he's trying to strike out on his own, but the twins are old enough that they're not threatened by a kid tagging along with them, and plus, they think Ginny's hilarious. Which she is.

-I wrote the line "she'd walk into a death trap and complain about the upholstery" and then realized that I was, in fact, describing myself.

-The comments have been amazing this past week — reading my inbox is my treat after a long day. I hope everyone who left a comment has something lucky and unexpected happen to them today.

-Anyway: you all know when the next chapter goes up! It's called "Eine Kleine Nachtmagik." And it's exactly what you think. Insane love to all of you. <3

Eine Kleine Nachtmagik

Chapter 43: Eine Kleine Nachtmagik

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

He did not see Hermione again for several days. He only saw evidence of her, in a pink cardigan draped over a sofa filmed in cat hair, or a flier for S.C.R.U.M.B.Y. that appeared, thrice, on the common room notice board, despite persistent graffiti attacks. The third time, he caught a first year named Hooper going after it with a quill, and from irritation and curiosity, he tried out a strange little spell he'd picked up from the margins of *Moste Potente Potions,* which turned out to make the victim's teeth grow until they met a solid object, e.g., the floorboards. The success of this experiment was the highpoint of his weekend; the rest was dreadfully dull, composed mainly of listening to Harry complain about homework he wasn't doing and Ron sulk over dates he hadn't gotten.

He heard that Hermione had taken up in the library, but he was wary of disturbing her. So he cast an Anti-Vandalism Charm on the S.C.R.U.M.B.Y. poster and gave Crookshanks a scratch behind the ears, and went about his days as normal.

The result of this process was an accidental and unpleasant revelation of just how many hours in the day he spent with, or thinking about, Hermione Granger. It was a daunting hole in his schedule that he struggled to mortar in. There was always plenty of homework to do, but wheedling away too many hours on homework alone made him feel like a pathetic hermit. He flew a few quidditch scrimmages organized by Harry and Cho; he finished reading the fifth year Runes textbook, and did a little work on the egg, though it was slow-going, because Hermione kept their notes in her journal. He played games of Exploding Snap with Ron and the twins in the common room, which always ended with a redhead's eyebrows getting blown off, and in a true fit of boredom one day he taught

Ginny how to cheat. He went through Seamus's record collection. He listened to Lavender complain about her volumizer. He put on his Walkman and wrote a long letter to his mother complaining of everything in great detail. Then he burned it and penned a short sequel asking why she wouldn't be home for Christmas. She didn't answer. He was starting to worry.

On Monday he found a note on his favorite armchair demanding his opinion on a particular Runic script from Ancient Mesopotamia, and his relief was embarrassing.

He burned it and waited four hours before sticking an answer to her favorite desk, under the window. Then he sat down across from it, put up his feet, and practiced Summoning Charms to pass the time. By the end of the hour he was so good at them that he could vault something across the common room, Summon it, and whisk it back into his hand before it landed.

She came down from the girls' dorm fussing a spray of damp curls into their clamp, and then froze.

The inkwell came hurtling over, and he caught it.

She'd bathed. Her hair was dark and stringy, and her face dewy from the heat. There was something vaguely indecent about seeing her with her hair wet, though it had happened before at the Burrow and he hadn't thought anything of it then. He blamed it on recent events. She was the one acting oddly; of course he was going to stare.

Some internal debate crescendoed and resolved, because after setting her mouth in a firm line, she stomped over and picked up his note without a word to him.

Her vow of silence was not long for the world.

"Doesn't *work?"*

“And a good morning to you, too, Granger. How was your weekend? Mine was wonderful.”

“It was perfectly lovely, thank you, I feel quite refreshed, I slept for an age and still got heaps done and what do you mean, it doesn’t work?”

He tossed the inkwell from one hand to the other. “Precisely what I wrote. It doesn’t work. Work, it does not. Work is the thing it does not do.”

“It checks every box.”

“Except the one where it has to work.”

“How would you know? We haven’t even cross-referenced it.”

“That would be a waste of time. We agreed the runes have to have a grammar, that’s what the accent marks are.”

“I’m positing,” she gritted out, “that we were wrong about the grammar. Obviously.”

“So I gathered. And I’m saying you’re wrong,” he said, “obviously.”

She ripped the note cleanly in half and fed it to the fire.

“We’re getting nowhere.”

“No, really? I thought we’d cracked it.”

“I’m half convinced it doesn’t translate at all,” she said pensively, wringing out a strand of hair. “That it’s supposed to represent something else. We haven’t skimmed the surface of potential symbology.”

“We dismissed symbology because it was too random. Three schools, three nations, and a clue that hinges on someone happening to recognize a precise item of cultural trivia? We can go

through it all again, if you'd prefer, but we weren't stupid then and we aren't stupid now, so—"

"I know that, but one of us is wrong somewhere, and if we don't sort it out soon, Harry's going to be flattened or eaten by whatever horrible thing they've got lined up for him, and would you *stop* throwing that stupid thing— *Accio!"*

It zipped neatly into her palm. He closed his hand around nothing.

"Twitchy."

"Prat," she said.

He cocked his head at the chair opposite him. She hesitated.

"Ronald found a date," he said, by and by.

She blinked. "Really? He asked someone?"

"Apparently Chang has a friend."

"I see," she said. "How's her nose?"

He held his hand so it bisected his face, dead center.

The corners of her eyes turned up the way they did when she wanted to smile. "Well. That's one less thing to worry about."

"Her name's Padma."

"I see."

"Patil."

"Yes, I know."

"And yours?"

“Nice try.”

“I won’t tell.”

“Yes, you would,” she said, insufferably smug, like she took pleasure in knowing something he didn’t. Scratch that: he *knew* she did, and the fact that he would’ve done exactly the same in her situation didn’t make it any less aggravating. “If you knew. You really would.”

Horrible, sneaky woman.

He held out his hand. She tossed the inkwell, and he caught it.

“If he doesn’t ask to match your dress, take Ronald,” he said, and went to go get his Runes book. He could feel her watching him as he left the common room, and that, too, was nearly as satisfying as the last word.

Increasingly, he felt there was a payment of some sort they were delaying. It was racking up behind them, all that debt, but for the life of him he couldn’t find it in his heart to pay it; not today, with the snow coming down so gently on the window, and the fire was babbling like it had a secret to tell. He let it go.

The ball was on Christmas Eve. That morning, the twins held a snowball fight in the courtyard, which started at nine o’clock and went twelve hard-fought rounds — a pyrrhic siege of snow golems and frozen artilleries that chased wherever you ran — until noon, when most of the girls departed to make preparations.

“What are you going to do?” said Ron, bemused, when Hermione went with them. “And — hey! Who are you going with?”

She threw a laugh over her shoulder and skipped ahead to join Ginny and Katie Bell. Draco landed a *Bombarda* that shattered a ten-foot snowman into a twinkling snowfall.

There was music in Gryffindor Tower that night. In the yellow rooms girls and boys hurried to and fro in whispering flocks like the migration of butterflies, half-dressed and half-drunk on excitement. At five o'clock a tea setting appeared in the common room and the boys came down for meat pies and fruit cakes with cups of hot strong cider, chatting about snowball fights and pretending vainly to have no interest whatsoever in what was going on upstairs. Seamus Finnigan put on an album by Blur, and bouncy guitars zigzagged up and down the staircase with the footsteps and the shrieks.

"They're putting it on," griped Ron, white-knuckled on his armchair. "There's no reason to make this much noise."

There was a crash, followed by giddy screams.

"What are they bloody *doing* up there? Animal sacrifices?"

"If only it were that easy," said Katie. She lounged in an armchair with a snifter of brandy, in a three-piece suit of black satin, looking effortlessly sharp and masculine, and somehow, her tie was still better than Ron's. Merlin wept. "Lavender's eyeshadow alone would take three goats."

"I would contribute at least one to fix Ronald's robes," said Draco, adjusting his cufflink. He wore a wizard's white tie, exactingly traditional, down to a white rosebud boutonniere his grandfather might have plucked for himself: a black tailcoat, a neat silk hourglass of a tie, and a waistcoat that sculpted the arch of his waist like it was painted there, in the same marble white as his hair. In the mirror, the black of his suit flushed like the first bloom of ink on parchment against the pale column of his throat and wrists. He slipped on his signet ring, and wondered whether his father had seen something similar in his mirror, down in a different part of this castle, twenty years ago.

Ron adjusted the spangled epaulets of his dress robes, and sighed gloomily. He did not wear a wizard's white tie, or any sort of white tie at all, but a camel hair suit borrowed from the husband of his Great

Aunt Muriel, and it looked like just the sort of thing someone married to a Muriel would wear. Bill had kindly mailed Harry his old set of white tie, in the interest of “not embarrassing himself” during the Opening Dance, but since Ron had no school to represent, he was allowed to embarrass himself in solitude.

“Me, too, mate,” he said glumly.

A knock came at the common room door. Harry went to get it.

“Er. Draco? Your date’s here.”

“We’re not to leave for an hour.”

Harry shrugged and held the door. Daphne wandered in, her eyes sweeping wondrously over the common room.

“So *this* is where you all throw parties,” she said. “I’d always wondered. Those stairs! Gryffindor calves must be fearsome.”

She was wearing a green dressing-gown. She carried several carpetbags that could have comfortably packed a small household.

“Draco, you look wonderful. Don’t think I’m going in this, of course; I’ve brought three dresses, I want your opinion — I didn’t know if there was a corsage that I ought to match—”

“Don’t push it.”

“Then don’t make it so fun to try! Would the girls mind, do you think, if I went up and — oh, I don’t know, found a corner, or something? I swear I won’t peek. I’m very good at not peeking. And I’ve brought goodies, if they want to share—”

“Slytherin’s still being twats, are they?” said Ron. Daphne faltered.

She rallied bravely. “Why, Ronald! Your suit is so individual. I love it.” She gave him a smile on full wattage. “No one will mistake you for anyone else. A bold statement. Well-made.”

“It’s pish.”

“Oh, thank God. Yes, it’s very bad, and I’m sorry, but I don’t have a moment to help you fix it. Do you think the girls will mind, if I go up, by the way? I wouldn’t ask, really — but I need a third hand to do my hair, and it’s just — the girls’ bathroom in Slytherin, they won’t — I couldn’t—”

Katie stood up. “Sure, I’ll take you,” she said. “It’s jam-packed up there, nobody’ll mind one more.”

Daphne looked her up and down. “Oh! You’re a girl!”

“Most days,” she said, grinning, and offered Daphne her arm.

Daphne looked at Draco, who shrugged. With uncharacteristic timidness, she took Katie’s arm and was led up the staircase. As she went, he heard her murmur: “Now, are you one of those girls who…?” followed by a burst of Katie’s laughter.

The lights grew brighter as the last vestiges of sunset dimmed from the windows, and the music grew louder, rowdier, dripping with the confidence that young partygoers were trying to leech like honey from the air. One of the seventh years sent a flask of firewhiskey rotating around the common room and it loosened the air with laughter, which now flowed eagerly from even the dullest remarks. Already there were vanguards, couples polished and primped ahead of schedule, such as Fred and Angelina, who was sleek and stylish in a sleeveless shift of pink silk, which matched both Fred’s tie and George’s. They formed a constellation with Katie and Lee Jordan, twinning in suits, around whom the younger students coalesced, faces bright with naked yearning. Ginny and Neville hurried down at ten to eight, she in a fluffy blue number with cap sleeves, he in a slightly sloppier vision of Draco’s tails. Cho appeared in a champagne-colored robe with red blossoms embroidered up the skirt, and her hair freed, for once, from its trademark ponytail. She chatted with George and Parvati while they waited for Harry to haul his brain back online.

Suddenly the clock tolled eight, and the will of the crowd asserted itself with a firm gesture toward the exit. Draco, caught up in the current of the colorful flock, checked the sea of heads for a familiar nest, but didn't find it.

"Hang on, we're missing someone," called Ron.

"They're fine! Go on! Hermione had some trouble," gasped the arriving Lavender, and when both Draco and Ron stared at her, she snorted and flapped her hand. "Oh, she's alright. Silly thing thought she could pick up makeup in an afternoon, because of *course* she did, and then we had to scrub it all off — anyway, Daphne said they'll catch up."

"She's alright, though?" said Ron, in a tone Draco vaguely resented, though he had no good reason to. He decided to blame it on Ron's jacket.

"She *will* be, once Daphne figures out how to get mascara on her without getting jinxed. As for me, you couldn't pay me enough — HELL-O, Finnigan, are you going to carry my heels? Because otherwise someone better bloody levitate me, I am not walking those stairs."

The entrance hall mulled with people he didn't recognize. In their finery, it was hard to tell these apart from the true foreigners, who swirled and eddied among the Brits with only a sneeze of French or Bulgarian to differentiate them. Not here, the dominion of House, for a glimmer of green could as well be a Hufflepuff's ballgown as a Slytherin's, and there were at least as many Durmstrang students in red fur dress uniforms as there were Gryffindors sporting the color.

A group of Slytherins emerged from the dungeons in dark finery. Theo led the group, his hair slicked in the knife-edge part of an old muggle movie star, dressed to the nines, and perhaps the tens and elevens, in tails, a cane, and a silk scarf. Pansy wore a sleeveless sheath of shimmering jet that made her body into a thin black knife, the same lightless color as her hair. Her mouth puckered in stylish

boredom, but it curved up slightly when someone called out a compliment on her haircut.

“Is that Fleur?” whispered Cho, going up on tiptoe. A group of blondes from Beauxbatons had come in, sparkling in white dresses. “With Roger? Roger Davies?” An anonymous whisper assured her that it was. “But he’s a skirt-chaser!”

“Is he really?” said Parvati, with interest.

Professor McGonagall’s augmented voice cut through the chatter. “Champions over here! Over here, please!”

“That’s us,” said Harry nervously, and offered Cho his arm. She beamed and fluttered her hand at the other girls, as if to say: *Can you believe it?* and they went off to stand with Fleur and Roger. Krum and Cassius had yet to make an appearance.

He turned around again to look for Hermione, and it felt a sting of irritation when she wasn’t there. It was one thing to be late. It was another to lag so far behind that you missed the opening.

“Can you see Granger?” he asked Ron. Did she intend not to show at all? It wasn’t like her. Pride alone wouldn’t keep her upstairs; if it were a matter of courage, she’d be charging down any minute at a dead sprint in pajamas.

“No. Say, there’s Daphne, though,” said Ron suddenly, and pointed.

Daphne rounded the curve of the grand stairwell and stepped into the light. Her hair fit in scalloped golden shells on the side of her head, a pale rose mounted atop the marble shelf of her naked shoulders. Two glittering straps rose from the bodice of her pale blue gown and twined around her neck, dangling a diamond pendant at the center of her naked back.

The amount of bare skin revealed the path of her scars from one ear all the way down into the neckline of her dress, a long canyon of

undisguised wounds, and there was whispering all across the hall.

On a guess, he glanced at Theo. The result was gratifying and amusing in the extreme: he was staring at her as if he had never seen a girl, or indeed another human being before.

Then Daphne winked at Draco, and then turned and said something to someone out of sight on the stairs. She held out her hand and beckoned.

A girl stepped timidly into the light. It caught and scintillated on the petals of her skirts, which bloomed in a wide gold bell from the stem of her waist. Gold sleeves like translucent leaves of champagne flowered from her shoulders, like the corselet of gold boning that encircled her waist, and it matched the sparkling tail of the gold wreath that wove in and out of her hair, like a naiad's crown. Her hair was dark and shimmery and soft as billows of melted chocolate being poured, some braided, and some left to curtain her heart-shaped face, which was bright and smiling and lovely.

It was Hermione.

At that moment it didn't occur to him that he was staring. It didn't occur to him that he was doing much of anything at all. Warmth invaded his stomach and trailed its tongue up the inside of his ribs. Everything was moving very slowly, except, of course, for Hermione, who was timidly creeping down the stairs under the hazardous rim of her skirts.

He crossed the room.

He felt himself move before he thought about it. There was static in the parts of his brain that were usually sharp. He really did think he'd been Confounded, but the trouble with it was that he was so distracted he couldn't concentrate on that, either.

She reached the last steps, which were bigger than the others, and a longer jump in heels, and in her hesitation a hand pressed out of the

crowd. She peered at it, and then broke into a smile and accepted it.

It didn't belong to Draco. It belonged to Viktor Krum.

The champion wore a blood-red cloak and a uniform with polished black boots. The difference in size between them was never more obvious. He was taller than Draco, taller than most of the professors, too, and her hand vanished in the glove of his own.

He leaned in to say something, a distance of approximately several miles, and spoke so close to her ear one would think she was deaf. She giggled back at him. It was all wrong on her. Hermione did not giggle, or wink, or anything that could be described by a theoretically short-lived poet as flirtatious. She was intense and serious and peppery and sly, and dryly funny, but she did not *giggle,* and if she did, she did not do so *girlishly.*

Or maybe she'd found a reason to.

It was a normal thing to do. Giggling. She could do it if she wanted.

She could flirt with Viktor Krum, if she wanted. Couldn't stop her.

But — *but* — it was perverse for Krum to encourage it. He was seventeen. There was a full two year difference, for God's sake, it was absurd. One could only infer that Durmstrang had so few girls he had to resort to cradle-robbing at Hogwarts.

Hermione was wearing makeup. There was gold on her lids, a sheen of pearl pink on her lips, and her eyelashes were unusually long and fluttery, all the better for batting at Bulgarian delinquents.

"Do try and give us a smile, darling," said Daphne. She was at his elbow, somehow; presumably she'd teleported. "I didn't spend two hours on that for you to scowl like she gave you the croup."

"Did you know her date was Krum?"

“If I did, I still wouldn’t answer questions put to me in that tone. And yes, she told me. You can thank me for that dress, also, it’s mine, but I’m simply a goddess with a needle and stitching; I dropped the bust two sizes and took in the waist four inches in the span of half an hour. I should be carried cheering through the streets of Rome. Frankly, for the hair alone I think I deserve awards.”

“You deserve something,” he said thinly. Krum had taken Hermione’s arm and was introducing her to Karkaroff and Maxime, who stood in a group with Fleur and Roger. Roger kept glancing at her waist. If he did it again he would get knocked off his broomstick the next time he played Gryffindor, and Draco would not be dispatching any Weasleys to catch him.

“Ah,” said Daphne wisely. She took his arm. He gave it to her, distractedly, in the same way he probably would have handed over his wallet and wand, if she’d tried to take them. “Well, don’t worry. She’s not in love with him, I don’t think. I gave her a thorough interrogation.”

“What?”

He hadn’t even considered the possibility. The shriveled little chamber of her heart reserved for things like romance and kissing was filled with petitions and Arithmancy textbooks and the smell of fresh ink. He knew, because — because he knew these things. And Viktor Krum didn’t. So she *wasn’t.*

“I said, she’s not in love with him,” said Daphne patiently, steering him along, though where he didn’t know. He was twisting his neck to keep an eye on Krum’s hand, which was drifting dangerously low on her back, and if it took further liberties it would receive a curse currently being deliberated on. Perhaps something to do with fingernails. “I don’t know about him, though. I don’t think she knows. For his part, he seems to be a gentleman.”

“He *seems* to be nine-tenths giant and one-tenth bear. If he’s a gentleman, you’d need a telescope to find out.”

“Mm. They do make a handsome couple, don’t they,” sighed Daphne, who was now being mean on purpose, he thought. “The gold and the red? Gryffindor colors? And it’s such a lovely story, all the newspapers will swoon for her. *La belle et la bete.* The little swot and the international celebrity.”

“What are you, their publicist? Shut your mouth before you drip ignorance on the flagstones.”

“And you shut yours before you drool jealousy on my dress. I didn’t agree to come tonight with a sourpuss. Pick that jaw up and smile at someone before I hex one onto your face.”

He twisted his cheeks into a stiff smile and aimed it at a random Slytherin second year, who quaked and turned around. “Don’t make me laugh, ‘jealousy.’ I’m concerned for her. If it’s jealousy not to want a seventeen year old putting his paws all over your friend, then I suppose I’m guilty.”

Krum’s hand was toying with one of the lace petals on her skirt. Fingernails *and* toenails, he decided. And possibly a blood curse, as a reminder. Or he could hex the hand off altogether. He had no right to do that. He didn’t care.

What was *wrong* with him?

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know,” she said faintly. “But do me a favor? If you see Theo, tell me, and whatever I do, don’t comment on it, please. I’m going to say hello to Pansy.”

“What?”

But she had slipped off his arm and into the crowd. This left him standing alone, and he didn’t know whether to be glad or dismayed, for Hermione turned and saw him, and her glow redoubled. She slipped away from Krum and Karkaroff and bobbed through the crowd, wading like a lantern cut loose on the tide, until she crested again beside him, and he was standing there, and she was in front of

him, and for the love of anything he had ever known he could not figure out what to say.

“Hi,” she said.

Something happened in his ribs.

She drew her eyes down his suit, approvingly. “You look very nice.”

“Yes.” As if that was any sort of answer whatsoever.

Her mouth curved. “Of course,” she said. “As I learned from Daphne earlier this evening, ‘humility is *so* middle-class.’”

“What?”

“Never mind. Are you alright?” She turned over her shoulder. “Is someone there? Oh, did you want to talk to Vikt—”

“No. I don’t want to meet ‘Viktor.’”

“Really? I think you’d have plenty to talk about. He was very interested when I said you played quidditch. And I’m sorry, but if I hear one more person say the words ‘Scottish Pincer,’ I’m going to tear my hair out.” She fidgeted with her fingers. It was so familiar that it rooted him gratefully to earth. It was Hermione. Hermione *Granger.* Nervous and fretful and tightly-wound, with more fidgets than a Pekingese. The girl on the train.

“Well?” She twisted her hips in a way that made her skirts swirl. It was a very small and girlish gesture that didn’t seem like her at all. “What, nothing? I thought at least you’d say something about the hair. ‘Well done, Granger, but where’d you hide the rest of it?’, that sort of thing.”

Her imitation of him was highly nasal and unsporting; also, very funny.

And now she was looking at him. Merlin.

“You look — you look like—”

“It’s a bit much,” she said quickly. “I didn’t realize. I had to borrow it from Daphne. She said it would be perfect, I didn’t know any better.”

“Of course she did.”

“Oh, dear. What’s wrong? I look silly, don’t I?”

“It’s perfectly appropriate.”

“Ah,” she said, confused. “Alright. So—”

“You look like you’re getting married.”

His mouth was dry. He wet it. Hermione was staring at him with all-consuming attention, which was good, and horror, which wasn’t, and the slack line of her mouth spelled a dismay so profound it erased all traces of levity and sparkle from her face. He kept looking at it.

“What?”

“In the wizarding world,” he said thickly, “gold is — it’s got a particular cultural — that is, as a color, it’s rather significant.”

And if she were getting married, her husband wouldn’t be wearing red. Her husband would be in traditional dress robes, probably with gold accents instead of white, but that wasn’t important; he would be waiting for her at the end of the stairs, and he’d take her arm and — and she’d smile, with her wide shining eyes, when he put a cloak over her shoulders — and the sunlight would be catching the gold in her skirt, because wizarding weddings took place at dawn, the kind of rosy light that always loved her, like fireplaces and lanterns and the candles that guttered on library tables at night.

And she would — theoretically — kiss him. The person she was marrying. There would be that, and he was thinking about it, unwillingly, and unhappily, but there it was. Because he was distracted. Because he wasn’t well.

“You’re lying,” she said, and he tried to remember what they’d been talking about.

“Cheers, you look well,” Ron said gruffly, appearing with a sour-faced Padma on his arm. One sympathized. He didn’t comment on Krum, though Draco didn’t know how he could have missed it. “Nice dress, too. Worried there was a funeral happening, though.”

“She put me in a funeral gown?” said Hermione faintly.

Draco narrowed his eyes. Ron backpedaled like he was going for a medal. “No! It’s not just for funerals! It’s like, for special occasions. A proper show-offy dress.”

“So I *am* overdressed!”

“Not really,” said Padma. “Cho’s in gold and red, and nobody thinks she’s out of place. Besides, you’re coming with a Champion. S’pose you’d want to look fancy.” It was more than a little jealous.

“I didn’t want to stand out! I asked her to give me a suitable, normal wizarding dress! Oh, I’m going to kill her. I’m sure she thinks this is hilarious.”

“Nah, I don’t reckon she does,” said Ron. “She brought that dress for herself, remember? You ought to trust her a little. She’s a real sport, Daphne, if you give her a chance.”

Hermione still seemed skeptical. Draco was about to lie and say it didn’t make a difference anyway, but Viktor Krum chose that moment to lumber over and loom behind her like a bodyguard.

Draco found it necessary to count back from ten.

“Hermynee,” said Krum, and Padma gave a high, freewheeling giggle that appeared to flow involuntarily from her throat. Draco and Ron cut her twin stares of disgust. “The headmaster calls us to dance.”

“Oh, God. Alright. I thought I’d have more time.” Hermione touched her hair, her sleeves, her waist, a flutter of shivery hands. “I warned you, I’m no good at dancing, so I’m probably going to embarrass you and say ‘I told you so’ afterward.”

“She really will,” said Ron, who was uncharacteristically sullen in the presence of his quidditch idol.

“Is good. I am not good also. Ve vill be not good together,” said Krum, smiling at her a little, and Draco was struck by a searing fork of feeling.

It was like dropping into a dive on the broomstick, the dizzying rush of fear and danger with none of the thrill. Like gravity, he was helpless to it, and like all helplessness, it irritated him. Draco couldn’t stand irrational people. It was a humiliation to be made one of them against his will, and he blamed her.

“If he drops you, I’m going to laugh,” he said coolly to Hermione, and then stepped away. Stares followed him. He didn’t care. If he stood next to her and Viktor Krum for a moment longer he would have said something he regretted even more, or possibly said nothing, and done something worse.

She was his friend. It was natural to want to protect one’s friends. Especially from overdeveloped Bulgarians with a taste for younger women.

He couldn’t find Daphne, but was hailed by Pansy and Theo near the entrance, standing in a circle with Goyle, Crabbe, and Marcus Flint. Crabbe had brought Millie, and Marcus was with a girl whose name might have been Gemma, from one of the up-and-coming pureblood families in Surrey.

“Good show, my boy,” said Theo grandly. They shook hands. “Trotting out the old reliable, I see.”

“Apparently more modern than I realized. Did you come straight from the coronation, or have you scheduled a revel of aged dandies for the afterparty?”

“I’m not sure what Dumbledore’s evening plans entail, but I quite intend to stay out of them. This is my father’s scarf, and it’s young ruffians like yourself who are letting the side down. Granger’s a revelation, by the way, not bad at all.”

“Go to hell.”

“That was genuine,” said Theo mildly. “Merlin. Can’t hardly say anything around here. She looks nice. Everyone’s saying so.”

Terrible news for his headache. He considered going back to bed.

“What do you mean, everyone? Are you taking a poll?”

“Everyone means two people,” said Pansy, rolling her eyes. “And he was one of them. If you ask me it’s a bit gaudy—”

“Hark at her, ‘a bit gaudy,’ she wanted to come as a nun—”

“—but better overdressed than under, and *far* better than the things I’ve seen on some of these muggle-borns. Thompson looks like she forgot to put a skirt on before leaving, Bell’s bloody crossdressing—”

Pansy had a remarkable knack for finding a sore nerve and whaling on it. He didn’t understand why it was so difficult for her to keep her mouth shut, at least when they were in public, about muggle-borns. It wasn’t as though she could really believe much of it. She’d gone to the same school as him and Hermione.

“Bell’s not a muggle-born. And she wore it correctly, so what do you care?”

“Because it’s not *done,”* said Pansy plaintively. “You think I wouldn’t like to wear pants to one of these things? I’d shoot someone to get

this stupid skirt off, but you can't flaunt the rules. It's rude to the people who do follow them."

"Be nice," said Theo, flicking her ear. "If you wanted to borrow my trousers, you should've just said."

"Sod off."

"Have you seen Daphne?" said Draco, deciding it was time for a change of subject.

Theo closed his mouth and turned his head away. Pansy also turned her head. The group found a panoply of fascinating objects on the floor. It was testimony to the deep space carved by her absence that it was marked in silence by a group ill-disposed to be silent on any subject, at any time, ever.

"So you have, then," he said, thinking of her carrying her own carpetbags up all fourteen flights of stairs, and feeling particularly ungenerous.

"I'm glad you took her," said Theo quietly. "I was worried she wouldn't come."

"Don't thank me as if it's some favor, you embarrassment. Why didn't *you* take her, that's my question, she'd obviously rather go with you —"

Pansy cringed. Theo gave a short unhumorous bark of a laugh. "Would she?" he said. "If she did, she might have said yes when I asked her, old chap."

"...She rejected you?"

"Mmhm. I believe she'd rather strip naked and ride in with Hagrid. Paraphrasing."

"You're being mean," muttered Pansy.

“Ring the presses. Local man expresses his personality, more at eleven.”

Draco marked the time and location on his watch when he admitted it: he officially understood nothing about the social dynamics of Slytherin House.

A kettledrum boomed, and a harmony of horns shrieked out over the babble of the chamber. From atop the stairwell, Dumbledore spread his arms and spoke in a voice that resounded against the walls:

“Dear friends! Peers! Special persons! Welcome to the Yule Ball! For our opening number, we will have a waltz from the four champions, who I am assured have prepared assiduously to demonstrate for you.” There were titters. Draco caught Harry’s eye, and found with satisfaction that he was already shining with sweat.

“The waltz is known," he concluded slyly, “by its dear composer, a wizard not of magic, but of skill; and a personal favorite of mine, whom you may blame for the choice, if you disdain it: Jonathan Strauss’s ‘The Blue Danube.’”

“A muggle composer?” whispered Pansy. Applause blanketed her next remark, and the doors swung open.

Someone had struck down the Great Hall, and raised in its place an enchanted garden. White trees sleeved in frost and fairy lights and diamond chains drew back their frost-feathered skirts around a wide dance floor. Their arms tangled overhead and formed a silver lattice, like a bridal veil, through which a river of blue and purple stars strained down from the bespelled ceiling. A menagerie of animals wrought in ice and furred in snow migrated, shining clear birds and foxes with coal for noses, deer with long intricate horns sculpted to glittering tips, and dormice with cups of holly for ears. On buffet tables, anchored between levitating trays of hors-d’oeuvre, baked hams glowed like small fat suns among a planetarium of roasted pig, scalloped potatoes, purple gelatins, tall whipped snow drifts of trifle, and circus salads brimming with Christmastime colors. A champagne

fountain nine tiers tall poured in the shadow of a chocolate fountain four tiers higher than that, so tall that most of the guests could not crest it on tiptoe.

The champions were dancing now in small circles of varying grace. Fleur and Roger swept fashionably through a rotary waltz, while Harry and Cho executed a mechanical box step. Next came Cassius, looking tastelessly handsome in a classic tailcoat, holding the arm of a sandy-haired girl in a green pinafore, her thin, fox-like features trained into an expression of intensely concentrated gloat.

“Hm,” said Theo. “Well, it’s not a *bad* match.”

“Not a good one, either,” said Pansy.

“Think he was nervous about losing the spotlight?”

“Or he wanted to keep his options open. At least this way, there’s no rumors of engagement.”

“Not sure this *does* help the rumors, Pans. Why would he take her if he’s not shagging her?”

“Oh, he wouldn’t, but that doesn’t matter. The gesture proves he’s not obligated, and the rumor makes her seem desirable. Good business.”

“Perhaps,” suggested Theo, “they’ve fallen madly in love.”

She barked a laugh and clipped his arm with her elbow, and he shouldered her back, tussling like a pair of colts.

“Pardon the fool,” said Draco tautly, “but whom are we mocking?”

“Oh. Right. Pans, d’you want to help the neophyte?”

“That’s Flora Carrow,” said Pansy, indicating the blonde with one indolent pinky finger. “If I’m not wrong, that is, I can’t barely tell the twins apart.”

“Mm. Do you think Cassius can?”

“Shut up.” She was smirking. “Pig. Anyway, Draco, they’re not suitable, which is why we’re speculating.”

Draco lifted an eyebrow. “Carrow is on the Sacred Twenty-Eight,” he pointed out. “‘Warrington’ isn’t.”

“Well spotted, but the twins don’t stand to inherit,” said Theo. “Only daughters of a thirdborn son, and the Carrow estate’s entailed, so the heirs couldn’t help even if they wanted to. Plus, their mother’s a loon—”

“Manners, Teddy, quite literally *everyone* is here.”

“What? She is. Elea Carrow was born a Lovegood, and they’re quacks each to each. How else can you explain marrying a thirdborn with an entail?”

“Somehow, I don’t suspect the Warringtons are cash poor,” said Draco dryly, after a moment. “And if they were, I don’t suppose they’d send their seventeen-year-old heir out with a shopping list and a dance card. But perhaps I’m old-fashioned.”

Pansy rolled her eyes. “Lord help us,” she said, “sometimes I forget you’re rich.”

“We’re all rich, Parkinson.”

“Yes, but some of us have estates that will expire *before* the heat death of the universe. *We* have reputations to uphold.” She nodded at the waltzing couple. “But I still wouldn’t marry a Lovegood for all the gold in Gringotts.”

“She seems perfectly lucid to me.”

“Neurosis can skip a generation,” she said. “With my mother, I’m not taking chances.”

After a few turns, the conductor turned, and beckoned other couples onto the floor. Dumbledore came first, escorting Minerva McGonagall in the most unsensual waltz of all time, and then came Cedric Diggory, with — Draco blinked — a mousy-haired *boy.*

“Who’s *that?”* hissed Pansy.

“I’ll be damned. That’s Neil Macdonald.”

“Who?”

“Hufflepuff seventh year. I wouldn’t have… well, I will be damned,” said Theo thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t have thought he’d try it on.”

Under the omnipresent grin, Cedric looked faintly nervous. Neil didn’t, however. He held Cedric’s arm like it was a shillelagh and smiled, serenely, like he was more than willing to use it. They settled into a form-perfect rotary position, Cedric leading, and slid gracefully into their waltz.

The sweep of whispers that followed them almost overshadowed Hermione’s second waltz with Viktor Krum. Hermione’s face was drawn with mixed excitement and dread, and she proceeded to give a presentable, if inelegant, demonstration of a waltz. It turned out that she was the stronger dancer of the pair, for Krum, never much one for land-based activities, was only charitably ‘dancing’ at all.

Draco watched. He couldn’t help it. There was nowhere else to bloody look.

She wasn’t unhappy, he thought, which was a minor miracle, considering the crimes she was abetting to the art form of dance. In fact she was very nearly happy itself, if anxious, which of course she was; she hated being stared at. He knew that. Krum didn’t, naturally.

After the first movement of the song, other couples joined them, and they disappeared among the colorful skirts.

He ought to find Daphne. He made excuses to Theo and Pansy, and pushed through the hex of swirling couples to a table where she sat chatting with Ron and Padma. Also with them were Percy Weasley and Mad-Eye Moody, who was stiff and imposing in a starched auror uniform.

“Did you see Hermione?” whispered Ron, leaning across the table. Padma sent a disgruntled look at him, which he ignored. “With *Viktor Krum?”*

“Oh, is that what his name is? I thought she’d transfigured a brick wall.”

“What’s she on about?” he hissed. “He’s from Durmstrang! He’s the enemy! She could be giving away our secrets!”

“What secrets? That we haven’t solved the egg yet? That Potter is, in fact, as lamentably ill-prepared as one could possibly suspect?”

“Among other things! And even if she’s not, she might have gone with someone from Hogwarts, instead of fraternizing with the enemy.”

“I simply must disagree. Young Miss Granger has come precisely in the spirit of the event,” sniffed Percy. “The tournament is an opportunity for international cooperation—”

“Ronald,” said Daphne, quite abruptly, “what do *you* think of Hermione’s dress?”

Draco sent her a dark look. Ron stuttered out, “I didn’t — but that doesn’t — it’s not bad, I guess,” and Daphne puckered her lips as if she were trying to work a length of pipe out of her mouth.

She turned to Draco at once. “Dance with me?”

Glad to get away from the table, he agreed. When they were whirling a clockwise rotary around the outer circle of dancers, she sighed and

sagged into the hand on her waist. She was, as he recalled, an able dancer, and they moved in swift eddies around the ring that would have dizzied someone else, like Hermione. She did not lean on his arm as if she required it, or indeed, as if she would move any differently had he disappeared altogether; she was the sort of follower whose great talent was in letting the lead imagine he was making any of the decisions at all.

Hermione had never once let anyone imagine they were making a decision for her, in her life, and had been distraught at the idea that she might have to even pretend. She led from the following position, for Merlin's sake. She'd kept bracing her weight on his shoulder, as if unconsciously, to drive him back where she wanted him. And she probably could have managed it, if she'd had ten more minutes and a partner less stubborn. His lip quirked.

"Draco, does Ron fancy anyone?"

"Merlin's flea-ridden beard. No, and vital fractions of my will to live are predicated on my never finding out, so step carefully."

"He's never said anything about fancying that lovely Lavender, or Parvati? Or Romilda? She's growing up quite pretty."

The gut revolted. He really should have taken an antacid before he came down.

"I don't know what you imagine we talk about, when you're not in the room, but the dubious allure of Romilda Vane is so far down the list as to have not been touched in three years of middling-to-acceptable conversation. And if you lived with Lavender Brown, you would understand from whence comes the strength to resist her charms."

"So your theory," she said skeptically, "is that a fourteen-year-old boy, living in immediate proximity to dozens of girls his own age, has never had a crush?"

“No. I don’t think about it one way or another, and I resent the attempt to break my streak. Why the hell are you interested in Ronald, anyway? I thought you were obsessed with Theodore.”

“Lower your voice! Merlin! Are you talking to someone in the Astronomy Tower? No! I thought not! Good! Shut up! Thank you!”

“Calm down. He hasn’t got bat-ears.”

“You’d be surprised! And I’m not ‘obsessed’ with him. I don’t even like him. I do think he’s fit, but so would anyone.”

“I’d mourn your taste, but considering fate has cruelly pitched Cho Chang into the throes of passion for Potter, it seems you’ve caught what little luck you can.”

She clucked her tongue. “Oh, but Harry’s fit, too. Don’t make that face. He’s not my type, but you’d be barking not to see it. That bit with the dragonfight was terribly daring.”

“I am asserting my inviolate right *not* to hear you lust after my idiot friend.”

“You can’t be jealous of everyone,” she said mildly, rounding off a promenade. “I’ll agree not to remark on your thing about Hermione —”

“I thought we’d ascertained the Astronomy Tower has no part in this conversation.” He spun her. “And I don’t have a thing about Granger. It’s Krum I don’t like.”

She huffed. “You and Theo are sopophorous beans in a pod, you know that. If I locked you both in a room with Anti-Irony Charms, I think you’d both leap out the window before you said a word to each other.”

“You made that up.”

“Anti-Irony Charms? Why, have I frightened you?”

“I’ll trip you.”

“Do it, I’ll scream.”

The waltz ended with a round of clapping, and the orchestra struck out a hearty mazurka. Dinner had begun, and enchanted automatons dressed as nutcrackers danced plates to each table. The champions ate at a table with the headmasters, Fleur’s long golden arms striking the air in emphasis, Hermione’s head bent intently towards Krum — and at their table, Ron, George, and Angelina were having an argument about the Weird Sisters, while Padma sulked and eventually drifted off with a boy from Beauxbatons. The dinner was sumptuous and accompanied by small fizzing cocktails that foamed different colors each time someone sipped, and afterwards a host of ice ballerinas in white tutus carried trays of spiced Turkish coffee and brandy with chocolates and cheeses for dessert. The orchestra jazzed it up and the mannered whirls of strictly ballroom ceded to the clumsy undulations of modern dancing, ‘Hungry Like the Hippogriff,’ ‘Compliments on Your Curse,’ interpolated with covers of muggle music.

Three girls came by to ask Draco to dance, which did nothing for Ron’s mood.

“He doesn’t want to dance with you,” he said bluntly to the last one, a short brunette from Hufflepuff, who purpled in mortification and practically Apparated out of sight. Draco didn’t disagree, but kissed his teeth in silent disapproval, to which he snapped: “What? You don’t,” and stole a gulp of one of the twins’ punch, which made him erupt in coughing.

“God,” he gasped. “That’s neat petrol, that is.”

Draco frowned and took it. One whiff had him steering it as far from his nose as possible.

“Spiked.”

“Course it is, it’s the twins. But where the hell do they get the alcohol?”

“Outside the castle, I expect,” he said distractedly, for Hermione had broken out of a knot of dancers and was coming over.

Roses had bloomed in her cheeks, and hair had started its inevitable ascent out of its gelled coiffure, forming a feathery corona around her face, but for all that she merely looked flushed and hearty. It was so rare to see her disarrayed or out of breath that he felt taken aback all over again, which was frankly getting annoying, at this point.

“Hello! It’s hot, isn’t it?” She was fanning herself. “You’d think the ice would do something, wouldn’t you? Viktor’s gone to get some drinks.”

“Viktor,” muttered Ron. “It’s *Viktor,* is it?”

She toppled into Padma’s empty seat. “I think it’s going well,” she said, “as far as I can tell. Harry and Cho wanted to keep going, but I had to beg off. Daphne, these shoes are obscene.”

“Oh, aren’t they just? You should show off your calves more often,” said Daphne serenely, proving that she held nothing but hatred for Draco in her heart.

“I meant obscenely uncomfortable,” Hermione amended, hiking up her skirt to rub at a small red mark on her ankle. “Waltzing’s already a nightmare in flats. Who decided witches ought to do it backward? And in heels?”

“It’s not backward, from the follower’s perspective,” he said, faintly amused.

“It is from mine. All the books teach you the steps from the lead’s position, and then they just say, ‘for the follower, do this, but backward,’ like that’s any help at all. Oh, just do it backward! Wonderful! I’ll be a ballerina by morning. Good Lord.”

“You read books on it?” Daphne sounded utterly charmed.

“Well, I wasn’t going to go in fresh on one lesson. Especially one lesson with *him.”*

His lip was twitching. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That you’re hardly a consummate teacher.”

“Excuse me, I’m a wonderful teacher. Ask Longbottom.”

She laughed. “He says you yelled at him for three years.”

“Correct. And then what happened?”

“Nothing like what will happen if you yell at me, I assure you.”

He *did* smile, then, and was more or less resigned to it. He pointed it at the far wall, for deniability’s sake.

“Did you see Neil, by the way?” she said into his ear. He leaned in to hear her over the music, and accidentally smelled whatever it was Daphne had put in her hair: something starchy and perfumed that overwhelmed the usual smell. He wrinkled his nose. “With Cedric? I got to talk to them a little, at the table. Dumbledore thought it was wonderful. You should’ve seen Fleur’s face, though, I think she a bit fancied him.”

“It’s a bold move, on Diggory’s part. He’s made himself rather vulnerable.”

“You think so? I thought the opposite,” she said reflectively, reaching behind him for a water glass. “I saw it as a great show of strength.”

Another lungful of scent. He turned his head toward her and was nearly elbowed in the face. The makeover had failed to imbue her with any grace, agility, or regard for his personal space, and it was deeply reassuring. No fairy-girl, this; just a bossy swot who didn’t

respect him half as much as she might have, if Merlin had garnished her massive brains with a drop of common sense.

She pressed the glass to her cheek, and condensation melted against her skin. He pivoted to face the dance floor.

By ten o'clock the Yule Ball had committed that triumphant metamorphosis from a dance into a *party.* The Weird Sisters thrashed away on guitars while their singer wailed into the microphone as if she intended to swallow it; the dance floor's subtle ecosystem had sprouted microbiomes, circles of girls with bare legs rolling their hips, shuffling couples penguin-walking in their private corners, wide dance circles where those with talent or courage broke into frenzies of pantomime for the amusement of their cheering friends — in which no one was partaking with more enthusiasm than Fred and George Weasley, who were throwing it back in the center of the dance floor as if they had but one night left to live.

A group of muggle-born seventh years were attempting to teach Dumbledore something called the Macarena, a task he undertook with bewildered delight. Cho had enticed Harry to Charleston, and he was making her laugh by doing it wrongly on purpose. Ginny and Neville were doing something that would have been humiliating if either of them gave the slightest evidence of taking it seriously. Theo, Pansy, and the Slytherins presented a row of uniformly mannered disdain at their own table, although Crabbe's foot was tapping.

Hermione peered around. "Ron, where's Padma?"

"Oh, remembered me, have you?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Nice of you to drop by."

"But — what do you mean?"

“Nothing. Forget it. Ronald’s been into the punch—”

“Excuse me,” said Ron, outraged, but he was interrupted by Harry, who broke out from the crowd and shouted something to Hermione about the song playing — she laughed, and took his hand — and he swapped her for Cho, who fell into her chair with a giggle and shooed them away.

“Did you see what happened with Lavender?” she said hoarsely. “I’ve never seen Seamus so red in my life. Wow! That’s a brave lass.”

“What did she do?” Ron wanted to know, but they were interrupted by a shadow roughly the size of a building.

“Vhere is Hermynee?” said a voice. Krum materialized from the crowd, dual-wielding cocktails.

“Lost her, have you?” said Ron, addressing him somewhere around his boots.

“Yes. If you see her, tell her I haff drinks.”

“Tell her yourself,” said Draco shortly. “She went to the powder room. First left out the door, all the way down the hall.”

Krum dipped his head and departed.

“I didn’t know there was a girls’ room on the first floor,” said Cho thoughtfully.

“There isn’t,” said Ron, sounding conflicted.

Draco shrugged, draped an arm over the back of his chair, and sipped his coffee.

Harry and Hermione were not so much dancing as jumping rhythmically up and down to a muggle song whose contents were mostly incoherent to him, peppered with refrains about starting a fire.

She was laughing. Harry was disheveled. Angelina and Fred were shaking their arms like they were in some sort of religious ecstasy.

“Excuse me. It’s impolite to hoard all the pretty girls at one table.”

Theo appeared from the swirl of dark coats. Daphne set down her goblet and splattered punch over the tablecloth.

“It’s impolite not to dance with your own date,” she said. She sounded indifferent, but her knee was bouncing.

“I quite agree. Tell Pansy,” he said. “But do it after you’ve danced with me. You might as well, since I’ve come all the way over here, and if you reject me now, everyone will see it.”

“You’re despicable.”

“A despicable fellow who gets his way.”

“That’s what makes you despicable.”

Nevertheless, she got up slowly, ignoring Draco's stare of judgment, and followed Theo onto the dance floor. The hand she offered to Theo had a braid of scars. He took it and tucked it into his arm.

“You don’t mind, do you, Draco?” he said off-handedly.

“I don’t,” he said, “but I won’t if she hexes you, either.”

“Good man. Have her back in a nonce. Meantime, why don’t you go rescue some pretty thing for yourself? If fifty galleons can buy anything these days, the music’s about to change.”

On his cue, the song ended, and a sad, sweet little waltz drifted out of the orchestra pit.

“Oh, I hate you,” said Daphne, with thrilling warmth. “This is my favorite, you beastly little man.”

“Is it?” said Theo indifferently. “Good Lord, that’s lucky. I just asked for a waltz.”

He drew her into the dissipating pack of dancers. All across the enchanted glade girls were canting up against their partners and leaning teasingly into their arms, and indeed the very crowd itself, from which some boy almost always appeared to catch them. And Draco was alone at a table with Ron Weasley and Cho Chang, both locked in a zealous symposium on the future of the Chudley Cannons.

He made an apology under his breath and stood up. Neither of them noticed him leave.

Beached aside the whirlpool of waltzing couples, caught in a conversational bubble with Harry and Parvati and Angelina, Hermione still glittered through the crowd like a lighthouse. When she felt the tap on her shoulder, she turned, and he thought it might have flickered with pleasure when she saw him; but since dancing had disheveled her, it was hard to tell under the changing lights, which marbled her face as if under the ocean.

“Dance.”

Her eyebrows pinched together. The music might have drowned him out, or she might not have understood, because she shuffled closer.

“WHAT?”

He rolled his eyes and held out his palm.

Her face cleared. “You want to dance?”

“You should have at least one with a decent partner,” he said. He was only half thinking about what he was saying. The whole affair was a mad impulse gone rogue, and he wondered a little when the other half of his brain would come back to check in on it.

“I’m not good,” she said immediately.

“Believe me, I know.”

“I was bluffing about the books. I read them but they didn’t help. I’m still rather bad.”

“Is that a no, then?”

“No — no,” she blurted. She laced her fingers and fidgeted with them. “I’m only telling you so — you know — you don’t expect me to be good at it.”

“Believe it or not, Granger, you don’t need a license to do this. No one will arrest you for fumbling a box step. Now, give me an actual answer, or I’ll go find McGonagall or something.”

“Is that a promise?”

“Keep standing there if you want to find out. At least a gentlewoman of her stature wouldn’t leave a fellow hanging like this. Speaking of which, if you don’t take my hand right now, I swear to Merlin—”

She huffed, as if she weren’t the one stalling. “Fine, then,” she said, “but only for McGonagall’s sake.”

The cheeky twit. As if she were worried he might get *ideas.*

But she gave him her hand, and her pulse nudged his fingers *hello.*

Fast, it was — from dancing.

Her hand laid across his like a limp gold leaf. He put his hand on her back and discovered, in a small supernova of synaptic activity, that part of her dress was backless. That was fine. It took some steering to put her into place for a rotary. She was no easier to partner with than she’d been in class. The books really hadn’t helped. God bless them for that, because otherwise he would have had nothing to think about except the bloody dress.

The waltz was slow and sweet like thick wine. He saw Hermione in a glittering streak of gold under his periphery, and saw her, too, when he released her for a spin. In the crowded whirl of couples it was impossible to see or focus on anyone else. And when he did let his eyes slide down, her face was pointed firmly at his collarbone, as fierce and independent as it ever was, but struck now and then by furtive glances of bewilderment and happiness, like the expression of a cat enjoying being petted more than it wanted to admit.

“Viktor Krum?” he muttered, for want of anything better to say.

“Oh, don’t you start.”

“I’m not saying anything.”

“You wanted to. He asked me, for your information.”

“So did Neville Longbottom. Of course, *his* performance in the World Cup final was just a hair shy of adequate, so I can see where you’d draw the line—”

“Very tasteful, Draco.”

“I’m dead serious. He didn’t even score once. You can never marry him now.”

“Marry him?”

He liked when her voice hit a pitch that threatened glass. It hurt his ears, but he still liked it. “Oh, heavens, no. He’d never suit. What would the papers say?”

“I expect they’d be too interested in *your* rendezvous with Daphne Greengrass,” she said snidely, and trod on his toes — possibly on purpose, but probably not.

He swore and corrected her footwork with a sharp turn, which she obviously thanked him for not at all.

“You realize, of course, that she only asked me because she didn’t know anyone else who wasn’t in Slytherin.”

“Anyone else ‘suitable,’ that is,” she muttered.

“If you’re sore she didn’t ask you, I’m sure it’s a failure of creativity, not of malice.”

Hermione was trying not to smile. But the smiling distracted her from her feet and she stumbled against him. He caught her against his chest and for a moment had her whole body curled inside his hand and his arm, her head spilling against his shoulder, while she righted herself. She gave an inelegant snort of derision and he could count little beads of sweat on her forehead, count them on her bare golden arms, on her shining chest, on the spirals of free hair swelling at her temples, shining on the valleys of her knuckles and the light brown plains of her hands, all over her, like a caravanserai of fairies come to take him in a bizarre and fearsome thrall.

He had a vague premonition that something stupid was about to happen, and he was going to be at fault. He was as helpless to stop it as she was.

“You should thank her.” His voice, to his own ears, sounded curt.

“Thank *her?* For what?”

“How you look. People have been looking at you all night.”

“Have they?” she said skeptically. “At me? I think they were looking at Viktor. Or Harry.”

“They weren’t,” he said.

“But how—”

“They weren’t.”

She blinked three times in quick succession and gave a bark of surprised, awkward laughter, as if trying to turn what she'd said into a joke. He said nothing more, and the waltz came to an end, which was a mercy. When the waltz changed tempo there was a clearing of a throat, and Krum stepped out of the crowd behind her, like the Masque of the Red Death, stony, drinkless, and unimpressed.

"Why, hello," said Draco pleasantly. "How was the powder room?"

"It vas quite charming," said Krum, equally civil. "I must thank you for showing me more of your castle's great beauty."

"I can give you a heading, if you'd like to see some more."

Krum ignored him. "I haf been looking for you," he said to Hermione. "They vant the champions to take pictures with their partners."

"Oh, God," she said in alarm. "Now? My hair isn't — yes, well. I suppose we'd better go, shouldn't we?"

She turned to Draco, of all things, as if he might have some sort of objection. Silly. Stupid idea. He let go of her and stepped away with his hands behind his back.

"Go on," he said coolly. "I've had my turn."

She rolled her eyes and began to say something, but the revival of the music drowned her out, and with a posture of gentle insistence Krum drew her hand over his arm and led her away.

The high point of the party had crested and smashed the undulating wave of dancers into pools that eddied around tables and in corners, nursing old drinks and laughing too loudly, too often, to suggest anything witty had been said at all. Lavender had welded herself to Seamus and was dancing, not so much 'with' but 'on' him; Ginny had fallen asleep on George's shoulder, and Fred and Angelina had slipped out of the Great Hall without company or goodbyes. Whenever there was a new song the groups dissolved and reformed

as dancers traded places. The main set was over and now all the songs were slow, as if coaxing the night to sleep.

Pansy popped out of one of these dissolving crowds and seized his elbow. “Have you seen Theo?” she demanded. “Or Daphne?”

“And a splendid evening to you, too, Parkinson,” he said. “No, I haven’t. He made off with my date, and I haven’t seen him since.”

“Oh, good, you’re useless,” she snapped. “Where have you been? I leave him alone for five minutes, and he totters off to find her, like a toddler who can’t help it— and why did you let her dance with him?”

“Shouldn’t I have?”

She threw up her hands. “Useless!” she cried. “Use! Less! I should have known. She’s been avoiding him for weeks, and there you go, throwing all that good work away!”

“I ask again — drawing on reserves of patience that are, I warn you, *very* nearly exhausted — *why?* It’s not my fault no one tells me bloody anything.”

“I didn’t think I needed to!” she said shrilly. “Because it’s obvious to anyone with half a brain! A quarter, even! Don’t they let you keep a quarter-brain, up there? For posterity?”

“Did I say ‘very nearly’? I meant entirely.”

“Because she’s supposed to be getting over him!”

The supreme underwhelming-ness of this revelation rendered him rather apathetic to Pansy’s woes.

“So?”

“So? *So,* it doesn’t help her when Teddy — who knows fully well what she’s doing, by the way, and don’t think for a moment he

doesn't — flounces around *serenading* her and *dancing* with her and being nice to her—"

"Yes, God forbid anyone be nice to her."

"If that's your idea of a barb, scrape it up and go flop it at someone else. I can't help what Millicent Bulstrode does, and if I could, I wouldn't have turned my room into a bloody rookery trying," she said, ferociously, all at once. "I've come around to the idea that isolation really is best for her, even if it's hateful, because it means none of the other girls can do anything, which has been *my* personal nightmare. A small price to pay, you'd think, when she knows we still love her, and I'll say it, even if he won't: so *what* if she can't come to our sodding tea parties? I told him, 'Let her vacation with the Gryffindors, it won't kill her.' But no, he's got to be Sir Luckless about it, trying to mate water with oil. If he could pull his head out of his own arse I do think he'd see that and stop bothering her."

She hoisted up her dress strap with the grim determination of one snapping down a helm. "Listen, if you see her, *don't let him talk to her.* Just — jinx her, or snog her, or something. Anything. And if you see him, send him straight to me. I'll set him to rights," she said, with a gentling, softer confidence. "I always can."

"Managing this farce can't possibly fall to me," he said incredulously. But her glare informed him that he was wrong, and she burrowed into the crowd, calling Theo's name.

He looked around, without much enthusiasm, for Daphne. Currents of older students in slackened ties and short dresses made a glittering railroad up to the countless echelons of afterparties. In the Entrance Hall a seventh year boy was talking with desperate speed to a weeping girl on the steps, though the color of the lipstick on his collar didn't match the one on her mouth. A draft of fresh delicious air wafted from the open doors, and he steered toward it at random, trying to escape the stuffy hysterics of the party, and leave behind all the stickiness that came with it.

On the front steps, he passed a huddled Dean Thomas, who had curled his knees under his chin.

“Night, Thomas.”

Thomas scrubbed a hand across his face. “Night, Malfoy,” he said gruffly, and Draco decided to leave him be.

The flowered labyrinth of the rose garden glowed ice-blue. Fairy lights hovered like rivers of stars over each courtyard and kissed each babbling fountain in white. He found a stone bench and a large fountain with an immodest cherub sprawled atop, far enough from the party that the voices had dimmed. No sooner had he bent to sit down than the bushes rustled, and he held up his wand, not from fear, but from wariness of being disturbed.

As a figure emerged from the bushes he put down his wand and suppressed a sigh. It was Daphne, her pale shoulders ice-blue in the fairy light.

When she saw him she took a wet gulp of air and smiled, a little miserable, but mostly relieved. He sympathized. He began to ask her if she’d just spoken to Theo, and if so, what she’d said; but then he considered that he more or less knew the answer to both questions, and decided not to indulge in needless cruelty.

“Oh, good. It’s you.” She swiped a glittering figment from her left eye. “If it was anyone else I would’ve had to drown myself.”

“I’ve had enough theatrics for one night, thank you.”

“Me, too. Care to join me in some meditative compartmentalization? I’m rather good at it, but don’t be intimidated.”

She draped herself across the bench. He joined her.

The water burbled lustily from the cherub’s lions. Midnight announced itself with a sad peal of the hour bell. After twelve tolls

the silence settled in, and the wind skated off the frosted plain of the lawns.

“Do you want to kiss me?” she said abruptly, turning.

He blinked, absolutely thoughtless.

“I beg your pardon.”

“Do you want to kiss me,” she repeated. “Or would you mind, terribly, if I kissed you? Barring objection? I’ve had quite a bad night, and it would all be much more bearable if I could walk away saying I’d at least been kissed.”

He fumbled for an answer.

He didn’t want to, in truth. It wasn’t that he found her unattractive. She was obviously extremely pretty. But it simply wasn’t something he had ever thought about, and it still didn’t exactly excite him, now.

But then again: he was fourteen years old, and he’d never kissed a girl before. It might be an ideal environment to try it out and get it over with.

And it was Daphne, anyhow. She’d know it didn’t mean anything, and she’d have a sense of composure about it.

“Fine,” he said. “But be quick.”

“Just what a girl wants to hear,” she sighed, and scooting across the bench — he stiffened — she pecked him on the lips.

It was a very strange first kiss. He was so stiff that he didn’t feel much happening on his mouth, except a firm and deliberate pressure from her own. He still took a careful catalog of sensations, for thoroughness: the heat from her face, the jitter of anxiety, and the inevitable weirdness of feeling a part of his body that had never made contact with its like before. That made him prickle, but there was nothing more than that, nothing supernatural, or even moving.

He wondered what it was about this that made everyone stupid. The reports of lunacy had been greatly exaggerated.

Her nose bumped his, and he made an irritated sound, and then she drew back, snickering. She dabbed a parting kiss on his cheek. He made another skeptical noise and shifted away.

“Thank you,” she said politely.

“You’re welcome.”

They sat in meditative silence.

She sniffled.

Draco had never cared much for meditative silences. They bored him.

He leaned forward on his knees. “So. What’s the matter with you and Nott?”

“Good Lord. How to start?”

“Briefly,” he suggested, eyeing her.

She giggled.

“Nothing,” she said. “Everything. The same.”

“...A little less briefly.”

“I’m in love. And he isn’t.”

“Oh.”

He turned back to the fountain, wondering if she would be content to leave it there.

“But you want to know why we’re fighting, I take it.”

“Conceivably.”

“Well, I’m furious with him, you see.”

“Sure.”

“Because he proposed.”

He hadn’t known it was possible to choke on air before.

“To *you?”*

“No, Professor Snape. The nuptials are in June. Yes, to me, you numpty.”

“Why?”

She rubbed small neat circles into the inner beads of her eyes. “I haven’t a clue, darling, except that he gets desperate when he can’t solve a problem, and when he’s desperate, he’s stupid. The way he explained it, however—”

“You’re fourteen!”

“Fifteen, actually, but the point is taken. The way he explained it—”

“Haven’t your parents anything to say about this?”

“Oh, they’d be thrilled if anyone would have me,” she said neutrally. “Better still, one of the Twenty-Eight. Best of all, a Twenty-Eight heir. And fifteen isn’t that young. We’d do it like Vince and Millie, have a three-year engagement, marry after graduation. It’s a very good match. And it would get me away from my parents. If we were engaged, he’d have some liberty to move me around. Take me on holidays, chaperoned visits, that sort of thing.”

With a considerable degree of mental effort, he pocketed the hard cringe of wrongness that reared at someone of his cohort contemplating matrimony, and he considered it neutrally.

“If it was such a good match,” he began slowly, “then why not—”

“Take it?”

“...Well.”

“Apart from the fact that he doesn’t love me?” she inquired matter-of-factly, without resentment or sorrow.

“If there are other reasons.”

“Because it doesn’t solve the problem. Even if he *did* love me, he couldn’t make everyone else do it, just by wanting. The way these things work, it wouldn’t... it’s harder to move up than down. We’d end up closer to where I am than where he is, socially. Which is something I know and he doesn’t, because he’s never *been* down before, so I had to be the sensible one.” She sat up straighter. “I don’t know if I can have children, anyway. Medically, I mean. The soul is willing and all, but there are two different blood conditions clobbering each other to death in my circulatory system, which means I’m in incredible pain three weeks of the month and given to smashing furniture in the fourth, and it doesn’t seem like it would leave one’s womb a welcoming environs for wee tots. Not that it would be a deal-breaker, but it does create logistical problems, and his father wouldn’t approve.”

That was its own rancid, molding vessel of worms. “Good Lord. You’re not honestly thinking—”

“Yes, because those are the sorts of things you have to think about, when someone proposes,” she said firmly. “As I have recently discovered. And I decided I wasn’t going to submit us both to all that just because it would make my life easier right now.”

“Is it bad?”

“Oh, who’s to say? Spells and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me. My pants keep going missing in the wash,

but if that's human malice or house-elf incompetence, I never do know how to tell—"

"Your condition, Greengrass."

"It is what it is," she said, with schooled neutrality. "There's pain, of course, but when isn't there? I can move around now, which is the important thing."

"What about full moons."

"I'm human. I told you, I've always been human. The worst I've ever done is throw a tantrum, which is scary, but I'd challenge you to do anything else when your bones start chiseling themselves away."

"So there are changes, then."

"Some," she admitted. "It hurts, mostly. But I don't transform. It's not… enough, for that. The healers said it was something to do with cell counts." She paused. "Some said it was possible it'll get worse."

"But that's not a certainty."

"'Not a certainty.' You sound like Theo, he didn't want to think about it, either. By the way, is it all right if I tell Theo I kissed you? I want to see him do the thing with his eyebrows."

"...Parkinson said you weren't to talk to him."

"Oh, well, if you're going to let *her* boss you around."

"Bite your tongue. Tell him, don't tell him, what do I care? I'm not your keeper."

"Indeed not," she agreed. "On the subject, do you mind if I tell him I let you get a leg over? Just to make him mad. And only if he does something to deserve it."

He closed his eyes, marinating in discomfort.

“You have the impulse control of a ravenous wolverine.”

“Old news. Can I?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be getting over him?”

“Aren’t you supposed to take my side? Besides. I’ll say you were really good.”

“Please don’t.”

“I’ll say you rocked my world.”

“You have taken ‘don’t’ in the wrong direction.”

She laughed. A more tired laugh he had never known from anyone so young.

“Do you want to know the saddest thing?” she said. “Sometimes I think you’re the only real friend I’ve got.”

He snorted, thinking this was an attempt at humor. But she had stopped laughing.

“I thought we held a moratorium on theatrics,” he said.

“No, really. Pinky swear.” She kicked off her heels and lifted her feet onto the bench, perching her chin on her knees. “Theo and Pansy might as well have shared a womb, and no matter how much I love him, even if he ever loves me back, it’ll always be Pansy, Pansy, Pansy — and it’s the same for her. They grew up together, did you know that? Running wild in the forests of Knotscliff, two terrible angry little children. You can’t get in late on love like that. It’s the kind that you only find when you’re young and lonely, when you’ll let someone carve himself into you just so you’ll remember him. Me, I grew up with Tori, and I’d live for her, but she worships me. She can’t be that way with anyone yet, she’s too young, it isn’t fair.

“But everyone else I’ve ever known, I’ve been too late or too little to get in — even you, too, you useless wonderful boy, I like you *so much,* but I already know if I get to liking you any better you’ll break my heart, too, won’t you?”

He had no idea how to respond to that, and chose silence.

“Yes, you will,” she said, eerily serene. “I think you’d try, just to be nice. And we’d both get smashed up, because *nice* just won’t do, for something like what I want. I’ve already taken more than I should; see, I made you come as my date, when I knew full well I shouldn’t have. I knew what I was doing, but I didn’t care. That’s my problem. I’ve never cared for rules, when it came to getting what I wanted.”

“Don’t be daft,” he said curtly. “You didn’t force me to come. I could have said no.”

“Could’ve isn’t would’ve,” she said. “And what did I get from coming? A few hours of make-believe? Not even. Neither of us think you’re here for me, and I knew that from the beginning. I saw her face, you know, when I asked you — I hope I never forget it, maybe I’ll finally learn — but I remember thinking, ‘Daphne Greengrass, you perfect bitch, you would’ve mauled a girl for doing this to you, and you well know it.’ And so I went back and tried to make up for it, but it didn’t work, and I still felt horrid afterwards. Isn’t that awful?” She sounded wondrous. “I came over and stomped on something pretty because I wanted one for me, and then I wasn’t even happy about it.”

A spider of nausea skittered up his stomach. “You’re not… Greengrass, if you’re trying to suggest… to attempt some sort of confession— I’m flattered, but—”

“Confession!” She tipped her head back and spilled laughter into the canopy of false stars. “Confess? No, I’m still very much heartsick for a boy who thinks *marriage* is the answer to a bullying problem, I’m afraid. You’re just an entertaining hypothetical.”

“Thanks,” he said tartly, one part insulted to all other parts profoundly relieved. “Glad to be of service.”

“Oh, you’re grateful, admit it. I’ve saved us both a lot of pain and suffering by not being in love with you, you know. I thought it out beforehand. I was practical! It would be fun, for a while, and I really would give you a good time — but I want someone to live and die for me, you see, and you’re far too busy living for someone else.”

“What?” He jerked his head at her. “Who?”

She smiled. “Drat. I owe Pansy five galleons. Don’t tell her we had this conversation, would you? I’m cash-poor; Daddy’s taking the Bulstrode settlement out of my allowance.”

“I don’t know what you mean, and my hypotheses about it range from indecent to offensive. And I don’t live for anyone, you daft tart,” he said. “I live for the sole purpose of pleasing Draco Lucius Malfoy. I fulfill it, daily, with vigor.”

“Do you really?” Her voice was rich with amused toleration of a lie. “Well, then, I’m very sorry. I was going to congratulate you for finding someone who’s quite obviously living for you, too, it’s a rare coincidence and most of us would kill for it; but if you haven’t, then I stand corrected, and I hope the food is good in Bulgaria.”

She stood up before he could parse this snippet of nonsense. “It’s late,” she said, “and it’s bloody gelid, and I’m wearing a backless dress. We should go in.”

It was the first sensible thing he had heard all night.

But the evening’s last piece of chicanery was still unspooling. At the foot of the grand staircase stood Hermione and Ron, having an exchange that could be easily heard before it was ever seen, from well through the oak doors and outside the building.

“—don’t like it, you know what the solution is, don’t you?”

The heat in her voice could have scorched the skin off someone's face. She was so angry it had closed up her throat, and left her choking, almost weeping from it.

Draco broke into a run, and shoved through the ring of stupid gossips goggling at them. He nearly mowed down Harry, who was struggling to mediate between them.

"—BEFORE someone else does—"

"But that's not the point! That's not the bloody point!"

Draco pulled his wand, which on reflection might have been an escalation, but it wasn't necessary: the fight slammed to a halt when Ron caught sight of him over Hermione's shoulder. His expression crumpled, mixed frustration and relief, and Hermione saw.

She whirled around. Her face was wet. Not just nearly weeping, then.

"Granger," he said, helplessly. He didn't know what to do when she cried. Hermione cried so rarely, and hated it so deeply when she did, that it occupied the same place in his brain as most forms of natural disaster. One simply weathered it, recovered, and moved on.

"There you are," she snapped, and then her eyes slipped briefly over his shoulder — to Daphne, who had come in from the gardens just after him, shivering from the cold air coasting over her shoulders.

"What's going on?" Daphne said warily, when she realized that several people were staring at her.

"Nothing," snarled Ron. "Where've you two been?"

"We were… out in the…" She blinked. "Hermione, are you quite alright?"

"Fine," spat Hermione, and violently scrubbed her hand across her cheek. She turned on her heel and started up the staircase, but

wobbled; Draco caught her elbow, and she tore it free with a vehemence that shocked him. “I’m just fine. It doesn’t matter. Go back to — whatever you were doing — I need to get up these godawful stairs—”

“Darling, your shoes, they won’t — let me help you—”

“That won’t be necessary, thank you!”

“Hermione,” said Ron, with traces of regret, but she cut her hand at him as if to slash his throat.

“Oh, shut up!” she snarled. “Go find Viktor, if you want someone to yell at! I’m sick of it!”

He recoiled.

“Fine! Maybe I will! Maybe I’m sick of it, too!”

“Good! Then go!”

“Great!”

“Fantastic!” She leaned forward to shout at him, wobbled, and Draco caught her again. Her skin was hot from dancing and shouting, and almost all of her hair had sprung back to its usual self.

“Potter,” snapped Draco, and jerked his head at Ron. Harry hurried forward and grasped Ron’s arm, muttering something under his breath while he steered him away; but Ron wrested himself free, and stormed down the hallway, away from the party.

“Ron! Wait!”

Harry gave chase down a random hallway into the dungeons. Once the two were gone, some of the fire went out of Hermione, and she stumbled again on her heels.

“They’ve got to come off,” said Daphne hurriedly, tripping up the stairs. “You’ll hurt your ankles. Here, sit down.”

“I said I was fine.”

“Let her help, Granger.”

Hermione shot him a nasty look, but she sat down hard on the staircase and drew up her skirt to let Daphne wrangle the buckles on her heels. In a moment, her shoes went clattering over Daphne’s shoulder, and she stood barefoot on the marble stairs.

“There you are,” said Daphne hopefully. “Now, we’ll get you up—”

“I don’t need your help,” she snapped, which would have been more convincing had she not listed immediately onto one foot, and hissed, whisking up her ankle. This time, when he caught her elbow, he refused to give it back, and braced her up by force.

“You’re not climbing fourteen flights of stairs like this,” he said flatly, something he took for a statement of fact, but turned out to be unexpectedly provocative.

“If I don’t want to sleep on a bench, I’m going to have to, since unlike any *civilized* muggle building, this monstrosity of a castle doesn’t have a lift.”

“Or we could carry you,” said Daphne, who seemed to think she was being helpful. “Between the two of us. In fact, I’m sure Draco could carry you himself—”

“He will *not,”* she said, with an insulting degree of horror.

“...or he won’t, of course. But there are other ways! If you give me your arm, you can use us like crutches. Trust me,” she added brightly, “it’s easier than it looks.”

Hermione’s expression became cryptically pained. “You don’t have to,” she said, but the amount of weight she was leaning on Draco’s

arm belied it. “You should go back to the party. It’s silly. I’ll be fine.”

“Personally, I can’t think of anything I’d like less than to go back to the party,” he said. “But Greengrass can decide for herself.”

“No,” she agreed. “I’ve had quite enough party for one night.”

Probably unconsciously, Hermione’s hand had wrapped around his wrist. He put his hand over it and used it to pull her up. It was all quite clumsy and ill-coordinated, but at least she wasn’t about to topple over and crack her head open, which she might have done just to spite him, now he thought about it.

At last, when Daphne offered her arm, she took it, and gingerly hopped up one of the stairs. “I don’t know how you manage in heels,” she muttered mutinously. “They’re torture devices.”

“They’re fashionable.”

“They’re ridiculous.”

“They’re sexy.”

“They cause back problems.”

“So do the men who like them,” said Daphne, and Hermione made the same discovery he had earlier, about choking on nothing.

He glared at her. Daphne simpered.

“Be that — as it may,” said Hermione in a strangled voice, and Daphne’s laughter skittered all over the hall.

The orchestra floated away beneath them as they wound up the many staircases to Gryffindor Tower. He held Hermione’s arm and sometimes her waist and bits of gold film from her dress flaked off on his hands, gilding his palms, his fingers. The snippets of shouting and laughter dwindled beneath them like the last swirling dregs from a wine glass, and in the higher atriums of the castle, a sudden

emptiness descended from the long hallways and unoccupied stairs, while the palimpsest of music and chatter lingered in his ears.

The Pink Lady had fallen asleep, and came awake only on a full-throated exhortation of “fairy lights.” Draco jumped up and helped Hermione into the portrait hole, while Daphne lingered in the hallway.

“If you stay there, I’ll show you back to the dungeons. I’m going to help Granger to bed.”

“That won’t be necessary!” came the shrill rejoinder from the portrait-hole. He shrugged at Daphne.

“Go on,” she whispered. “I’ll wait here. Goodnight, Hermione! Sleep well! You looked gorgeous! And ask Lavender to help you with the straps!” She turned to Draco. “She needs help with the straps,” she informed him.

“Alright,” he said, entirely at a loss as to what he was supposed to do with that information, besides smother any thought of straps, Hermione, or the combination thereof.

Offput, he left the giggling miscreant to her own devices outside the portrait-door.

The common room was empty. Word had it the afterparty would occupy the Astronomy Tower until four o’clock, and the hour-bell was striking one. The fire guttered low in the grate, sending red light swimming across the walls.

At the foot of the girls’ stairs, Hermione hesitated when he offered her his arm, and then pushed it away. “You should go help Daphne,” she said firmly. “She ought to get to bed.”

“In a moment.”

“It’s not polite to leave her waiting,” she pressed.

“She’ll live.”

“So will I. You didn’t have to help me in the first place. This is more than enough—”

“Granger, it’s this or *Levicorpus,* and I don’t really need the temptation.”

“But she’s waiting—”

He stepped towards her. She yelped and skittered away.

“Don’t you dare!”

“Very good, then.”

He held out his arm and smirked at her. She sighed.

At the top of the stairs, she was deposited safely within limping distance of the fourth year dorm, and he was two steps back down the staircase before he heard her call his name.

“Draco?”

“Mm?”

He turned. A halo from the lantern atop the stairwell glazed each of her loose curls with white, and made her dress scintillate, the way it did when she came down the grand staircase. He lost his train of thought.

“I said thank you,” she said hesitantly. “I mean — I had a good time. Even though the ending was rushed, a bit, it doesn’t — I, er — I didn’t think it would be fun. But it was.”

“Splendid. I’ll tell the organizers.”

“No, I…” She yawned. “Never mind.”

She put her knuckles to her mouth while she yawned again. He followed the movement with his eyes.

“Happy Christmas, Granger.”

“Happy Christmas, Draco,” she said, and ducked out of sight.

Several seconds passed while he stood on the staircase, feeling cold and strange and scatterbrained. It was late, and he was tired, and he had suffered more ordeals in one night than he thought any human being could be asked to tolerate.

On his way down, for some reason, he thought about the kiss. It was his first kiss. He’d done it, and it was over, and it had been nothing to bother with.

But he thought about Hermione — his heart beat faster at the memory of her face gliding out of a muddied watercolor of other couples, sharp as film — and thought of her in moonlight, on a bench in a courtyard. He wondered if it might have been different, in a different garden, on a different sort of night, if they had by some accident found themselves secluded, when he could have crossed that small distance between their faces and done it differently. The idea throbbed inside him like the beat of a tuning fork on his ribs. The reverberation continued, a jarring, constant thrum of an idea that would not leave his mind’s eye, following him down the stairs — the many, many stairs — that separated him from its completion. Distance failed to ease it; no amount of space seemed to shake it free. It lived in his head, a physical thing, and when he folded himself into bed it continued humming in his chest, a gnawing persistence, like he had invented a new species of hunger. He feared that if he let himself think about it, deliberately, he would never stop: there was something terribly real behind that thought, something more than parties and ballgowns and the make-believe courtships of a school formal. If he set it free, then it would bury him under its monstrous weight — that dark and dense and terribly real hunger.

-[clapping idiotically]: prom chapter. prom chapter. prom chapter

-There's a lot of good-faith criticisms you can make about the books. But. We did eat with the prom chapter. We were FED with the prom chapter. There was no plot reason to do that, but it was put in there for us.

-Further notes on the soundtrack. I believe that Lavender introduced Daphne to Shania Twain while they were getting ready and it rocked her world. how could it not. Imagine you're a pureblood teenage girl, the only music you're used to string quartets and Puccini, and then one day someone throws on "I Feel Like A Woman." Instant radicalization.

-Thank you for the warmest reception, and for endlessly encouraging comments! I wish all of you a very fine, sad, slow waltz with a person of your preference at some point in the near future. Or, alternately, spiced Turkish coffee and brandy with chocolates and cheeses for dessert.

-The next chapter is called "The Golden Trio." In which teenage heartache shall never end, Theodore Nott continues to play hopscotch with the moral event horizon, and Ronald Weasley has a Moment.

The Golden Trio

Chapter 44: The Golden Trio

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

On Christmas Day, while the church bells in Hogsmeade crooned, Gryffindor Tower rose blearily to laze about in its jimjams and trade presents over cups of hot cider. Draco woke sooner than most, since Dobby had Apparated directly on top of his legs. This was no more pleasant than it had been when he was six.

The elf had darned a tea cozy apiece for Draco, Hermione, Harry, and Ron, each printed with different flowers; Draco's were jasmines, while Harry and Ron got a sprig of bright red holly, and Hermione's were patterned with marigolds. Harry mistook it for some sort of hat, and put it on his head, which Dobby took as a compliment of such high esteem that he burst into tears, and was still weeping when he left.

"He takes the holidays seriously," remarked Hermione. Her hair had swelled to its normal bush now the Sleekeazy had washed out, but a few bits of gold still twinkled in it.

Draco passed her a package wrapped in gilded green paper. It contained a full set of Everfull Inkwells — expensive ones, but justified as an investment in the vain hope that she would stop stealing his. Signing the card would have felt like an insult to her intelligence, so he hadn't. "Course he did. Potter wore his gift as clothes," he said. "For a house-elf, you can't get much more serious without proposing."

Ron, who had not spoken to Hermione or Draco since the Yule Ball, silently shuffled over and deposited a pair of packages in both their laps. This being the closest they were likely to get to an entreaty of

reconciliation, Hermione thanked him stiffly, while Draco cleared his throat and muttered something vaguely grateful.

It was a strange, slightly strained Christmas, but at the very least the bad feelings from last night had abated; the atmosphere was not dislike or bad feeling but embarrassment, as though no one had a great deal of pride for how they comported themselves. Even Draco, who thought honestly that he had done nothing wrong, was not spared from the tension, and found himself wishing that Harry and Ron would go celebrate elsewhere. All the same, when they drifted together into a private corner of the common room, chatting in low voices about something that had Harry glancing more than once over his shoulder at Hermione, Draco felt ill at ease, even though his wish had been fulfilled.

Ron's present for him was a sweater from Mrs. Weasley, along with a package of Ton-Tongue Toffees that had obviously been stolen from Fred and George. Draco almost said something to this effect, but Hermione spoke first.

"Er. Ron, what's this?" She was holding a weatherbeaten English-French dictionary, its spine splintered white from wear.

Ron jumped. "Er. Yeah," he said. "Sorry about the wrapping, I know it isn't pretty."

"Oh, I don't care. But… why…?"

"I thought you might like to know what they're saying," he said stiffly, jerking his chin at Draco. Draco glanced up in disgruntlement. "When the purebloods are talking, you know. Or the kids from Beauxbatons. I just remember it annoyed you, and I know it's pretty tough, feeling left out. So."

"That's very thoughtful," she said. "Thank you, Ron."

She hugged it to her chest. Ron grinned at the floor.

“Yeah, well. It’s a rubbish copy, so don't go spilling anything on it, or anything.”

“I would never,” she said seriously, and there were a few beats of happy silence. Harry actually gave a little sigh of contentment. It seemed that everyone was pleased by this exchange except Draco, feeling even more irritated than before — he was the only tosser in the room who actually *spoke* the language, it wasn’t like Ron would know a good French dictionary if it tried to mount him in his sleep — and he waited for Ron to turn away before he leaned against the back of Hermione’s armchair.

“If you wanted to learn French, I could’ve taught you.”

He spoke in a low voice; Ron was busy trading Dungbombs with Harry. She looked up in surprise.

“But now you won’t need to,” she said matter-of-factly. “I’d think you’d be glad to save the time.”

“I’ll be the judge of what I have time for. Anyway, reading a dictionary hardly makes you fluent.”

“It’s still a thoughtful gift,” she said.

“Oh, yes. And wildly generous. I don’t know where I’d even go about finding something from the Stone Age, myself.”

She scowled and shooed him away, calling him a spoilsport; but a few minutes later, she was absorbed in trying out her new inkwells, and the dictionary lay under a pile of books from her parents, apparently forgotten. He decided not to bring it up again.

When the common room was a hurricane of boxes and wrapping-paper, they waded out into the cottony snow, swaddled in new sweaters from Mrs. Weasley. Some students from Beauxbatons were building ice sculptures in the shadow of the Forbidden Forest,

while the Durmstrang ship glittered with tall bonfires, and there was music from aboard the deck.

At two, Fred and George led a party down to go ice skating on the lake, but they were turned away on the shores by a grim Barty Crouch in a fur hat, informing them the lake had been fenced off for construction related to the Second Task. Instead, they hosted a snowball tournament, in which Harry and Angelina led a siege on the Ron and Ginny's snow fortress that left the whole pack of them soaked and red-nosed and cackling when they filed back into the common room, where Hermione and Draco had been spending their afternoon on a delightful excursion through Middle Eastern pictographic scripts.

At the sight of Angelina, however, Hermione broke away from their enrapturing work — Draco hardly noticed, having spent most of the past hour reading about novel uses of the Banishment Charm — and stood up.

"Oh! Angelina! Glad I caught you! Are you interested in joining a club?"

Angelina shrugged, stretching her muscles with a deep knee-bend. "Sure. I reckon. What about?"

"It's called the Society for the Cultivation and Recreation of Underage Muggle-Born Youth," she said in one breath. "It's for muggle-borns and half-breeds and people of otherwise underprivileged circumstances. I'm starting it with Colin and Dennis. I've invited Nigel Wolport and Justin Finch-Fletchley from Hufflepuff, and Dean, too, even though he's technically half-blood, because he was raised as a muggle which is the main thing—"

Angelina straightened. "Not sure that's not such a good idea, Hermione."

Hermione sputtered out. She looked like a bird that had flown into a window, all disarray and pain. "You don't… want to?"

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” she said, “I mean, mudblood and proud, right?”

At the word *mudblood,* Hermione flinched. So did Draco, who looked sharply up from his book. Angelina said it like *beautiful,* with her whole chest.

“But I’m not gonna put my name on a list of ’em, either,” she added.

It took Hermione about two seconds to process this, and then she sat up very straight. “You don’t think someone might...?”

Angelina shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. I tell you what I’m not gonna do, is find out, though.”

“So you’re just going to hide, then?” Hermione’s shoulders had assumed defensive formations around her ears. “You’re going to let people assume, what, because you’re scared of someone—?”

“Oi,” said Angelina sharply. “Cool off. Tell you what, I’m scared of nothing and his cousin, bugger-all nobody, and if anyone in this castle wants to test that theory, my door’s open seven days a week. Doesn’t mean they need me making it easier for them, though. You get me?”

Hermione appeared to be thawing to Angelina’s perspective. She gazed doubtfully at her notebook, fretting at her bottom lip. Quiet stretched over the common room. Ron and Harry fidgeted with their presents. Draco waited, intrigued as to what Hermione would say; he had never heard her lose an argument about muggle-borns before.

It was into this mire of pensive silence that Lavender Brown called out: “I’ll join, Hermione.”

Hermione’s eyebrows prepared to clear the ceiling. Draco had noticed Lavender’s exclusion from the list of muggle-borns, and as Hermione pressed her lips together with faint guilt, he realized that might have been deliberate.

“Like, you are so right, Angelina?” Lavender added, pitching up the end of the sentence like the question it wasn’t, “but I don’t, like, see it that way, personally? It’s like, anybody who really super cares enough to go after all muggle-borns ever is probably, like, smart enough to also figure out who’s a muggle-born? And I’m, like, super open about it, so joining a social club is like, not going to make a difference for me? Personally.” She smiled guilelessly, drumming her periwinkle blue nails against her cheek.

“It’s not a social club, actually,” said Hermione, under a taut skein of politeness. “It’s a dedicated political organization for the advancement of underprivileged groups. And it’s important.”

“Oh, if it’s im- *por* -tant,” said Lavender, rolling her eyes. “Come on. It’s muggle-born club. What are we gonna do, talk about boy bands? I do that already.”

The skein snapped. Hermione’s voice kicked up at least an octave. “Well, it’s been a lot of work, actually! For me! And it’s meant for people interested in solving real problems at this school, because — honestly, Lavender, no offense, but there’s such a thing as priorities.”

Lavender’s smile had the brittle sweetness of toffee. “Wow,” she said. “Cool! Never mind. Have fun running your super-duper serious club with the Dweeby Brothers, I guess. Hard to believe anyone wouldn’t want to be part of *that* group.”

Having delivered this tinkling cudgel to the face, she swiveled back to Parvati and Romilda. Hermione made a sound like a broken steam engine. Draco swore he actually watched the fingers of her wand-hand flex — he tried to decide how he’d feel if she jinxed Lavender, settling on ‘dismayed, but strongly amused’ — but she held back, possibly because half the common room was watching. Instead, she threw herself into a chair and disappeared into the smoky cowls of a Granger Sulk.

“Bungled that one, I think, Hermione,” murmured Angelina.

“What do you care? You’re not joining anyway,” she snapped. She then shot a wary look at Draco, who cleared his throat and feigned a reverie of fascination with his book.

Two weeks and several centuries of cumulative research later, he and Hermione were still left with nothing but two heads full of empty and an egg full of scream. Each morning he methodically downed the mug of lukewarm tea and stacks of brittle sourdough that Hermione ferried up from the kitchens, and scoured compendiums on spell incantations, looking for anything that required the user to scream. He pored over *Moste Potente* and *Defense Against the Dark Arts* textbooks. He even considered writing to his mother. He didn’t think she would know, but any word from her would be more reassuring than the short, terse card she had attached to his present (a pair of fireproof dragonhide gloves, expressly requested) at Christmas. He was beginning to suspect that she was cross with him, but Snape had been impossible to get ahold of, and he was not yet so desperate he was willing to submit a letter to Ministry confiscation via owl post.

Everything was cold and frustrating and strange, right down to the Gryffindor common room. With every passing day, jaws of icicles closed over each windowpane, and anxiety about the Second Task made Harry remote and uncommunicative. Cabin fever worked its claws into his mind. He toyed incessantly with his pocket snitch, and sprang up like a shot every time an owl fluttered at the window. There was no distraction, no game of Exploding Snap or snowball fight or marshmallow-eating contest, too trivial to claim him; Hermione had to haul him down to the common room by his ear to get him to work on the Task at all.

“What the hell am I meant to be doing down there?” he said plaintively, as she fruitlessly tried to teach him the Bubble-Head Charm. His efforts spluttered out with a bubble the size of a fist. “Finding another egg?”

“Unlikely,” drawled Draco, bent over a spreadsheet of translations from Banshee. He had not known before today that it was a

comprehensible language, and an hour of study had not rendered him convinced. “Too predictable.”

Hermione nodded. “Besides, even if it *is* an egg, you’ve still got — wand *up,* Harry, come on, twirl and flick — you’ve still got to plan around whatever’s down there. It wouldn’t be a challenge if they didn’t implement some defenses for whatever you’ve got to do in the lake. I’d guess it’s some sort of guardian, like the dragon — it’s a classic setup — brave the lake, slay the monster, claim the reward.”

“What reward? Not getting eaten?”

“A very motivating reward, one thinks,” said Draco. “Almost as good as not drowning. You’re leaking.”

Harry’s wand had begun panickedly spluttering bubbles at the idea of his oncoming demise. Hermione sighed and swept them into the fire with *Ventus.*

“Why don’t you two stop riding him for a minute?” suggested Ron. Draco was startled not so much by the flinty streak in his tone as the fact that he was awake at all: he had spent the better part of the last hour with his head pillowed in his arms. His contributions to their brainstorming consisted of derisive snorts and the errant horsey sigh. “Let him work it out without you needling him.”

Though it was addressed to both of them, it was clearly aimed at Hermione, who had been trying to fix Harry’s wand form. It caught her all the deeper because she had been off her guard. “Work *what* out, Ron?” she said shortly. “We don’t have any clues. The best we can do is start preparing for what we can predict, and move forward whenever we solve the egg — which, by the way, did you read the book I asked you to?”

It proved that hope sprang eternal, he thought, that Hermione had assigned both Harry and Ron some research on theories of aquatic spellcasting. The last touch either of those books had known was hers.

Ron ignored this. “That’s what I’m saying,” he shot back. “You’ve been on Harry about the Task since Christmas. How’s a bloke s’posed to think with you twittering in his ear about Bubble-Head Charms?”

Draco lifted his head. He slowly set down his quill.

“I do not *twitter,”* said Hermione hotly. “And if Harry doesn’t start working on the Charm soon, he’s not going to get it in time for the Task, and so excuse me for *twittering,* Ronald, but I think it’ll be easier for him to bear than drowning.”

“See? See? That’s what I’m talking about. You can’t go five minutes without reminding him he might drown, or get eaten, or get murked by the squid. Gosh, I wonder why he hasn’t got it yet!”

Harry’s lips bunched into a purse the quarter of their usual size. “It’s fine,” he said loudly. “You lot, it’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

“Harry had a month to relax,” said Hermione. The lines under her eyes were ashen and inflamed, from an abundance of reading and none of sleep. It made her face dire and bloodless. “He had a nice long break while *Draco* and I tried to figure out the Task. Just like we did last time, incidentally!”

“Gee, Hermione, *did* you and Draco do something for the First Task? You never said!”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Ron raised his head. “I dunno! Sorry. I dunno. It’s just — you act like you want a medal or something,” he said flatly. “Alright. You figured it out. It worked. So what?”

It was an arrow to the square of Hermione’s back: the suggestion that she had not, in fact, been helpful.

“So what?” she stuttered. “So what — if we hadn’t, it wouldn’t have happened! Harry would’ve been stranded!”

“You don’t know that!” he snapped. “Why d’you assume that Harry and I couldn’t do it without you, huh? Why’s Draco the only one who gets a mite of credit where brains are concerned?”

A flare of panic scuttled across Hermione’s face.

“Because I often happen to use them,” Draco said coolly, and Ron twitched, apparently just remembering that he was still in the room. “If you wanted credit for helping, you might try the same. Or haven’t you noticed that the rest of us have been working for the past hour?” He unfurled his hand at the notes beneath him.

For a moment he expected Ron to throw something at him. But he must have judged his odds wanting, because after a palpable unclenching, he muttered, “Never mind,” and screeched his chair away from the desk. “I’m gonna get some air.”

“That’s a great idea,” said Harry, nearly hysterical with relief. “Really good. Best I’ve heard all day. Air! Let’s get some air! Hermione, Draco, do you want some air? I think I’ll get my cloak.”

Hermione was glaring after Ron’s back in the portrait-hole. What she wanted for was clearly not air so much as the chance to stuff a piece of her mind through his thick skull. But she swallowed whatever she wanted to say next — a clump of words so thick they visibly moved down her throat — and tucked her wand into her hair. “I’ll go get some tea,” she said thinly. She flashed Draco a look of heated exasperation and snatched up her robe on the way out.

Harry exhaled and leaned over on his knees.

“Don’t put your back out keeping the peace, there,” said Draco dryly.

“I dunno what to do with them,” he groaned. “I’d stick my foot in but I think I’d lose it. Why can’t they just get along? It’s not that hard for

the rest of us to not rip each other's throats out."

This last was questionable, but he let it go.

He flipped the book closed. "Do you want to know what your problem is?" he inquired, crossing his legs casually.

"If I say 'yes,' will it get me out of this conversation?"

"No. But good thought," said Draco. "Your problem is you let your friends rule you."

"I wouldn't describe what you're doing as 'ruling,'" he said doubtfully. "'Bothering,' maybe—"

"Too late, I'm still talking. Now. You came to this school and welded yourself indivisibly onto the two — and I'll even admit it, three — most headstrong, contrary, pertinacious wankers of the crop. An incredible yield, really. Once-in-a-generation. And all of them would kill for you, but they'd die before they let you win an argument."

He opened his book with a decisive flick, and returned to it.

"I don't want them to kill anybody," said Harry philosophically, from a reflective pose laid upside-down on the sofa. "And I don't need to win arguments. If it's Ron, I'd rather let him win than have him be angry, and if it's Hermione, she's probably right anyway." He smiled, soppy and guileless, at Draco. "And if it's you, I just let Hermione know, and she takes it up with you for me."

"You play your hand well, I admit. But it's not tenable."

"Why not?"

"Because one day, one of us is going to be wrong," he said. "It won't be me, obviously—"

"Obviously," said Harry, nodding somberly.

“—but it’ll happen, and if you don’t find it in you to shake one of them off, you’ll end up hauled into mortal peril by the hooks in your heart.”

Harry was puzzled.

“If they’re in mortal peril, I don’t want to shake them off,” he said. “Why wouldn’t I go with them?”

He felt an unwelcome rash of heartburn. Talking to Harry this way reminded him why he infrequently attempted to engage on matters that were neither practical nor trivial. Draco made a point of carefully moderating the sincerity in his diet. Like all rich foods, it risked indigestion. Now was not the day to find out how Harry could bear to gorge himself on it.

He opened his mouth to say *Hopefully because I am also there, yelling at you,* but was interrupted by a crisp rap on the portrait-door. Harry made an abortive attempt to sit up that somehow ended with him slumping even more comfortably into the pillows, groaning at the imposition.

It took two encores before Draco finally threw back his chair and went to get it, taking responsibility for absolutely everything, as per usual.

It was Theo. His hair had recovered from the rictus of gel at the Yule Ball and he had dressed quite snappily in a brown wool suit and tie, his breast double-studded with the Slytherin badge and the League one beneath it. He was fanning himself.

“Merlin’s sordid rectal prolapse, she wasn’t joking about the stairs. This is untenable. This is disrespectful to the student body. My body, to be precise. Surely you don’t do this every day? I’d hurl myself over the banister. I would learn to levitate. I have,” said Theo, “a stitch.”

“You play quidditch, you emphysematous bellyacher.” Draco leaned against the portrait-hole. “If you think that’s rough, Oliver Wood would dine out on your liver. Ah, wait; he already did.”

“If you’re referring to the late and tragic miscarriage of justice that denied us our fairly won Quidditch Cup, then I refuse to hear it, for I am selectively deaf to all remarks under a certain threshold of intelligence. The threshold is ‘any.’ Any intelligence. In case you need it spelled out for you. Speaking of spelling things out, are you busy? It’s been ages since we’ve caught up, and I’ve missed being mocked with five syllables.”

“Pansy knows the word ‘emphysematous.’”

“Yes, but she prefers ‘twat.’”

“She’s efficient.”

“Among other things. Do you have time for a butterbeer, or is your dance card full for the afternoon?”

He weighed his options. Ron and Hermione likely wouldn’t be back for a while. It had been miserable working on the egg, and he wasn’t keen to be the only one at the grindstone if everyone else had decided to lark off. He wanted a short vacation, somewhere breezy and calm and not tempestuous, where everyone could be trusted to lock up their unpalatable emotions in a vault. Repression sounded delightful, right about now, frankly.

He turned around.

“Potter!”

“What!”

“I’m going to Hogsmeade. Be back at dinner.”

“What do you want me to tell Hermione about the egg?”

“Tell her it’s not Banshee, and if she wants to check my work, she’s welcome to, though it’s a fate I wouldn’t wish on a mountain troll. I recommend we get started on Hagspeak, instead.”

“Okay. I’ll try. I’ll remember maybe half of that, though.”

This was rank optimism. Draco had put the over-under at one third.

“That’ll do. Afternoon.”

“Have fun!”

He dropped down from the portrait-hole. Theo rediscovered the world outside his cuticles and swept the conversation tactfully aside with a pivot on his heel.

They wound down through the maze of staircases. The castle was quiet and chilly in the weekend emptiness, the halls hollowed, narrow stairwells grown newly ample.

“Have a good Christmas?” Theo said unexpectedly, his voice skittering in the chill gloom. “I’m sorry I didn’t get you a present. I sent Narcissa some poinsettias, of course, but she hasn’t written back, and considering the usual tempo of her correspondence, I can only conclude I’ve committed a grave sin. Is she allergic? I didn’t think to ask.”

Theo’s voice was smooth and nasal, but the vibration behind it was poorly suppressed. He wasn’t really half as good at hiding his feelings as he thought he was.

Not that Draco had much room to think of it. At the mention of his mother, a black pit of worry, like the stone heart of a cherry, congealed in his chest.

“The sin of tardiness, perhaps,” he said. “She’s probably not received it yet.”

“Slander. I ordered it a week ago.” Theo thrust open the Entrance Hall doors with a wave of wand, and they waded out into the sludge carpet of the lawns. Snow was still wafting in dark sticky flakes from

a lumpy mattress of clouds, a sorry medium between powder and rain, stinging their heads and cloaks.

“But she’s well, then? I shouldn’t worry?”

“No. She’s fine, thank you.”

Theo sent him a sidelong look.

“What.”

“Do you remember coming to the Yule Hunt at my house?” he said mildly. “I understand if you don’t. It was fully two years ago.”

“I remember.”

“Mm. Do you remember how you left?”

Draco cut a sharp look at him, and Theo met it, evenly and expressionlessly.

“Perfectly. I also remember telling you what would happen if you tried to hold it over my head.”

“I’m holding nothing.” He demonstrated with a flick of his hands. “I should fry my fingers in oil and serve them to lions before I willed any harm to your mother. Incidentally, if you require someone to make discreet visits—”

“Your concern is appreciated but unnecessary.”

“—someone to check in, from time to time—”

“If you require an illustration of the word ‘unnecessary,’ please refer to a mirror.”

“Do you want me to beg you?” he said shortly. “Do you want me to go down on my knees and plead to let me help? That’s not normally

how this goes, Draco. Normally, *you* ask, and *I* give, and we don't wait for someone to hurt herself before it happens."

Draco shuttered. He felt all the doors and windows of himself slamming closed, at once, generating a cold breeze that whistled through all the chambers of his heart.

"We have help. We don't require your charity."

"Oh, thank Merlin. Maybe your gardener can weed her back to health. You do understand that your mother is sick, don't you? Properly sick. If she weren't a Malfoy, she'd probably be in St. Mungo's."

"Hark at you," he said coldly. "What leprous fool gave you a healer's license? You know nothing about her condition."

"And you do?" said Theo incredulously. "You're here three-quarters of the year and flouncing off with the Potter Pals for the fourth. If she had an attack, when would you know about it? *Would* you?"

He moved his hand to his hip; Theo twinned the movement, touching his holster.

They stood with their ankles turning wet in the snow, awkwardly facing off on the trail to Hogsmeade.

It was silly. He made a disgusted sound in his throat and lifted his hand away from the holster, flashing five fingers. Theo relaxed and folded his hands behind his back.

"She wouldn't accept it, you know." His voice was quiet. "She raised me. I don't know why you think her position will be any different than mine."

They came upon the gnarled iron gates to Hogsmeade. Black cloaks scuttled here and there sparsely through the gray downfall.

“I don’t know either,” said Theo. “I suppose you get your stubbornness from the Blacks.”

“At least mine has a better pedigree than yours.”

They passed under the iron archway, and left the subject outside it.

Striding past the Three Broomsticks, Theo turned in at a dingy stone building that looked like the earth was trying to digest it. Scummy moss stained at the half-timbered walls and spread in gangrenous patches over the pitched roofs, and an old billygoat in the courtyard wailed balefully at them as they crossed it.

“Darling, you take me to the nicest places.”

“Left your mettle in the Tower, did you? It’s discreet.” Theo dodged the main entrance, over which flew a wooden sign of a hog’s head leaking blood onto a white tablecloth, and picked his way through a litter of rubbish and mold-nibbled barrels in the alley. He tapped out a pattern on the brick with his wand, and a slot opened in the wall. A pair of beady eyes peered out.

“Password?”

“Godelot,” said Theo.

The slot closed, and part of the brick wall swung open. Theo flicked his hood up and gestured for Draco to do the same, which he did, after a moment, feeling terribly silly.

Inside it was a low-ceilinged barroom sparsely populated with witches and wizards in dark cloaks. Grime laid too thick on the windows to cast much sunlight, so they found their way by the light of small candles which guttered on each table. Behind the bar there was a mirror turned black as a chalkboard with tarnish, and a wizened bartender with few teeth and fewer hairs, polishing a glass.

“Aberforth,” said Theo, and the bartender grunted. The glass appeared to be getting dirtier from his polishing.

Coming in from the side door, they cut directly behind the bar and up the rickety stairs to a sitting room, where a long wooden table sat under a withered brass chandelier, and a fire roared in a great stone fireplace to one end of the room. The film on the windows was so dark it could have been night, and an owl roosting in the rafters gave a keen warning of their arrival.

Blinking the darkness out of his eyes, Draco picked out Theo rolling off his cloak with a sure ripple of his shoulders, talking to another boy. It was Gregory Goyle. He hadn’t seen Goyle up close since last year’s quidditch final, a time all evidence suggested he had spent guzzling growth potions continuously: he had progressed from *big* to *unhealthfully large,* whereas the *unhealthful* applied to Draco, not him. He’d started working on a beard, too, under a generous definition of “started,” “working,” and “beard.”

“Draco,” said Theo, turning, “you remember Greg.”

“I seem to recall a large blur trying to kill my seeker.”

A younger Goyle would have risen to the bait. This one snorted and threw back some of his tankard.

“S’ just a game,” he said. “Don’t be a girl.”

Draco waited for the customary threat of unsettling violence, but none came. This was a new, unspirited Goyle, more interested in glugging butterbeer than declaring his malevolent intentions toward Draco’s bones. He reflected with new interest on the possibility that all his menacing had been Goyle’s idea of trash talk, and found it both unsettling.

“I thought we might have a shared grievance,” said Theo, “since we’re all three quidditch players. Monstrous that they’ve canceled it, this year.”

“Only thing that made this stupid school worth coming back to,” muttered Goyle.

A door to the privy opened and Pansy came out, pink and swaddled for the cold. She wore a League of Promising Youth badge high and proudly on her collarbone, but her Warrington badge was gone.

She saw Draco and grunted amicably before scuttling into the warm radius of the fire. “Balls, it’s cold,” she snapped. “Why couldn’t we meet in the castle? That privy retains cultures from the Pleistocene Era.”

“There are few things so expensive as privacy,” said Theo, “as my father likes to say. A little discomfort is a bargain price.”

“Maybe *yours* is. I hope mine isn’t. Who else is coming?”

“I invited Blaise, Cassius, and Tracy, but alas, it’s a day that ends in Y, so Tracy’s got a shagging appointment with Higgs, and Blaise is a notorious flake. Cass might come, but he sprained his ankle, so it depends on whether he can pull Pomfrey away from a Hufflepuff outbreak of the first year flu.”

He noticed that Crabbe and Bulstrode hadn’t made the guest list. But then, neither had Daphne.

“Anyway, it’s a bad day for the side all-around. We’re trying to decide who to root for if Cass is still hurt for the Second Task, and it’s slim pickings. Krum’s seeing a muggle-born, and rumor has it the Frenchwoman’s a half-breed. I think Potter has it by a nose.”

Draco gripped the table.

“Who?” he gritted out. “Are you talking about Granger?”

“It was a joke,” sighed Theo. “Are those still legal, in Gryffindor?”

“Speaking of which,” said Pansy severely, pointing at him as if she were conducting an inquest. “What the devil is she doing with the

Durmstrang champion? I thought she was with Potter."

He narrowed his eyes. "She's neither."

"What? Not Krum, either?"

"No."

"Hm. They were awfully friendly at the Yule Ball. If she's smart, she'll hold onto him, she's not likely to get a better match."

"Your mouth is about to get 'awfully friendly' with a Scouring Charm, if you don't find a better use for your tongue than septic waste," he snapped. "I didn't realize an escort was meant to precede a fucking marriage proposal, I would've sent you and Theo flowers."

Her eyes flared auspiciously. "Don't be saucy. I was only asking for Gemma's sake, anyway, she has a crush on Krum."

"My wishes for a swift recovery," he snapped. "I'm sure Granger would tell her happy hunting. For her part, she's been in a long-term engagement to her personal library since she was about three, and they're blissfully happy together. Put your nose out."

He sat down in bad grace. Why everyone suddenly thought Hermione's love life was their personal *Witch Weekly* column was a profoundly unpleasant mire of a question, rivaled only by the dark mystery of what he would do to them if they didn't soon recover.

"I don't like Potter," said Goyle, slowly and emphatically.

"We know, Greg. The world knows," said Theo. "The question is whether you like him better than someone whose grandfather dabbled in bestiality."

The new turn of the conversation hip-checked Draco from brooding into disgruntlement. "The hell? Nott, clarify."

“Delacour. Her grandmother’s a veela,” he said mildly, tracing the tip of his tankard with a finger. “Didn’t you suspect? That’s where she gets her looks. Also why her magic’s weaker than the other champions’, I expect. Blood’s diluted.”

“Diluted?”

“You know how it is. The further you get away from a wizarding line, the less magic you have. There’s science about it. Some studies show that muggle-borns—”

“Stop.”

It became very quiet in the room. Pansy stared at him. Theo’s finger stilled. When it started again, it moved in the opposite direction.

“Anyway,” he said, after a moment. “Whatever. It’s a hang-up of yours, I get it. But half-breeds are different, everyone can agree on that. They’re not fully human, so their magic doesn’t fully manifest. Take Hagrid, for instance. Is it any wonder that he got expelled?”

Draco startled.

“Hagrid? A student? You’re lying.” Pansy was sniggering.

“Oh, yes. About fifty years ago. He’s older than he looks. That’s giant blood, for you.”

Draco said, “Giant blood?”

“You should be reading the *Cavalier Post,”* said Theo, tapping his nose. “Keep you up to date on everything the *Prophet* won’t let to print. Yes, he’s a half-giant. So’s Maxime.”

“How the devil can you tell?”

“...Is that a joke?”

“He’s big. Goyle’s big, that doesn’t mean he’s a half-giant.”

“You’d be amazed what you can find, digging through old school records,” said Theo airily, picking some lint from his tie. “Newspapers dating back to the 1930s, for example. I even found McGonagall’s graduating class — total riot, well worth a look if you’ve got a strong stomach — and a few delectable tidbits about the lake. In fact—”

But the door swung open, interrupting him. In swept a tall, golden-haired boy with an oily pompadour.

“Cass,” said Goyle, with the first thing approaching real gladness he had shown all afternoon. He got up and hurried to shake the Head Boy’s hand.

“Greg. Delightful.” Warrington pumped his arm and gave a short bow to Pansy. A light German accent cushioned his consonants. “Parkinson. The cold becomes you, does it not? *Du bist so schön wie Rosenrot.”*

She gave him a haughty scoff and turned her head toward the fireplace.

He moved one of the chairs with his wand and Summoned a tankard from the sideboard. “Good call with the private room, Nott. It’s just the ticket. Of course, it’s not the faculty lounge, is it? I admit, I’ve become accustomed to the brandy.”

“They only let us use that for meetings. And if I try to book twice in a month I think McGonagall will transfigure me into an etiquette manual.”

“Shame. It was big of your father to let us use the Boardroom, once, I’ve been spoiled for it. What a building! Filled with history. If I live to a hundred I’ll never forget hearing Odin Davis delivering that speech. You missed it, Greg — it was the nine of us at the table, and Lord Nott had brought Mr. Davis to talk to us about careers in law enforcement — you remember Mr. Davis, from the attacks last year? We watered him up with brandy and oysters on the half-shell, and when dinner was over he told us the whole story, including how Lord

Nott saved his life — he found him and raced him to St. Mungo's, even though it meant the savage escaped. That's nobility, for you. And Nott, do you remember his story about killing a whole den of them, in Wales? Four grown mongrels and a pair of bitches, one with pups. All dead. Merlin knows how many lives he saved."

"Werewolves, you mean," said Draco.

"If you like." Cassius turned to Draco and beheld him, at a distance, like a new and intriguing species of blind mole. "I don't believe we've met."

"No. You'd remember."

"Warrington, Malfoy," said Theo, waving boredly. "Draco, Cassius. Prefect, Head Boy, Hogwarts champion — the original, not the decoy. You may have sneered at each other before."

Cassius tilted his head in interest. "Pleasure."

"I'm sure it is. Well done, there, with the dragon and the birds."

Cassius' smile recalled the shade of shattered eggshells.

"Thank you," he said.

"Read it in a book?"

"Hm?"

"The trick with the egg," said Draco calmly. "Did you read it somewhere?"

"Ah — I understand. No. My family has a summer house in Romania. It neighbors a dragon reserve." Warrington flicked his eyes to the table in a winning imitation of bashfulness. It faded too soon. "I, ah… learned some tricks, as it were."

"Mm. Impressive trick to pick up on your own."

Another feint at humility, a smile too cold to be sheepish. “Well, I never said I didn’t have help.”

“No, of course. I’d heard it suggested,” said Draco, ignoring a slight jitter of danger, “that you might have been helped.”

Theo made a soft hiss in the back of his throat. Warrington merely blinked at him.

“It’s Malfoy, isn’t it?” he said, apropos of nothing. “Strange that we haven’t met. Ravenclaw, are you? The curious type?”

“No.”

“Then I must be thinking of another family.” He smiled, and it was a genial, beatifically handsome thing that Draco got the feeling he could wipe off with a napkin. “I apologize. As you can imagine, I have a great deal on my mind.”

“Certainly.” He drummed his fingers. “Give my regards to Miss Carrow, by the way. My mother’s aunt was a dear friend of her grandmother’s.”

“I’m afraid I could not presume to take that liberty,” said Cassius apologetically. “Miss Carrow and I are not socially involved.”

“No?”

“No.”

“I wonder how I could have been so mistaken,” said Draco.

There was a pregnant pause. Theo looked at Draco flatly over Cassius’ shoulder, while Pansy gave him a proud, sidelong sort of smirk.

“I am continually surprised by how people have treated the Ball as an exercise in matchmaking,” said Cassius. “That was not the purpose, as I understood it. In the classical Wizarding tradition, it

was customary for brothers to serve as escorts for their sisters at social events. It prevented the appearance of impropriety and vouchsafed the family's virtue." He paused. "In fact, I had presumed that was why you took Miss Greengrass, Mr. Malfoy. I have made a point not to tolerate any rumors to the contrary."

Draco stilled. Then he twitched his mouth into a cold smile.

"They must have been very confusing rumors, indeed," he said, "since you didn't know my name before Theodore introduced us."

Cassius inclined his head, his expression half-indulgence, half-condescension, and a trifle of respect.

"One hears so many things that aren't worth remembering," he said. "I try to give every man no more or less than the credit I would ask for myself. My own name has been abused in all sorts of absurd contexts, you see; I'm sure you can sympathize."

The wind whistled in the eaves. Draco found himself tired.

He was tired of being cold. He was tired of tension and stress. He was tired of performing conversational acrobatics just to keep his head above water. He was even tired of Theo and Pansy, who for all that he liked them always left a sour aftertaste. They sat and drank and talked as if there were no human beings outside the walls of this dismal cellar, and apart from that — apart from the long list of things that he knew, with a deep and squirming discomfort, that Hermione would have said if she could hear them — he did not understand why, if at all, it gave them any particular comfort.

It wasn't warm. It wasn't civil. It was the world they came from; it belonged to them, it was made for them, carved in their bones and the graves of their forefathers; but he didn't have to *like* it. It felt puerile and small.

Once he would have done a great many things to be in this room, crossing glasses with the Head Boy, a Nott, a Parkinson, and a

Goyle. There was another world, another blond boy in another tie, where he was the man Warrington wanted to please. He would have asked for entry into the Boardroom, and been granted it.

That boy had never seen the world from the top of Gryffindor Tower, with its windows full of starlight and mountains, its smoky firelit rooms. But he'd also never seen a werewolf's teeth under a full moon. He'd never seen the inside of a dementor's throat, how dark it was, how fathomless.

He saw the two rooms set against each other like opposed mirrors, reflecting a corridor that fanned out into oblivion, and down one path he could see himself here — drinking brandy in three-piece suits with men and women who would flay their own hands to kiss his signet, who adored him madly and easily and automatically, and he wanted it so badly it made him ache in places he'd forgotten. In the other, he was sun-blistered and sweaty on the Burrow's roof, exhausted and miserable and riddled with strange insensible guilt, and it was always hard, and it never got easier, and nobody cared for his ring or his name and one day he feared he'd wake up not caring, either, mundane and not caring, mediocre and not caring, no different and no better than anyone else.

And if he wasn't different, he was nothing. They would peel off everything that he was, and they'd burn it up, and whatever was left of him — if there was anything left of him — would have nowhere, no one, if not them. They'd consume him.

Which, in a way, wasn't so different from what Warrington's people would have done. It was just a different part of him that was dying. A different limb to shear away. Why couldn't his life fit all of him in it?

He wanted to talk to Hermione.

"What are you doing?" said Theo.

He had stood up.

When Hermione talked about these things, they became simple. The world through her eyes was moral and elegant and easily mastered through brute application of brilliance and will. When she disliked something, it was immoral, irrational, evil, and irredeemable. When she liked something, it was perfect and reasonable and good. She was ruthless and scant with her praise, but when it came, it came like sunlight, and just then he was terribly cold.

He wanted to capture the way she looked at him when he told her he would bait the dragon before the First Task, capture it whole, and lock it up somewhere that no one else would ever find. He wanted her to look at him that way all the time, and never look away. He wanted to never see it again. The two wants didn't cancel each other out, they just sat together in his ribcage, bleeding.

"I have an obligation. I just remembered."

"Did I say something?" said Warrington, politely, but it was clear he didn't really mind that Draco was leaving.

"I'll walk you out," said Theo.

"I will, too," said Pansy. Goyle didn't offer, and for some reason that stung.

They came with him to the door and squeezed into the small dank hallway over the stairs.

"Sorry for Warrington," whispered Pansy. "He's a bit of a pig."

"It doesn't matter," he said, which was true.

As he turned to leave, Pansy broke out: "Wait, I wanted to ask you a favor."

"Parkinson—"

"It's not for me, it's for Daphne." She pulled a small golden badge from her pocket and held it out to him. "Will you give this to her?"

“...Has she joined?”

“No,” said Theo quietly, “but it’s still an option for her. We want her to know.”

He curled his lip. “Has she expressed any interest, whatsoever, that she might someday be inclined to join?”

“No, but it’s not about the club, you ninny. You think Daph gives a fig for politics? We just want her to know we haven’t forgotten her,” said Pansy, with characteristic impatience, as if she didn’t understand why everyone in the world didn’t think the same things she did and on the same schedule. “We won’t ever. Tell her if she wants to come back, all she has to do is show that at the door.”

She pressed the badge into his hand. It branded his palm with a cold kiss. He curled his fingers over the curlicues of gold and felt hollow.

“So you want me to lie to her.”

Pansy’s mouth parted. Theo, tellingly, showed no surprise at all, but a toothless exhaustion that dug fresh trenches under his eyes.

“She can’t come back. You know that. So does she.”

“Millie will get over herself,” whispered Pansy. “She just—”

“Millicent Bulstrode isn’t the reason Daphne isn’t welcome in her own common room anymore.” He tossed the badge at Theo, who caught it. “Give it to her yourself, if you can find the audacity. I certainly couldn’t.”

He turned and went down the stairs. He had not made it three steps into the snow when he heard his name called, and Theo came hurrying after him, his boots crunching in the sludge.

“Hang on,” he said breathlessly, skidding alongside Draco. “Gracious, tarry a moment, would you? I still had something to say.”

“I really do have an obligation.”

“Right, okay, like everyone in the room couldn’t see through *that* for a barefaced lie. I know Cass is a strong flavor—”

“Again, it wasn’t anything to do with Warrington.”

“It could be,” said Theo indifferently. “He irritates Pansy out of her skin. But that’s not important. I wanted to invite you to the next League event. The next speaker is Quilliam Coalhend, he’s got a doctorate in Herbology from Oxford, revolutionized the use of aquatic plants in Potioneering. He’s a brilliant alchemist, a great connection for anyone in academia, I thought you might like—”

“I’m not joining. I thought I made that clear.”

“And I thought everything happening recently might have made you reconsider. Obviously, I should have known better, since you and everyone else I can possibly stand has a habit of calibrating your decisions to whatever makes my life hardest. Speaking of which, can you ask Daphne—”

“Daphne is besotted with you.”

Theo dragged his hands over his face. The snow had hastened and came down in stinging sheets, melting inches above his face into ice-cold rain.

“Did you know that?”

“Yes,” he said finally. He pulled his hands away from his face, newly pink, and blinked away sleet. “So?”

“So?” Draco had no idea what to say to that. He had assumed Theo would have some sort of answer. He hadn’t the first notion of what you were supposed to do when you were in love with someone, except hang around each other and snog a bit and then eventually get married. “So… I don’t know. Do something about that.”

“Like what?” Theo’s mouth crooked.

“Anything! Do I have to do bloody everything? I’ve already pulled more than my weight here. And don’t go proposing to her again, it’s a disgrace.”

“That was a moment of weakness.”

“You think so?”

“In my defense, I hadn’t slept in a while. While I maintain that it would have solved several problems—”

“When’s the last time you did sleep, speaking of?”

“—I concede that it was ill-founded. And I don’t know, I passed out after splinching myself at the World Cup, that must have been a good six or seven hours. It’s not important. I’ve got just two problems right now that don’t have to do with the Ministry of Magic, and that’s you and Daphne. Both could be solved, incidentally, if you and her could just *get on side,* join up, and let me protect—”

“I don’t like your friends.”

The snow settled into sad gray lumps in the alleys, like a stray cat.

“Cheers,” said Theo briskly. “I loathe yours.”

“Crabbe and Bulstrode are callous and insipid gossips.”

“The Weasley twins in particular I find crude and disrespectful of others’ property.”

“Goyle tried to hit Hannah Abbott for defending her prefect.”

“The She-Weasel is a violent hypocrite.”

“Marcus Flint is a barbarian.”

“Do you expect me to disagree?” he snapped. “They’re my friends, I don’t have to like them.”

Draco had no idea what to call the kind of sadness this inspired. It was big and quiet and painful.

“I’m going back to the castle,” he said. “I assume you’re not.”

“No,” said Theo, who seemed no happier about it than him. “I’ve *obligations,* too.”

Abruptly, to Draco’s surprise, he held out his hand to shake.

Draco did. It cost him nothing, and it put some color back in Theo’s face.

“You should stay with us again, next summer,” he said, without much heart. More words that cost him nothing, because they were rejected, predictably, at once.

“Dad wants me home.”

“For what?”

“He’s taken an interest in my education. I’m being groomed for leadership. I’ve already got a job offer upon graduation, did I tell you that? If I live that long.”

“Bugger that,” said Draco, surprising himself. “Run away.”

Theo blinked. “Where?” he said curiously. “With you and Narcissa?”

“She’d have you in a heartbeat.”

“And what would she do when my father came looking?”

“Nothing anyone would be able to prove.”

Theo put his head back and laughed. The snow laid a veil of frost in his dark hair, turning it, too, gray, like the sky, like the dirt.

“That’s the first one I’ve had in a while,” he gasped, blinking up at the dull clouds. “Thank you. I really mean it. I needed that a lot.”

“Is that a ‘yes’?”

“Of course not,” he said, still talking softly to the sky. “There’s no running away. It’s too late for that. And if you could ever hold your nose and actually show up to a League meeting, you’d know why. Hell, in a year, there'll be nowhere to run away to.”

“I am at my limits of toleration for riddles, believe me. What’s happening in a year?”

“It was a figure of speech,” he said, dropping his eyes. “Dumbledore’s going to lose the oversight battle, you know, in the Wizengamot. The Tournament was a smart concession, on his part, but he can’t hold off reform for long. Runcorn wants skulls. Trelawney, Hagrid, Burbage, they’re all on the chopping block — do me a favor and don’t break that before the *Prophet* does, by the way — and there are more staff changes coming at the Ministry. Names you’ve heard of. The old families are coming back.”

“Coming back from where?” He understood perfectly well what Theo meant, but he wanted him to say it. In him was a cold and mean sense of curiosity about how far Theo would go, out loud. He was also, frankly, frightened of it. “We never left.”

A pause. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it,” murmured Theo. “But you know I mean. Better than anyone, sometimes, I think.”

“Massive slight to Parkinson out of nowhere.” His voice was light, but he was unsettled. “I’m touched.”

“I didn’t say I *liked* you better than anyone,” he muttered. “But you do understand. You *get* it. I know you do, I’ve seen it. Your dad…

actually, perhaps that's why I kept thinking you'd fall in. You know? Eventually. You'd have your fun while we were kids, and run around with rabble, have your little Prince and the Pauper moment… but you'd come back home, when the time came. Once you figured it out."

It was very cold, standing out in the open snow.

"Figured out what?" he said tonelessly.

"That you're the same as I am," he said bitterly, "only luckier."

Draco tipped his chin back, considering.

"No," he said. "Braver, I think."

Theo put his head down and laughed.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah. 'Where dwell the brave at heart,' indeed. Inarguably so."

Given time and opportunity, he would have wrestled Theo down, and forced him to justify his ominous prognosticating. Contrary to assertion, he did not, in fact, know what he meant, and whatever change Theo was referring to, it was a vague darkness whose contours remained obscure to him. But Theo had nothing more to say, and at length it became clear that neither did he; and they shook hands again, before they parted ways.

The distance between Hogsmeade and Gryffindor Tower vanished in the blur of deep thought. When he blinked back to reality, he was standing in front of the Pink Lady. She was fiddling nervously with her braid. When he told her "Cetus," she pursed her lips.

"If you're quite sure," she said. As soon as it unsealed, shouting swelled from the common room.

“—THINGS HAVE YOU BEEN SAYING ABOUT—”

“We didn’t say anything! God! Can you read? You’re being completely stupid!”

“STUPID, AM I? OUT OF PROPORTION, IS IT? YEAH, CLASSIC RON, ALWAYS MISSING THE POINT—”

“Mate, c’mon, you *are* being stupid, it’s all bunk, you’re the one making this up—”

“SHUT THE HELL UP, HARRY!”

He had never heard Ron yell at Harry before.

Draco scrambled through the portrait hole and pulled out his wand as he rounded the curve to the common room. What he saw made him feel like he had come stumbling into a playhouse halfway through the second act.

Harry and Hermione made an isosceles triangle with Ron at the tip, in postures of various placation, which had obviously failed to cool their bristling third. One of the desks lay fetal on the ground, bleeding from a shattered inkwell. Ron gripped a balled-up newspaper. In another universe, it could have been the scene of a comically unsuccessful fly-swatting, but the illusion shattered as soon as Hermione caught his eye and shook her head, trying to warn him back through the door.

Too late: Ron spun around.

“Oh! There you are! Bloody wonderful! Fantastic! The Trio’s all here!”

“What the devil is going on? I was gone for an hour!”

“You don’t know?” Ron snapped. “Ask your pal Rita Skeeter! She seems to know all about it!”

The newspaper flew at him. It collided with a crackling white *Locomotor.*

He lowered it slowly, and suppressed the urge to hit back with *Levicorpus.*

“What in Merlin’s holy name are you ever about?”

“Absolute utter rubbish, thanks for asking,” snapped Hermione. Each syllable dropped off her tongue like the stroke of a cleaver. Ron made an owlish sound of anger. “Skeeter wrote another piece of trash making you and me and Harry look like total prats, and he’s upset because he wasn’t included.”

“Hermione,” pleaded Harry, with a tired, thin diplomacy, “let’s just, you know, let’s just be nice for a second, alright, he doesn’t—”

“You be nice to him. That’s your answer for everything, isn’t it, Harry? Oh, poor *Ron,* he’s got it so hard, let’s baby him, let’s be nice to him, let’s let him say whatever he wants and never get angry — of course, it’s easy when you’re the only one he ever apologizes to!”

“That’s not fair,” said Harry indignantly, and now he and Ron were pivoting towards her, like the magnetic center of the room had shifted. “I’m just asking us not to shout.”

“That’s all you ever do! Let’s not fight, let’s not get angry, let’s shove it all down so that *Harry* doesn’t feel uncomfortable!”

“I didn’t say that,” he snapped, hurt. “I don’t like shouting. I don’t — I hate playing this card, so I wasn’t going to bring it up, but — but the Dursleys do it, a *lot,* and — and, you know, I d-d-don’t— I don’t like it when you do it. I don’t think that’s, like, this incredibly unreasonable thing.”

That was it. It earned a beat of incontestable silent observation from all.

Hermione set her jaw into a rictus that could have snapped through wood. She said, in a very tight, very small voice: “I’m sorry.”

He broke immediately. Ice shattered, the waters thawed, and he sagged out of his posture as if it had taken every ounce of strength in him. “That’s okay. It isn’t a big deal, really. I just — yeah.”

“Well, I’m glad that you two have sorted things out.”

Ron’s interjection was a bead of ink unfurling in a clear lake. It stained the waters swiftly and completely.

Draco finally consulted the newspaper. The article on the second half of the page caught his attention first: MUGGLE UNREST NEAR BRIGHTON, DARK MARK REPORTS UNCONFIRMED. This sent a jolt of something watery through his stomach before something even more striking on the page caught his eye: his own name.

[img: https://i.ibb.co/3dg1KwS/Screen-Shot-2023-06-02-at-8-25-49-AM.png]

The ensuing article proceeded to sketch out some sort of bizarre star-studded social clique including Harry, Hermione, and himself. This clique, as Hermione had suggested, came across as rather less attractive than insufferable, as Skeeter’s “anonymous source” seemed determined to augment their glamor through as many adjectives as possible: “reserved,” “coy,” “selective,” and “mysterious” all made double appearances throughout the article. At least twice, it hinted at a romance between Harry and Hermione, though Skeeter appeared to anticipate a plot twist on this score, and entreated readers to submit their opinions on “Hermione’s choice.”

The first page featured a moving photograph of the common room, empty save for a blurry head that might have been Seamus; on the second page, the three of them were captured in shifting black print,

posing candidly on some sort of staircase. Ron was absent. The photo credit for both pictures was Colin Creevey.

“Where is he?”

“What?” snapped Ron, turning. “Who?”

Draco calmly ripped the newspaper in half. “Creevey,” he said. He tossed both halves in the bin, and set them on fire with a jab of his wand. “Where is he?”

“Don’t,” said Hermione shortly. “It’s not a good idea.”

“You don’t know what I’m thinking.”

“No, see, actually, I do, and I’m telling you, it’s not a good idea. I thought of it first.”

“Sod off. Why not?”

“Retribution,” she said simply, which slightly surprised him; he’d thought she would object to the prospect of grievous injury. Then again, the article hadn’t been too kind to her; it had used her and ‘coquette’ in the same sentence, which was going to cost Colin several fingernails and a tonsil, if Draco ever found him. “He’s got access to Skeeter. If you threaten him, he’ll just run and tell her. And if he tells a teacher...”

“He won’t.”

“You could face disciplinary action. Which gets us nowhere.”

“So you want to let him go?”

“I didn’t say that,” she said, her eyes glittering, and he knew he was mirroring the savage little smile on her face — he couldn’t help it; it was his second favorite expression of Hermione’s, the one he loved almost best, because when she smiled it there was nothing in the

world except her and him and the poor dead bastards who didn't know what was coming for them — when Ron cleared his throat.

"Aren't you two bloody chummy," he said, in tones of pelagic depth.

Draco no longer suffered from any impulse to smile whatsoever. He turned his head to face Ron, slowly, and rolled out his wand-wrist. *Silencio* would do nicely.

"What *now,* Ron," said Hermione, and he knew at once it was the wrong tone, the wrong phrase. She came in hot and fast and this time even Harry was wringing his empty hands like he knew they couldn't stop her, while Draco gripped his wand and thought that it was possible he could, but found he didn't want to. He was holding a pocket ace, and he didn't even have to play it.

Because Ron and Hermione had built up about four years' worth of quarrels, petty and not, including some nastiness Draco was sure even he didn't know about. And they were catalysts for each other, high-intensity conflict engines without a decelerator, and he knew how they fought; he'd watched them do it all last year. Let them run long enough, and it would hit terminal velocity. Eventually one of them would smash into something unforgivable, and their speed wouldn't give them time to stop.

And that would be that, the birth of a new uncrossable distance, the sides drawn, the pairs cemented, Harry-and-Ron against Draco-and-Hermione, and the thing was — it would be all Ron's fault. Draco would have nothing to do with it. He and Hermione would be best friends, and Harry and Ron would be their *other* friends, and all the frustrating mercurial dynamics of their quartet would be laid to bed. *People grow apart,* he would say, *don't blame yourself, Granger, not everyone can be like us,* and Hermione would be sad and then less sad and she'd never give Ron her tears or her laughter or her secret smiles ever again.

Which was the kind of thought he might expect more often if he were a clinical psychopath, actually, or made a habit of using his soul as

fishing-bait in a tar pit. The rest of his brain united in appallment. He'd never thought anything like that before. He liked Harry and Ron. He didn't want them to go away.

"Explain yourself," he said roughly. In actuality, he did not want Ron to explain himself. He thought there was very little about Ron's position that required explaining; it was himself he didn't understand. He wanted to go upstairs and take a minute to work through what he was about. He wanted for everyone to shut up, for at least thirty seconds, while he put his mind in order.

This was a request that would have made the very cosmos roll with laughter, if it could hear.

"It's always you two, isn't it?" said Ron, very calm, and very unhappy. "It always comes back to you. It's never 'let's all do this,' or 'let's plan something, the four of us,' it's 'what do Draco and Hermione think we should do?' How do Draco and Hermione think we should do the First Task? Polyjuice is pretty easy for Draco and Hermione, maybe that's how we should help Sirius! What do *Draco and Hermione* think the egg means? But at least you're nice enough to let Harry in on it!"

He scoffed. "If you objected to those plans, you could have used your grown-up words and voiced them. Did you expect us to send you a permission slip before we saved Potter's life?"

"When would I bloody object?" Ron roared. "When would *either* of us bloody object? I can barely get a word in with either of you when the other person's in the room! Sometimes Harry and I have to wait for you two to leave to talk to even each other—"

"What?" said Hermione, stricken. She turned to Harry, who cringed as if he wanted to fold himself into a box the size of his chest. "Is that true?"

"No, it's n— I mean — but it's not like *that,* honestly, I mean sometimes, but—"

“You know, I reckon I did have it wrong, earlier.” Ron’s fingers kneaded the flesh of his palms like gestating fists. “It’s not the three of you. It’s two.”

“We’re your friends, Ron. Of course you’re part of the group.” Hermione spoke as if to a small child, which was not the thing in any number of senses, but Draco was still reeling too hard to interject.

It was the way Ron said *Draco-and-Hermione,* like one word. At the bottom of his anger — and it was a very, very, deep bottom — there was a kernel of something else; not even disagreement, just a mild bit of proud rankling, as if Ron were saying the right thing in the wrong way.

“Yeah,” Ron said, blinking something shiny out of his eyes. It was tears, he realized, though whether tears of anger or distress Draco couldn’t parse. He couldn’t think of a time he’d seen a man cry before, and it was unsettling as hell. Ron scrubbed them away in humiliated haste before he could examine the feeling further. “Yeah, I’m part. The last part. The part *you* two always forget. Did you even notice you left me out of the First Task? Did it cross either of your big brains that I wasn’t there? Don’t answer that.”

Hermione spun from condescension to fury in the space of an axon tip.

“No! No, don’t you dare! You said you wanted to watch,” she said angrily, stabbing her finger at him. “You wanted to see what Fleur did —”

“BEFORE I KNEW WHAT YOU WERE DOING! Of course I wanted to watch! It’s a bloody DRAGON! That doesn’t mean I couldn’t have helped!”

“How?” snapped Draco. “By doing what, exactly? It’s not our job to make sure Ronald gets his playtime. What do you suggest you’d have done?”

“You’ll never know! Because you didn’t ask me!”

“Ron, it wasn’t personal, there really was nothing for you to d—”

“And there never is!” he bellowed. “There never is, is there? Not nowadays! Not when you two have Harry rigged up like a sockpuppet! But do you want to know what’s funny, Hermione—”

“Safely assume she doesn’t, thank you, and neither do I. You’re crossing a line.”

“Do you want to know? Do you? It’s that during second year, when that twat called you — you *know* what he called you—”

“Weasley, the ice where you’re standing is so thin it’s about to be steam.”

“—and it was just the three of us? I remember that. I don’t think you ever paid so much attention to me in your life, Hermione, and it was sodding *great.* And then *he* comes back, because, what, he bought you a whole stinking garden—”

“Go to hell,” said Hermione. Ron flinched; she had dropped from molten frustration to a quivering, cold fury.

“You can go straight to hell for that implication, Ronald.”

Harry inhaled on a wince. Shiny-eyed with hurt, Ron still hesitated only for an instant.

“Well — but — well, it’s what he did, isn’t it?” he snarled. “Little rich boy, isn’t he, with a castle and an inheritance? He can buy anything. He can even buy an apology.”

“That’s what this is about? Are you serious? You’re ripping into me because you’re jealous of something that happened *two years ago?”*

“So what! *So what if I am?* He gets EVERYTHING!” Ron was bellowing at both of them, now, and there were fresh tears he had

made no effort to wipe away. “For four years, if anything in my life is worth having, Draco Malfoy’s got it, and he’s got a better one than me! Money, and grades, and quidditch, and better presents, and better broomsticks, and better clothes, and pretty girls, and whatever it is that makes you like him better than you ever liked me—”

“As if you don’t play favorites.” Hermione’s voice cut through his like a hot knife through sand. “I mean, I don’t even know where to start. I could say it’s disgusting and chauvinistic to talk about me like I’m somehow equivalent to a nice broomstick. I could say that things like ‘better grades’ and ‘quidditch teams’ require time and effort, not just money, and in any case it’s not my fault you don’t have them. And I could say that I’m a human being, and I get to spend time with who I *very* well please, and if you wanted more of my attention then you could have shown a little interest in *my* hobbies instead of complaining that I don’t make more time for you, but actually, I won’t say any of those things, because Ron Weasley, you look me in the eye and say you don’t like Harry better than me.”

Her voice cracked on the word *Harry.*

Harry froze, and stared at Ron, who rendered fully silent for the first time in the argument.

“I don’t,” he said, by and by, but it was strained. “I don’t. I like both of you — differently.”

“You’re a hypocrite,” muttered Draco. Ron sneered at him, but Hermione guffawed and turned away.

“And — and anyway,” Ron snapped, working back into it, “it doesn’t matter. Because at least Harry doesn’t — doesn’t look at me like I’m a species of *bug* or something whenever money comes up! You think I don’t hear you two talking about me? All the times you’ve said something about my robes, or my house? Yeah, bet you didn’t think I heard that one, did you! The two of you cozied up together, gossiping about how bloody *awful* it must be to be so *poor*— you both hated the Burrow! Admit it!”

“No! Ron, don’t be ridic—”

“I admit I’m not used to living in a house with more dirty dishes than blades of grass,” Draco said.

To his own surprise, it turned out that he didn’t need to wait for Ron or Hermione to cut the tendon, because his mouth was more than happy to go hurtling ahead with the knife. He was very angry. It was not entirely clear to him, until he heard himself speaking, how angry he had been.

“I admit that I’m accustomed to a house with more structural integrity than a sand castle. I admit that I’m not used to living in the same dirty kennel as ten other people” —this was a lie— “sharing beds and bathrooms and closets and God knows what else” —it was far past time for him to stop talking— “all crammed in together like an incestuous autoclave, no, I’ll admit, I’m not accustomed to it, and if my luck holds, I never will be.”

Now Ron was shaking like something was about to burst out of him. He had never been so livid. Draco thought there was something faintly relieved in the fury on his face.

“I know.” Somehow he kept his voice steady, despite the shaking. “That’s the thing, Malfoy. *I know.* You think you’re so clever and subtle, laughing at this big stupid oaf and his sorry life, but I know what you think. I’ve always known.”

Once upon a time, he’d said a word he would never repeat, and he had watched it slowly rip open the conversation beneath its terrible weight, wishing he could snatch it out of the very air.

This didn’t feel as bad as that did. He didn’t know how anything possibly could. But it was not an unrelated feeling.

Hermione was stony and silent. Draco tried to catch her eye, but she was gazing at Ron like he was the last man on the planet, and she was the last saber-toothed tiger.

“I love your family,” said Hermione quietly. “I think they’re wonderful. And I loved the Burrow.”

“Yeah, sure. Okay. The thing is — the thing is, Hermione? I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. I’d still rather live in a hovel and sleep on a dirt floor than be the— the—”

It was going to be bad.

“—the *sidekick* of someone who treats your parents like they’re animals.”

Hermione flinched. And that was it, that was all it took.

Draco rolled his fingers into position on his wand. His heart was playing a song on the inside of his ribs, and the song said *hit him, hit him, hit him* .

“Weasley, take out your wand.”

But he was too quiet. Ron barely seemed to remember him.

“Doesn’t he?” Ron demanded. He swept a hand at Draco. “Be honest. When’s the last time he asked after your parents? Can he name them?”

“You’re being cruel,” said Hermione. She was crying, but trying to speak through it, as if they could possibly fail to notice. “And you’re doing it on purpose. Stop it.”

He — he could, couldn’t he? He could— but it was an old memory, and he was too distracted, he couldn’t think, he needed a moment, he needed *space*—

He needed to put a Furnunculus Jinx so far up Ron’s nostril he’d be sneezing boils on his deathbed. Yes. That’s what he needed to do.

“I said take out your wand.”

Ron still didn’t. Fine. He’d been warned. Draco raised his arm.

“No!” roared Harry, and he threw himself between them. It was the first time he’d spoken in — Draco didn’t even know. Maybe hours. “No magic! Put it down! *No hurting each other!”*

“Too late, Potter.”

“Far too late, mate,” said Ron, staring at Draco’s wand with a hollow sort of shock. His eyes flicked up to Draco’s. He could see the wide bloody crescents of the whites in them, bracketing the rust-rimmed blue. “Missed the train by a couple years.”

Draco eyed him. He still hadn’t drawn his wand.

He twitched his wrist—but Harry was faster.

“Expelliarmus!”

His wand leapt from his hand, and Harry snapped it out of the air. Then he brandished it at Draco, instead of his own, as if to make a point.

“NO MAGIC!” The sight of Harry Potter shouting at him was so fearsome and irregular that his anger packed its bags and quite simply hauled ass. “Get it through your skull! No magic, not on each other, not *ever!* And what the hell do you think you’re doing, anyway? It’s *Ron!”*

Draco reviewed the ledger and found that he didn’t have any sort of response. Ron had made Hermione flinch; he obviously couldn’t say that, but it had seemed a perfectly reasonable answer, at the time.

“I don’t know,” said Ron. The air had gone out of him, but the anger was still there, like venom in a pufferfish skin. “I really don’t know what’s going on with us, anymore. But I guess I’ll give you lot some room to find out.”

For a moment it looked like Hermione was going to say something, and he wished she would: say something, say anything, unveil a sudden dazzling twist of ingenuity that threw the whole problem into perspective and saved them. But no such pearls were forthcoming and after a miserable sound of protest, she closed her mouth again.

“That’s one thing you’ve got to say for me,” said Ron. He was blinking like he had eyes full of sand. “I know when I’m the problem. I’m — that’s another way of looking at this, isn’t it? Maybe you three aren’t the problem, it’s just— it’s supposed to be three. Not four. And I’m the idiot trying to shove a spoon in a wandsheath.”

He turned, ignoring a chorus of his name, and fled up the boys’ stairs. This exit would have been more impressive if had not been executed at top speed, and with a terribly recognizable choking sound.

Harry sat down hard in an armchair. Hermione swiped her hand over her face. For a long time no one said anything, just listened to their own ragged breathing in the awful quiet.

Draco leaned on the back of the sofa and listened to the thunder of his own pulse running itself out. Unlike Harry, he didn’t take deep breaths or try to settle himself, because he didn’t want to calm down. He dreaded the moment the adrenaline receded. He heard his own voice rattled back at him like a cassette, and it made him sick. *A dirty kennel. An incestuous autoclave.* So easily, he’d said those things. He hadn’t had to think about them. They’d come bubbling up from a secret trench and surfaced without his consent, like was only a vessel for the cruelty, just a mouth and a tongue and the hard mean things they could do.

It was enough to make a man wonder just what kind of thing he was carting around in his chest.

“Here.”

Draco looked up, and found the handle of his own wand staring back at him.

“Sorry for disarming you,” said Harry quietly.

He gave a graceless jerk of his head and took his wand back.

“I— er.” Hermione rubbed her forehead. He stood up straight when she did, mirroring her, and still in him was that unfair hope that her next words would make the whole miserable situation go away. Or the next ones. Or the next. “I — do either of you want dinner?”

Both of them stared at her as if *dinner* was a word she’d invented.

“Well, we have to do something,” she said miserably. “We can’t just sit here reeling until — I mean, someone’s going to come down and find us. And I can go up, but you two — shouldn’t. So unless you feel like explaining to people—”

“It’s a good idea,” said Draco. She broke off with evident relief. “Dinner. Best thing. Potter?”

Harry was staring at the boys’ staircase.

“What?”

“Food. Come on,” he said, and jerked his head at the door.

“Shouldn’t we—” Harry hesitated over the fallen desk.

“Right,” muttered Hermione. “Yes.”

In a word, they cleaned up their mess. Hermione levitated the desk back onto its side and repaired the inkwell. The ink had to be siphoned from the floor, and what little remained, Harry went after with a rag. Draco cast *Reparo* on the chair, and after they had cleaned up as much of the scuffing as they could, they stood in the clean empty common room, holding in their minds the only evidence that there had been a fight.

When they were done, they stood shoulder to shoulder with their backs to the portrait-door. Hermione was between them.

“Well,” she said, in a small voice that made his stomach tie knots, “I suppose that’s everything.”

And it was.

At the risk of harpooning you with tonal dissonance: COVERS!! Cover images for this fic are available now on Tumblr and Imgur. Those include back covers, which I made for fun, because I sort of got carried away.

Miscellaneous other notes:

-I hate to leave you on such a dour image this week. You all know how much I love Ron, and I could talk for ages about his character arc in GoF, but suffice it to say he's quite simply going through it this year. As is everyone, in fairness. I like to think that a fight is a failure of problem-solving, whereas all parties had things they probably should have said earlier, and in different ways. But I'll shut up and play dead author, now.

-I’ve read in several circles that Lavender Brown is a pureblood, but the evidence for it is mostly secondary or inferential (e.g. JKR’s “original forty” list, the fact that Lav stays at Hogwarts in seventh year). Which is fair, and I grant she was probably intended to be a pureblood in the books, but Terry Boot stays on, too, and he’s muggle-born in early drafts. So there's a nebulous amount of creative license going on in my interpretation. Plus, one can always invoke the ancient transformative author's rule of My City Now.

-More generally, I think that having Lavender be a muggle-born is a lot more interesting in the context of her rivalry with Hermione, both in this fic and in the books. Because like, Lavender is not an academic weapon. She doesn’t care about “earning” her place at Hogwarts, and plays shamelessly into the stigma about muggle-

borns being insipid and more interested in muggle culture than magic. And she doesn’t care! Lavender does not give a stone cold hoot what other people think of her. I think that adds a few interesting layers to how much Hermione dislikes her. Put bluntly, there’s a reason she doesn’t want people thinking they’re in the same club.

-I'm always tickled when someone in the comments guesses something that's going to happen, and it's even more impressive when they call it from, like, fifteen chapters out. Someone called a major arc in Book FIVE the other day, just as errant speculation, and I remember sitting there like :O. No spoilers, but damn.

-I am never not staggered by how kind you are in the comments. I have hoarded messages like little treasures, and when writer's block hits, I go through and read them, and it gets me through the next one thousand, two thousand, five thousand words like gasoline on flames. I'm so eager and determined to do right by you, and if you've left any comment on the past few chapters, I hope you get — well, I don't even have a good metaphor, this week, but I just want to give you a really nice thing!

-NEXT CHAPTER: "Come Seek Us Where Our Voices Sound." It contains a feature appearance from Mad-Eye Moody, Invisibility Cloak shenanigans, and a bath.

-See you there.

Come Seek Us Where Our Voices Sound

Chapter 45: Come Seek Us Where Our Voices Sound

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Herbert and Denise.”

Hermione paused. Given that she did so with one hand on the sugar bowl, poised to turn a perfectly good cup of tea into a bioweapon, he judged his intervention a mercy.

“Gesundheit,” she said.

“Those are your parents’ names.”

“Quite,” she said, after another pause. Her eyes darted between him and the sugar spoon.

“What? Aren’t they?”

“Yes,” she said. “I am aware of that.”

“Shield your eyes, lest her brilliance astound you—”

“Oh, sod off.”

“—and lest mine, for I am, in fact, aware that you know your own parents.”

He returned to his own tea. It was cool before she ventured anything further.

“Were you asking, or…?”

“No,” he said crisply, and reached for the kettle, point proved. She made a quiet, contemplative sound, watching him.

It had been five days since the fight.

Ron did not return to them, and it was felt. It was very unlike Draco's own brief estrangement from Hermione earlier that year, when wide new cavities of time in his schedule had testified to the unpleasant changes at hand: at least those had been obvious. No single activity disappeared from his life, but all took on a slightly uncanny feeling. Ron's absence was like coming up the stairs in the dark, misjudging their number, and planting one's foot with erroneous confidence on a shelf of empty air.

When they went to dinner it became more apparent. All of them now read while they ate. Draco brought Potions homework or a novel stolen from Hermione — recently, *The Count of Monte Cristo,* chosen because its volume could get him through a good number of meals — while Harry flipped through Draco's old copies of *Quidditch for Seekers.* This unnerved Hermione, who would have been reading anyway, but every so often would look up with a queer bereft expression, trying to tune into a conversation that didn't exist. More than one meal elapsed without talking.

Harry began coming to the library. This was good for his education and terrible for everyone else's.

His idea of studying, of course, involved nothing so pedestrian as reading textbooks or writing things down. He took out the assignment sheet, paced several circles around Draco and Hermione's study table, and then paged through the book like it was a magazine, screening for pictures. The 'studying' aspect, if indeed there was one, seemed to come later. When asked whether many of his papers wrote themselves via immaculate conception, he was baffled.

It was also bothersome. Draco didn't consider himself a tyrant, but he was accustomed to a modicum of quiet, which Harry's shuffling footsteps and muttered pleas for understanding both denied him. It took him twice as long as it should have to write an essay on the use of peppermint oil in Calming Draughts, because every two

sentences, Harry cleared his throat or blew his nose or went to get some water. A lesser man would have fused his anklebones to the chair, but Draco had discipline, and moreover, he had pity: Ron hadn't spoken to Harry since the fight. Even sitting next to each other in the Potions classroom, while Snape sneered and mocked their pitiful cauldron of curdled Doxycide, they exchanged only terse monosyllables, and afterward Ron swept out to walk with Dean and Seamus.

"Have you spoken to him?" ventured Hermione. This was bold of her; she herself hadn't talked to Ron since the fight, either.

"No. And that's fine," said Harry, lying pathetically. "If he doesn't want to talk to me, that's fine. He can talk to whoever he wants. Hell, he can — he can go spend all his time with someone else. I can't stop him. He can do that. If he wants."

"If… he wants."

"Yeah. If he's that angry at us, or you, or maybe all of us, I can't do anything about it if he doesn't talk to me. Which is fine, I guess. And it seems like he's having a *great* time off by himself with Seamus and Dean, they were really laughing it up together in Charms, so I guess if that works out he doesn't have a reason to talk to you or me or Draco ever again, and that's fine! Really! Awesome! I guess."

Hermione came in unexpectedly gentle. "Of course he misses you," she said. "He loves you."

"He's got a funny way of showing it," he said tightly. "Running away. But that's fine! He can do that. If he wants."

Hilarity. It was patently obvious to all with eyes that if anyone in the world needed Ron Weasley, it was Harry. The proof was in the way he slouched along unhappily behind Draco and Hermione wherever they went, falling silent during conversations about, for example, the antiinflammatory properties of various poison antidotes and their corresponding concentrations of antihistamines. He was adamant

that he wasn’t bored, and that they could talk about whatever they pleased, but it was difficult to make a point about vascular permeability with Harry sprouting new abandonment issues in the background.

On a day in late January, they came back from a depressingly literate luncheon and found a flood in the third-floor corridor that usually conveyed them to their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. A film of greenish water lay ankle-high over the dark stone. Draco, who rounded the corner first, drew up short, and Hermione bounced harmlessly off his back. Harry quickly sidestepped her — preened, slightly, at his dexterity — and then, not looking where he was going, slipped on a wet stone and tripped headfirst into the soup.

A gnarled hand thrust out of the darkness and caught him by the collar. Mad-Eye Moody materialized from an alcove and hoisted Harry up, lifting eight stone and change like a sack of sickles. He grunted and tossed him on the dry stone.

“Watch yourself, Potter.”

“Er — thank you, sir.”

“I see you don’t check your corners. Malfoy does, that’s why he’s not wringing bilgewater out of his robes. Also why he’s not like to be jumped. You want to be jumped, is that it, boy?”

“No, sir.”

“No? How about petrified? Stunned? Shot?”

“Not really, sir.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“...Check my corners?”

“That’s right, you’re going to check your corners,” muttered Mad-Eye. His glass eye swiveled at Hermione. “And you, too, Granger, I didn’t see you taking too much time with them, either.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Not as sorry as you will be, if you don’t,” he muttered. “Not as sorry as I’ll be, come to think of it. When you don’t. And you won’t. That’s my misfortune. Cruel man, Albus Dumbledore, come-and-serve he says, do I deny him, I do not… and here I am, all the same people, only different faces… should’ve torn it down when we had the chance… Schoolchildren for soldiers… infants for infantry… Never grow old, kiddies, you’ll have to watch your own life happen twice.”

Draco wondered what medication Mad-Eye had missed, and where to procure as much of it as possible, immediately.

“Soldiers, sir?” said Hermione faintly.

But Mad-Eye had apparently met his quota of cryptic disclosures for the day. He tucked his thumbs into his coat pockets. “No class today,” he barked. “Not till Filch gets this cleaned up. If any of you need a soak, in the meantime, use the prefects’ loo, it’s nearest. Password’s ‘pine fresh.’ Not,” he added, with a rare double-eyed stare at Harry, “that you should go spreading that around.”

“...No, sir.”

“Those passwords are for *Hogwarts personnel only.* Peeves happened to catch a certain Frenchwoman coming out of there the other night, some daft nitwit must’ve given her a password into the tunnels… Though she’ll not be hurrying back, after I found her,” Mad-Eye added, with some satisfaction. “If Maxime hadn’t pitched a fit, I would’ve confiscated that egg, too. *No special treatment!* That goes for you, too, Potter. I’ll not make any exceptions for you, if I catch you lurking about after hours, you understand?”

“No, sir,” said Harry fervently.

Mad-Eye grunted in satisfaction. On that note, he hobbled away, his wooden leg rasping against the slick floors.

Hermione had put a strand of hair to her mouth and was nibbling it, which showed she was entirely lost to thought, and her body was more or less an autopiloted vessel for the brain. Draco, sighing, took the elbow of said vessel and steered it along while the brain did its work.

“Every day,” he announced, “I wake up and am made to imagine situations. Terrible situations. Distasteful ones. Why is it that no one ever asks me to imagine pleasant, flattering situations? Why does no one ever say: ‘Picture yourself quidditch captain,’ or: ‘Say you have just been awarded the Order of Merlin.’ No one does this for me, and frankly, it rankles.”

“Can you picture yourself quiet?” said Hermione distractedly, and he glared at her.

“What situations?” said Harry. “Are you talking about Moody?”

“Those ears of yours can do more than hold up your glasses, Potter, and if you use them right you might just learn something.”

“My fault, I usually turn them off when you’re talking,” said Harry. “C’mon, prat, what did he say?”

Draco snorted. “He all but told us Delacour’s been shacking up with Roger Davies.”

“Wh— I mean, I guess, but — how do you know it’s with him, though?”

“Only prefects and quidditch captains have access to that bathroom,” murmured Hermione, “and Davies is both. Sorry, but could you two possibly— not to be rude—”

“Shut up?”

“Pipe down?” suggested Harry.

“Keep mum.”

“Put a sock in it.”

“If convenient.”

“Or if it isn’t,” suggested Draco.

“Yes, thanks,” she said, too distracted to be polite. He directed his smile at the ceiling, so it wouldn’t end up in her or Harry’s crosshairs by mistake.

He climbed the stairs in silence, exchanging an amused glance with Harry behind her head. It didn’t take more than one flight. When she reached the top stair she stopped, one foot in the air, and then spun around and seized each of them by a shoulder.

“The egg.”

“What?” said Harry, but Draco held up a finger.

“Professor Moody caught Fleur coming out of the prefects’ bathroom, and he wanted to confiscate the *egg.* If she was meeting Roger for a — a late-night rendezvous,” she said, turning a lovely shade of pink, “then why did she bring the egg with her? Unless he was helping her with it — which isn’t very likely, if you believe what Cho has to say about him — and Moody didn’t mention anything about Roger being there, anyway. So she must have been doing something *in* the bathroom with the egg.”

“But,” began Harry, and Draco held up a second finger.

“But what was she doing with it? Yes, Harry, that’s the question! Moody said we should use the prefects’ ‘if you want a soak,’ which doesn’t make sense, because the third floor bathrooms don’t have bathtubs. But the prefects’ bathroom must! And we know the egg

opens when it’s covered in water, but Fleur’s more than capable of an *Aguamenti,* so there must be something different about the bath.”

“Oh,” said Harry, “you don’t think, maybe—”

Draco raised his third finger.

“The egg has to be submerged,” she said triumphantly. “And I think *we* have to be submerged with it.”

It was a testament to how time had changed him that Draco felt almost no apprehension stepping down from the portrait-hole after curfew.

The castle corridors, painted with the squirming shadows of low-burning torches, held no terror for him now. He had mastered far worse than what lay waiting for him in the darkness. It was with a calm, weathered sort of confidence that he didn’t even reach for his wand once he stood outside the portrait-door — untroubled by the creaking floorboards, at ease with the odd deep croons of the building’s magic resettling itself into the foundations. It was just a school, which when you got down to it was only another kind of home. Nothing inside the walls of Hogwarts Castle could frighten him.

And, in fairness, he wasn’t much worried about being caught, anyway. He held in one hand the Marauder’s Map, which showed the dots labeled ‘Filch’ and ‘Mrs. Norris’ both puttering safely around the dungeons. In the other, he carried the Invisibility Cloak, which he shook out while Harry and Hermione stepped down after him and eased the door shut. Hermione held the egg carefully under her arm like she had laid it herself.

“This isn’t going to fit the three of us,” he murmured. “It barely managed me and Granger during the First Task.”

Hermione cleared her throat. “Well, it was tangled,” she said. He glanced at her, and she promptly turned away from him to adjust the egg. “But anyway, you’re right. Harry, you two are about the same height, so why don’t you and Draco—?”

“I’m wider than Draco is,” said Harry apologetically, like his wingspan had been an inconsiderate personal decision. “It’s easier with the two of you.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well — it doesn’t have to — I mean, it would also work with you and me. Since Draco’s taller.”

“Well spotted,” said Draco curtly. It was a more than cozy arrangement, and she seemed rather eager to get in there with Harry. “And I’ll just fetch my own Invisibility Cloak, shall I?”

“It doesn’t matter who gets it! I don’t even need it, my Notice-Me-Not’s better than yours.”

“I don’t know whether to be impressed that your attempts at manipulation are improving or dismayed that this can be considered ‘improvement.’”

“What? It *is.”*

“If you two aren’t under the Cloak in the next ten seconds, I’m getting Filch myself,” said Harry doggedly.

There was a lull in negotiations.

“Pushy,” muttered Draco.

“Bossy,” whispered Hermione, which was the pot calling the cauldron tenebrous, really, but he wasn’t going to mention it.

She folded herself under the Cloak beside him, forced against his side by the shortage of fabric going to cover his head. It became apparent that no amount of personal space could be preserved if this was going to be effective, so with a short pained sigh he opened his

arm and jerked her unceremoniously against his side, where she went with a small squeak.

“Draco!”

“What? I haven’t got fleas.”

“You might have warned me,” she muttered, fussing at the Cloak. Harry, who could not see them and could not have looked more grateful for it if he tried, had still turned his back for some reason.

Perhaps vengefully, she burrowed into his side, suffusing the whole side of him in tingling — it wasn’t discomfort, but a keen awareness of *contact,* of a human being in all her fidgety warmth. Locks of hair tickled his neck and the underside of his jaw — if he found one in his mouth later she was a dead witch — and perfumed the world in florals.

“Are you comfortable?”

“We lack enough time left in the millennium, Granger.”

“Fine, then, I won’t bother adjusting my elbow.”

“By all means. My kidneys have become quite fond of it.”

“I’m going to start walking,” announced Harry, “and you two can stay here and sort out your situation, or — mad idea — one of you can actually come help me. Just spitballing.”

“Well, look who has a timetable—”

“Honestly, Harry, it’s only eleven—”

“—would think he’d got another appointment—”

“—no need to be pushy about it, like you’d even know how to open it —”

“—little bit of patience, for crying out loud, the Task’s not happening at dawn.”

“Can’t hear you,” Harry said, “too busy walking,” and then they had to follow, or he wouldn’t hear them complaining.

The Marauder’s Map located the prefects’ bathroom behind a statue of Boris the Bewildered, a famous Seer who had discovered several new forms of divination by accident. A high stone door, thatched by a somber deadbolt, held a jewel at its capstone, and this glowed faintly green through the castle gloom.

“It’s ‘pine fresh,’” Hermione whispered.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, Hermione, I remember,” he said. He turned to his side, as if to mutter something to Ron, but then remembered the other thing, and shoved his hands in his pockets.

A voice from down the hallway stopped them all cold. It was a low male baritone, interpolated irregularly with a much fainter tenor, like the two speakers were at odds.

“...for a fact it was drugged, if you so much as glanced at the toxicology report, which I know you didn’t—”

“But you would,” said the second voice pleasantly. “And I am afraid I fear inefficiency too greatly, these days, to ever risk redundancy. Tell me what it said, if you please.”

“It would *tell you,* Albus, that four hours later, that creature was still approximately *one-third* diazepam.”

“A state one envies more and more, throughout this conversation.”

“Are you listening to me? The beast was tampered with! Even you can’t ignore—”

“Ignorance is not a synonym for patience, Severus.”

“—signs everywhere! Someone has conspired to back Potter in the Tournament! An *adult!* Someone capable of manipulating the ancient charmwork of the Goblet, and very capable potioneer, if I had to guess.”

“Now, this is interesting. I recall your initial hypothesis was that he had cheated his way in himself, for vainglory. Have you developed an appreciation for his better nature?”

“I’ve developed an appreciation for hard evidence. He’s a feckless child, but he’s no great potioneer. When will you pull him out?”

“Assuming, *arguendo,* that the Ministry will not fire me for doing so?”

“Don’t run and hide behind the Ministry. It might work with Minerva, but it doesn’t with me.”

“You think me far stronger than I am. That always was your mistake.”

“I know who you are. Besides, Runcorn prays for Potter’s downfall. It isn’t him.”

“Albert Runcorn is not the sole voice of the Ministry of Magic. Nor is he the most salient one, in the case of Hogwarts… you must trust me above perhaps all men, Severus, to know how very weak those at the heart of power are to wield it. We must act through the hands of lesser wizards, and lend them our judgment and trust, while they offer in return their freedom and strength…”

“Then where is your judgment and trust for me?” Snape’s voice was harsh and low. “If you will not heed me, direct me. How am I to answer Karkaroff?”

“Cautiously.” Dumbledore’s voice swelled around the corner. Hermione gasped and tried to duck behind the statue of Boris — forgetting, as was the perennial danger, that they were invisible — nearly tearing the Cloak from their shoulders. Draco hissed, wrapped an arm around her, and hauled her against him to keep her still. She

wriggled and then fell slack, her chest rising and falling riotously under his arm.

Harry, however, had no such protection. He dove behind the statue, but the noise sent echoes skittering around the corridor. Dumbledore and Snape paused and turned to look. Snape's eyes narrowed, and he lifted his wand.

"Lumos."

Light blazed through the hall like a tiny sun, stinging the eye. The trouble with the Cloak was how hard it was to believe, on the inside, that you were hidden; it seemed impossible that Snape's dark little eyes didn't see right into him and Hermione, tangled together in plain sight, with only a thin layer of silk to shield them.

Hermione's heart was doing a scherzo against his arm. She had ceased breathing. Her hand found his wrist, somewhere around her hipbone, and squeezed. He exhaled hard into the thatch of curls against her neck, and her whole spine shuddered.

"Who's there?"

"It is an old castle," Dumbledore said mildly. "It would be more suspicious if there were no strange noises, from time to time; in my experience a silent building is far more dangerous than a loud one."

"Be that as it may," said Snape, and his lips crooked in unpleasant anticipation. *"Locomotor Boris."*

The statue trembled and then rose from its pedestal. Harry gave a slight groan and screwed his eyes shut as light washed the back of his head.

"Potter!"

Harry sighed, and with a graceful motion of his knees, he rose to face the music.

“Evening, professors.”

“Harry,” said Dumbledore warmly. “It is an unexpected pleasure.”

“You know, professor, I really wish it was.”

“Explain yourself,” snarled Snape. The statue of Boris dropped back down with a shuddering *thunk.*

Draco caught Harry’s sidelong glance. He almost mouthed ‘say something’ before he remembered Harry couldn’t see him.

“...Reckon I fancied a walk.”

“What?”

“You know,” he said. “Stargazing. Good for insomnia.”

Dumbledore was clearly repressing a much broader smile. “I’m afraid the rules do not recognize an exception for celestial contemplation,” he said, “no matter how much you and I might wish it. You should be in Gryffindor Tower.”

“Funny thing, professor, I was just on my way back. So if you’ll actually excuse me—”

“Wait.” Snape’s order froze Harry in his tracks. “Who else is with you?”

“No one,” he said immediately.

“You expect us to believe you came here by yourself?” Snape swept his wand around the chamber. “Where is your stalwart entourage? Where is Weasley?”

Harry shrugged.

“Answer me.”

“Ask him,” said Harry, mimicking the tone. Draco suppressed a snarl of frustration. “If you can find him, that is.”

“I see from your tone that you have already reconciled yourself to a well-earned detention.”

“I’ve reconciled myself to a detention,” he said. “I think I’m still working on earning it.”

Dumbledore lightly placed his fingers over his mouth, but the bundles of his cheeks were too high for him not to be smiling.

“Harry, why don’t you go back to bed?” he suggested gently. “We will see to your detention on Monday. In the meantime, I trust you can find your way back to Gryffindor Tower in the dark. Professor Snape and I have an appointment.”

“The meeting will wait,” Snape gritted out.

“Not happily,” said Dumbledore. “Surely you trust Harry to find his way.”

“It is not his sense of direction which I fear will lead him astray.”

Harry, ever the fair one, dipped his head to acknowledge a valid point.

Dumbledore sighed. “Then see him back to Gryffindor. But punctuality, and I mean this, is of the essence—”

“Fear not. I will be quite scrupulous.”

His tone shaved the adjective of all positive connotations.

Snape clamped a hand on Harry’s shoulder and steered him out with a grip that Draco knew, from personal experience, would remember itself with a bruise. Dumbledore watched them go, gave a quiet sigh to himself, and sent another glance at the chamber. A prickle of cold ghosted over Draco’s neck as the shock-blue eyes passed across

his face — the Cloak held fast, so he must have imagined their lingering — and then wandered away, as did their owner, into the darkness.

In the silence that ensued, he heard only his heartbeat and Hermione's, which beat into his arm like a tattoo.

Belatedly, he noticed she was pushing against his arm. She was trying to get out. He still had her pinned to him. He'd — he'd not forgotten, but acclimated to it, so that he hadn't remembered she couldn't — well — leave.

He tore his hand away and stepped hastily free of her, throwing the Cloak from his shoulders.

"Finally," she gasped. "My lungs were about to explode. I thought we were cooked."

"—want to say straight away that it was an emergency procedure, Granger, I obviously didn't — we were *what?"*

"Cooked? Oh. Muggle thing, I suppose. Poor Harry, I feel so bad for him. And if he'd only been under the Cloak. But I don't know what else we were to do. One of these days, you and I should really figure out Disillusionment Charms — anyway, do you still want to go in?"

"So that his sacrifice might not be in vain?"

"Dulce et decorum est," she suggested, and he snickered, before realizing what he'd done, and sent a Muffling Charm racing after the echoes of his stupidity that went scampering into the dark.

A murmur of "pine fresh" sent the deadbolt rattling back, and the door creaked ajar.

His immediate reaction was of overwhelming adequacy. It was a nice bathroom. Big, pretty roomy, nice taps. The master suite at the Manor was better, but at least this one had a bath, which was more

than could be said of the Gryffindor showers. He'd make a point to revisit in the future.

"I love Hogwarts," said Hermione softly.

That surprised him. He'd expected something more practical, a remark about ventilation, perhaps, or the high risk of slippage on the tile. But she gazed at the room with such starry unadulterated wonder that he thought he'd perhaps missed something in it, and turned back to look. At first he was amused, because it was just a bathroom, but by and by he came around to a certain reluctant aesthetic appreciation: it *was* a nice room, really, when you thought about it. The ceiling and walls were dappled with the buttery light of a candle-laden chandelier, and under this soft glow the marble floors were toasted yellow, with shadows burnt into the crown moldings. A wide sunken bath at the center was terraced in a hundred bejeweled taps, each inscribed with a different rune for scent, and a row of sculpted marble nereids along the wall offered stone armfuls of soaps, perfumes, and lotions of every possible variety. Across a triptych of stained glass windows, velvet curtains the color and consistency of whipped cream swirled their skirts shyly under a tickle of cool air.

"It's alright," he remarked. "Bit drafty."

She flicked her eyes at the ceiling, once, with a totally unfair and unexplained implication of ridicule, and then set down the egg. "I suppose 'hot' and 'cold' would be too pedestrian," she said, squinting at the runes. "I'm not up to date on herbs and flowers. Is that a melon? And that's cinnamon, I think… I'll just do them all, it's faster."

"By all means, if you want this room to smell like a bomb went off in a Chanel warehouse."

"I'm surprised you know what Chanel is. Aren't brands 'dismally middle-class'?"

"Well, I'm something of a prole, myself."

She laughed and went down the row, switching on a few at random. One spurted thick ropes of foam, while another poured a braid of purple rapids into the basin, and fluffy lavender cumulus clouds drifted off the water's back. The combination of colors and scents swirled together in a nacreous film at the bottom of the marble bowl, welling under snowdrifts of opalescent bubbles and cotton-candy colored foam, which rose in childish towers and buffets around the edges. When the pool at last brimmed with hot, iridescent water, and the room was cloaked in hot, overpoweringly fragrant steam, they shut off all the taps and stood together at the water's edge.

Hermione looked at the egg. She looked at the bath. She said, "Hm."

"What?"

"I didn't think about this," she said. "I didn't even think to think about this. I suppose… you wouldn't want to go stand outside, would you?"

"Oh, yes, and let me just go get my livery while I'm at it."

"A simple 'no' would have sufficed," she said balefully. Then she squared her shoulders, stuck the egg on the ground, stuck her courage to its sticking place, and said: "Well. Turn around."

In an egregious tactical error, he failed to do what she said. Instead, he glanced over and found that she had bent down to peel off her socks. These she layered neatly on top of her shoes, because of course she did, and stepped barefoot onto the cold tile, toes curling. Even then, he was such a contemptible idiot that it wasn't until she tugged out her tie — Merlin — and undid the top button of her shirt — Merlin's fucking *blood* — that something in his wretched thick head woke up and slammed a lever, making him spin around on his heel, face burning.

"What are you doing?"

"Well-for-heaven's-sake-what-does-it-look-like-I'm-doing!" Her voice was shrill. "It's a bath! What did you think we were going to do!"

“You might *warn* a fellow!”

“I told you to turn around!”

“You didn’t say ‘turn around, Draco, I’m about to put on a one-woman burlesque’—”

“Burlesque! *Honestly!”*

His brain was replaying the part where she’d reached for her button. He closed his eyes in the hope it might help. It didn’t. With his eyes closed he could focus on nothing but the small rustles of fabric coming from behind him as she undressed. Did people undressing always cause so much noise?

“This was ill-conceived,” he said thickly. “Potter and I should have gone it alone.”

“Oh, very nice,” she snapped, “and leave me out, just because I’m a girl? It’s not my fault you’ve got ridiculous hangups about a woman’s body.”

He desperately needed her to stop saying words like *‘woman’s body.’* “I haven’t got *hangups!”*

Too high. Far too high. Needed to talk in a lower voice, project calm. Didn’t have any. Needed to find some. In these environs it was a non-native species.

“You sure sound like it,” she said skeptically, and his irritation was an excellent distraction from the embarrassment. Hard to feel any kind of way about someone being naked when you wanted to get a handful of their hair and tug. *No.* “Sometimes I forget how traditional you are. I’ve still got my pants on, you know. It’s hardly any more skin than a muggle bathing suit.”

“That doesn’t — it’s the principle of the thing.”

“Of what? Seeing a woman’s shoulders? Will they throw you out of parties?”

“I’ve seen your shoulders,” he said informatively, which was not a riposte that sizzled. “It’s not about that. It’s about propriety. It’s — not done.”

“Well,” she said, a trifle sly, “obviously it’s done *some*- times, or you wouldn’t exist.”

“Granger!”

She laughed, either at her own joke or his tone or both, and there was a small splash.

He found the door where the thoughts were coming from. He slammed it. He deadbolted it. He piled it high with chairs and thoughts of an amorous Severus Snape. It held for a hearty nine seconds.

“You can turn around,” she said. She sounded not quite so confident as she had been before. “The bubbles cover mostly everything.”

“I beseech you to remove all ambiguity surrounding the word ‘mostly.’”

“Oh, please. I’m not going to flash you.” That went straight into the mental lockbox with *woman’s body* and *hair-pulling.* He was going to need a bigger box. And a bigger lock. “All you can see is my head.”

He forced a neutral face and turned around. She hadn’t been lying, although she’d neglected to mention he *could* see her shoulders, rising from the water in burnished crescents, her skin shiny and stark against the white straps. She had tied up her hair to keep it dry, but pieces of it had tumbled loose and floated in a dark shawl around her shoulders, buoyant on the white bed of foam, wet to the shiny brownish-black of wood stain at the tips. The steam had turned her skin rosy and damp.

“See?” she said meaningfully. She swam forward, parting the drifts of foam with an efficient sweep of her arms. “It’s deep. You can’t see anything.”

“Mmhm.”

“In fact there’s a part that’s deeper, if you’re anxious for space. Or *propriety.”*

“Mmhm.”

“Draco, for goodness’ sake, if you actually want to go outside—”

“No. I — fine.”

He sighed and stripped off both shirt and jumper with a wrench at the back of his neck. They went in a pile beside her shoes, and she made a noise like a bit of tinsel had an interaction with a paper shredder.

“What now?”

“You might warn me first!” But she hadn’t turned around. She was staring at his chest as if he’d spilled something on it; he checked, but it was clean. “Instead of just stripping!”

“There’s nothing to show,” he said, mystified, which wasn’t quite true — he had the beginnings of a rather nice chest, if he did say so — but as far as modesty was concerned, he showed more skin at quidditch practices. A shortage of shower stalls and an excess of impatient teammates tended to desensitize one to the male form. Katie Bell had seen his nude arse more often than his mother, at this point, and treated it with no more interest than a decorative sconce. Harry’s arse had become something of a team mascot. “You can close your eyes, if you’d prefer.”

“There’s — a double-standard at work here,” she said, in a strange airy voice, as he divested himself of shoes, socks, and trousers. He

kept his pants on, and after a moment of thought, he slipped the signet ring off his finger and tossed it on top of his jumper. The stone landed on a cushion of cashmere and rolled upright, the engraved stone face-up and glinting in the soft candlelight.

“Feel free to close your eyes at any time,” he said, raising his eyebrows at her, and she turned such a radiant shade of pink that she could have blinded a sunrise.

Snickering, he slipped into the water.

It was deep, and hot, and his muscles sang from a relief long denied them. The bath was so wide that he could swim freely under the towers of phosphorescent bubbles and foam. He did a neat dive to the bottom of the pool, swam the length of it, and popped up at the other side. Hermione, treading water, twisted around to find him.

“You’re fast!”

“I ought to be. My mother didn’t go to the trouble of hiring a nereid just so I could dog-paddle.”

“Nereids are real?” She was caught between her natural skepticism and her fervent desire for him not to be lying, which was the best spot to have her.

“Never so much as when they’re harrying you around a swimming pool with a trident,” he agreed.

“And why was she doing that?”

“Pedagogy. Swimming is one of the cardinal talents, you know, dating back to the pre-Merlin Era. There was a time no wizard could call himself a man unless he’d mastered the arts of swimming, dancing, and French.”

“You’re joking.”

“Yes. The Manor has a lake.”

He dropped to the bottom, pushed off, and ribboned through the water. When he surfaced, he slicked some of his hair out of his eyes and deposited himself on a stone bench that ridged the wall of the bath. The egg sat in a small cradle formed by their clothes, and he had to hoist himself up on the elbows to get it, a taut assertion of his core muscles that drew him half-out of the water.

“Alright. Want to try this on, Granger?”

She said nothing. He twisted back into the water and found her transfixed by the middle distance between them as if it held a trove of profound and unsettling secrets. He snapped his fingers.

“Hello? We’re not here for a soak, remember?”

“What? Yes. Let’s hurry.” She was passionate, which showed she hadn’t lost her wits entirely. She tucked her hair around both ears and paddled forward bravely, her expression determined. Gryffindor to the last, was Hermione. Give her a biopsy, they’d probably find a lion carved on the inside of her ribcage.

He submerged the egg and twisted the clasp. It sprang open, and they both cringed away in anticipation of a sound that did not come: instead, a gurgling melody floated up, insulated by foam, muffled by the burble of water and the laving of waves against the tile.

Hermione gave a triumphant shriek. *“Ha!”*

“Ah, no,” he said, nearly giddy with success, “there’ll be no living with her, now.”

“I told you! I got it, didn’t I? I was right!”

“Don’t give away too much credit.”

“I’m *good!* I’m clever, admit it! Admit I’m clever, and I figured it out.” She bounced closer to him in the water, sending lips of foam lapping at his chest. Her face was a gloriously insufferable beacon of pride.

She could be a terribly haughty little thing, Hermione, and he liked it rather a lot.

“Yes, you’re clever,” he said. “You figured it out. Have a shout about it, go on.”

“Seventh year runes! And as a fourth year! Without help!”

“Right, none. Alone in the world, that’s you. A solitary savant.”

“Except for you,” she said, after an offensive pause. “Obviously. I mean, I did figure out the clasp. And the submersion—”

“Yes, and how many legs of yours did a dragon flambeé? If we’re doing a comprehensive accounting.”

“I didn’t mean you didn’t help!”

“Oh, I *helped,* did I. Thank you, Professor Granger, for the credit, I feel ever so appreciated.”

She rolled her eyes and swam closer, peering at the green glimmer under the foam. “I can’t make it out, though,” she said curiously. “Can you?”

“No. I expect we’ve got to put our heads below.”

“Right. Together, then?”

“On three?”

“One—”

“Two—”

They gasped and sank together below the waves.

Water rushed into his ears and blanketed the world. Under the foam the bath was eerie and quiet, like a marble chamber roofed in white

clouds, webbed with shivering green light. The egg shone verdantly from the nub at its center. From its depths echoed a high, discordant choir of voices, and they were singing a song.

Come seek us where our voices sound

We cannot sing above the ground

And while you're searching, ponder this

We've taken what you'll sorely miss

An hour long you'll have to look

To recover what we took.

It took two listens to make out where the verse ended and began. By then his lungs had started to itch for air, and diamond chains of bubbles rose from his nose. Hermione had already once resurfaced and come back down. Her face shone from the egg's refracted glow.

In the water, everything was blurry. Her hair wreathed her head like a drop of diluted ink. Her bare arms and legs floated unmoored from the ground, less freckled than they had been in summer, save for a dusty scattering around her shoulders; and there was a long, bleach-pale plain of skin between the hem of her brassiere and the top of her waistband, soft and fair where the sun never touched. She had a birthmark on the swell of her left hip, just a tiny brown smudge like the print of a thumb, and he watched helplessly as that information went searing into the depths of his long-term memory, never to be removed.

She shook some hair out of her face, a slow, artless movement that sent billows of it rippling behind her head. Then she swam closer, until she was floating over the egg, and tendrils of her hair coiled in feathery loops around his shoulders, like soft strands of kelp. She was very close. One of her ankles accidentally bumped and collided

with his knee. He whisked it away, but she didn't seem to notice. She was staring at the egg with her hands knotted over her mouth in concentration, face furrowed in intense and oblivious problem-solving that meant he could have stripped off his trunks and Transfigured them into a flying carpet without disturbing her. His skin was covered in prickling heat from the bath and his head was full of warm thick silence.

Abruptly she drew her hands away from her mouth and slid them over his. He had a heart attack.

Subsequently he realized he had not had an actual heart attack, merely something that felt like one, and disgorged an unwise volume of his remaining air. Oxygen deprivation had left his cognitive acuity rather under par. That was probably why he instinctively twitched his hands outward, into hers — assuming, *reasonably,* based on available data and a *total lack of communication* — that she wanted them.

His knuckles dragged against her soft pruney fingers, almost frictionless. Tingles followed across the back of his hands, distantly pleasant, almost unnoticeable. The egg slipped through his open hands and drifted to the bottom. He turned his cheek into the soft stroke of her hair, feeling his heartbeat kick down slow and hard in the base of his ribs.

She twitched her head up at him, squinting, and cracked a smile. Then pearly balloons of air bubbled out of her smile: she was laughing. And, still laughing, she dropped his hands and dove to the bottom of the pool, where she scooped up the egg — i.e., the thing she had wanted the entire time, as was obvious to anyone who wasn't an absolute goddamn dribbling moron, and he instantly began working on plans to kill himself.

He slammed his heel against the floor and rocketed to the surface.

Hermione surfaced a good few seconds after him, filled her lungs, and went immediately back down for another listen. She repeated

this procedure several times. He was glad of it, because it gave him a few minutes to plant himself firmly on the other side of the pool, fill his chest with cold air, and figure out what the hell was wrong with his brain.

It was time to admit there was a problem. He could no longer depend on his own senses of perception. His first instinct was head injury, but the more likely option was enchantment. He ought to ask Daphne to see her Healer. At the very least, she could tell him if lobotomies required parental consent.

With a splash, Hermione breached for a final time and took three quick gasps of air. “It’s mermaids,” she panted. She hauled a curtain of hair out of her face and shoved it distractedly over her shoulder. “The Task is mermaids.”

“Obviously,” he said unevenly, though it wasn’t. He hadn’t thought about the bloody riddle at all. He still felt shaky and unsettled, and acting snide made him feel better. “You needed six verses to get that much?”

“No. I memorized it.” She snapped the egg closed and hocked it carelessly over the side of the pool. “It’s all laid out. Some riddle! ‘We cannot sing above the ground’ — that’s Mermish, of course, famously untranslatable, it wasn’t until the invention of the Bubble-Head Charm that anyone knew mermaids were even *Beings* because their voices are enchanted and need water as a medium—”

“Slow down. Binns isn’t lurking in the shadows with a gradebook.”

She didn’t, and blazed on with full steam. “But that doesn’t matter, of course, you’re right. ‘Where our voices sound’ has to be the lake. ‘An hour’ is self-explanatory, so is ‘recover,’ he’ll have an hour to retrieve something hidden. But ‘what you’ll sorely miss’? That could be anything. It could be a trinket, or a personal item, or even their wands… dreadfully vague, but I suppose it isn’t important, because the real thing is to get Harry prepared for whatever’s under the lake. Mermaids aren’t aggressive but they’re notoriously territorial,

especially against wizards, and I don’t suppose they’ll take kindly to a bunch of students barging in and trying to take something... and I don’t know about you, but I’ve heard really nasty rumors, Lupin had a whole unit on grindylows—”

“Potter can handle the grindylows fine. That was the one class he ever paid attention in. I’m still hung up on how to keep him aspirating. He can’t do a Bubble-Head Charm, remember?”

“But we’ve solved that, he’s just got to practice.”

“That would be a waste of his time, to say nothing of ours,” he said grimly. “The time has come to accept what we’re working with. Even if he does manage to cast it, he would have to sustain concentration the whole time he’s underwater, on the understanding that if it breaks, he’ll drown—”

“Harry’s not totally useless, you know. I do think sometimes we haven’t been fair to him.”

“—and as someone who might, hypothetically, harbor some fondness for the sorry git, I am exercising a hard veto on any plan that requires Potter to concentrate on anything.” He paused. “Anyway, there are other ways to breathe underwater.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Such as?”

“...I don’t know, but there’s got to be *some.”*

“Oh, very helpful—”

“Listen, wizards have been faffing about for thousands of years. It is probabilistically impossible that we haven’t come up with more than one method for subaquatic immersion. We’ve just got to find one that doesn’t require concentration.”

“And one that we can do,” she reminded him stubbornly. “Or teach Harry to do. In a month.”

“Yes.”

“Easy.”

“We’ve done more with less.”

Her lips quirked. “Bootleg Polyjuice?”

“Three-headed dogs. Sodium lamps. Et cetera.”

The quirk doubled and spread. “I’d forgotten that,” she said. “That was years ago now. In the Vault, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, though I’m aghast that you apparently thought so little of my brilliance. I’ll have you know that was a fine moment for me.”

“No, it was very good. I admit it. I wouldn’t have thought to check the flames themselves, I would’ve spent all my time fussing with the clues.” She smiled at him through a sappy fug of memoria, bringing heat to his cheeks. “It was the first time I realized you were clever,” she said. “Properly clever, I mean. Like — well.”

“No, go on and say it.”

“Fine! Like *me.”*

“Humility, thy name is Granger.”

“I was impressed! That’s all! I was little and stupid and I’d somehow concluded that I was the only eleven-year-old on the planet who liked to read, and here you come, and you impressed me.” She laughed a little. “And then I wrote you about a hundred letters that summer, I think, trying to impress you back—”

“That’s what those were?”

“Yes. Why are you looking at me like that? Honestly, did you think I cared that much about the properties of hinkypunk vapor?”

“I read a *book* on that for you!” He was indignant. “I thought it would be on next year’s exams! I thought I’d fallen behind!”

“I was showing off,” she said, amused and a bit startled, like she thought it obvious. Had it been? He couldn’t remember. He’d been a bit caught up, himself, in the prospect of having someone to write letters to. “You were the smartest person my own age I’d ever met. I wanted you to like me.”

“I *did* like you.” It was a bit strange to say it out loud, like it was a remark on the weather, but it was true, and anyway, it was pointless to play his cards close to the chest, at this point. The kneazle was out of the bag. The kneazle had been out of the bag for so long that it had forgotten the bag altogether, roamed to new pastures, and started a dynasty that was now several generations bag-free. He couldn’t very well admit to liking anybody, if not her.

That made her beam. Sometimes it was bafflingly easy to satisfy her. She really ought to have higher standards than — what, a smile? The admission that he, having risked death a multiplicity of times at her side, did not disdain her company? Merlin, maybe she did need better friends.

“I liked you, too,” she said. She paused and blinked hurriedly. “I mean, you were my friend. Are. My friend. As in, you *are* my friend. Still. Like then — but now.”

“Are you having a stroke?”

“Quite possibly. Permission to change the subject?”

“Enthusiastically granted.”

“The water is getting cold.”

It was. The surface area of the pool was so great that it actually held heat quite poorly, besides which it was surely near midnight and

Harry would be waiting for them in Gryffindor Tower, to hear what they had found out. They ought to be heading back.

He suggested as much, and she agreed. A hop brought him out of the pool, and he padded over to the muddle of his clothes, where he withdrew his wand and Summoned a towel from the annals of the room. He coursed it roughly over his hair and shoulders, used a Drying Charm for his trunks, and dressed quickly, shivering in the damp air of the vaulted chamber. A heat prickled at his back, but when he glanced over his shoulder, Hermione had turned away from him and stared pointedly at the far wall.

“Are you finished?”

“Nearly. I didn’t ask you to turn around, you know.” He abandoned the tie and jumper, from laziness, and left his collar unbuttoned. The cufflinks he ignored, and merely rolled the sleeves up to his elbows to avoid the appearance of complete slobbery.

“I know you didn’t ask,” she said, “but I realized you shouldn’t have to ask for a bit of privacy when you’re dressing, it’s common decency, and it’s no more than you did for me, and anyway, maybe I’m modest, did you think of that?”

She hadn’t been when he was getting in, but that particular can had ‘WORMS’ written in big red print all over it.

“Now you turn around, for me,” she said nervously.

He did.

“You know, it’s nothing I haven’t seen,” he said, for apparently no sodding reason at all, except possibly a sublimated death wish.

“What?”

“I meant earlier, underwater, and anyway you’re the one who said you’re in a muggle’s idea of wading gear—”

“That’s different,” she said, scandalized. “It’ll be all see-through when I get out.”

“Oh,” he said.

The ceiling was an exceptional work of architecture. The Founders really outdid themselves. Not one missing bit of ornamentation, not one tile out of place. If anyone wanted proof, they could consult Draco, who had personally checked them all.

“...Draco? Draco.”

“Good evening.”

“I’m decent,” she said, though he gave her a few extra seconds, just to be sure. When he turned, she had every scrap of clothing firmly and properly affixed to her body, and was winding her hair into a high bun over her head. “You’ve got the Cloak, haven’t you?”

Merlin’s tits. He’d forgotten that they had to get back to Gryffindor Tower. Under the Cloak. The same way they’d come.

“It’s fairly late. I doubt anyone’s holding a soirée in the hallways.”

“Filch is still on patrol, prefect rounds are still going, and we *just* watched Harry get caught by a teacher.”

“We’ve got the Map, remember.”

“The Map doesn’t show ghosts *or* Peeves. And knowing someone’s coming won’t help if we can’t find somewhere to hide.” She paused. “But I suppose, if you’re not comfortable—”

“That’s not it. I mean, it’s *not,* to be honest with you, but I don’t have any reservations about that.”

“Good, then,” she said after a moment. She gave a short, businesslike nod, and smoothed her skirts. “We’ll be quick. And, er—I promise not to tell Daphne.” She gave him a queasy smile.

“Why the devil would she care?”

But Hermione had already hurried away to drain the pool, and the sound of gurgling water drowned him out.

She insisted on getting the Cloak situated before they left the bathroom, which meant a lot of fidgeting and muttering and swearing and stepping on toes, mostly Draco’s, but no amount of engineering could produce a permutation of limbs that didn’t leave her veritably squished up against his side. That was fine. He was resigned to it, or would have been, if it didn’t mean her hair was wedged up against his neck like an ice-cold wreath of wire, making him yelp and squirm away wherever she brushed her head against him.

“Ow!”

“For goodness’ sake— *sorry,* but you keep wriggling around!”

“That’s because you’ve got a pile of sodding icicles on your head—”

“It’s hair, I’m sorry it doesn’t magically dry out when it touches a towel, but not all of us cut it short! Believe me, it’s on my head, it’s no more fun for me than you!”

“Why don’t you use a Drying Charm?”

A suspicious silence. Something was muttered so low that even in very close quarters he couldn’t hear it, which meant he was about to dine out.

“No, tell us, go on,” he said gleefully.

“It makes it frizzy,” she said sulkily. “Okay? Are you happy? I used to use them every day, until Lavender mentioned that Drying Charms make your hair frizz up, and I didn’t — know that, before. And my hair *is* frizzy, most days, as I’m sure you and everyone have noticed.”

“...And you… attributed that quality… to the Drying Charms.”

“Do you know, Flitwick said my Freezing Spell was exceptional? The best in years, he said.”

“Truce,” he said, but he was so close to laughing she could hear it in his voice, and she fumbled for her wand. “I — no, stop — Granger, *don’t—”*

He ducked away from her, laughing, as she sent a whistling bolt of cold over his shoulder. “I just meant to suggest that an eleven-year-old’s Drying Charm is probably not quite so — *stop* — sophisticated as it could be, and given the likelihood of confounding variables—”

“Singularly frigid, he said!”

“—I am making a number of purely hypothetical statements about the scientific method, and therefore cannot be blamed for them. And Brown is wrong, anyway, I use Drying Charms every day, and my hair’s fantastic.”

“It is,” she muttered vengefully, as if she thought this deserved capital punishment.

“So — and *don’t* jinx me, you little creature, or you’re going straight back in the bath — I’ll show you how to do one. If you’re nice.”

She eyed him doubtfully, but lowered her wand and her head in begrudging assent. Still snickering to himself, he drew his wand and stepped close.

The trick to a good Drying Charm was not to go quickly. Flash-drying your follicles in a bath of heat would leave them fussy and shriveled, which created the aforementioned woebegone frizz. He activated the charm with a murmur, and drew it in a slow halo around her head. At the touch of magic, the strands lifted and lightened to the same lustrous chestnut color it always turned in winter.

Which was sort of an odd thing to notice, wasn’t it. He couldn’t have described how Ron’s hair changed in winter, for instance. Let alone

identify a unique adjective for it. His mental account began and ended at ‘red.’

He *needed* to have his head checked.

“That’ll do,” he remarked, once the charm had erased all but some lingering dampness at the ends and roots. He flicked his wand to put it out and put it back in its sheath, where lingering warmth on the tip pressed into his thigh. “Leave some to dry on its own, you don’t want to overdo it.”

She said nothing.

He looked down at her. “Did you hear me?”

She was standing so close the tips of their feet could touch, staring evenly at his throat, to let him reach the crown of her head. It put her eyes on level with the loose buttons of his collar, and belatedly he felt a bit self-conscious about them; he hadn’t thought they’d be getting any particular scrutiny. He probably looked like some sort of scurrilous ragamuffin.

When she turned her face up it startled him, a little, because she didn’t move away. There was a sort of fogginess in her eyes that made him fret he’d bungled the charm and Confounded her, only she was frowning. Or not frowning, exactly — anxious, perhaps, was a better word. Despairing? Not pleased, at any rate.

“Granger?”

“Yes. I heard you. Sorry. Thank you. Have you got the Cloak?”

She was rather more clipped than he thought he deserved, considering he’d done her a favor. This taciturnity did not dissipate with time, and, if anything, got worse. As they fumbled back under the Cloak, she remained stiff and uncooperative to adjustment, moving only when asked, and when they at last made it out of that damnable bathroom, she said very little on the way back to

Gryffindor Tower except to remark about something on the Map, or remind him of a secret passageway that could shorten the journey.

He had no idea whatsoever what she was about.

The Pink Lady yawned and lilted lazily ajar upon receipt of the password, barely lucid enough to recognize it. It was midnight now, and the hour-bell was tolling twelve, sending its chilly moans all through the dark stone vaults of the castle. The torches guttered low, and from the common room beyond, there was only the faintest glimmer of firelight around the bend in the portrait-hole. Impossible to tell if Harry was there, or if he'd gone to sleep.

From courtesy, he offered his hand to her to climb up. It was a bit of a high step, especially for shorter legs. He'd done the same for half of Gryffindor House, including Ginny Weasley, Angelina Johnson, and Katie Bell, each of whom would gladly pop his nose flat, the muggle way, if he tried it on with them.

But Hermione glanced at him with wide-eyed unease, as if his hand were covered in neurotoxin, and hurriedly clambered up by herself. His hand floated there for a moment in stunned repose as she muttered something about having perfectly functional legs.

As he watched her vanish into the portrait-hole, reeling from what felt, against reason, like a subtle blow to pride, he nevertheless assured himself that it would be alright. He put himself to bed repeating this assurance: that a night's rest would dispel whatever delusions of sentiment a long day's turmoil had brought, and that daylight, that old harbinger of normalcy, would restore equilibrium.

He woke the next morning from a dream about soft wet skin and dark wet hair. And he admitted, with his burning face in his hands, that the problem had officially worsened beyond his capacity to ignore.

-It's angst, it's drama, it's... BY GOD IT'S ANOTHER UPDATE WITH A STEEL CHAIR!

-So, my justification for the double-hitter is that, one, I was literally considering a second update this week as soon as I hit Publish on the last chapter. I thought, "Hm, that ended on a downer, a chaser might be nice." And then not one but two people in the comments suggested it. And then I had a really good writing week, and finished TWO chapters of Book 5. And it wasn't any single element, but the rare confluence of all three factors made me think: hey. Drop 30,000 words in 8 days. Do it.

-draco, upon having a single physically awkward interaction with his crush: interesting. i'm going to kill myself. (been there!)

-One of the joys of writing from Draco's POV is that I get a live feed into his brain for every moment; one of the great sadnesses is that I don't get one into Hermione's. The sort of nostalgic conversations that they have in this chapter, about the Vault and second year summer, are real indulgences for me because I can sort of wink behind the curtain as to what was happening in Hermione's head during that time.

-Next chapter will go up on Friday, as usual. It will include a feature appearance by Daphne Greengrass, a terrifying conference with Draco's godfather, Speculations Concerning The Whereabouts Of Narcissa Black, and a special field trip to the Slytherin common room.

-Naturally, there's a ton of threads still hanging from Ch.44, and I will continue to tangle those up in my mean little hands for a while more at least. But the important thing is [avengers endgame title card] RON WEASLEY WILL RETURN...

-Thank you, thank you, thank you, for commenting. My God. I hope your Monday is wonderful, and contains a rare and beautiful bird.

We Cannot Sing Above the Ground

Chapter 47: We Cannot Sing Above the Ground

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Flitwick had them doing Banishment Charms, which was sorely needed stress relief. While each student had received a cushion on which to practice, it was almost impossible to enforce this rule against the base human appreciation for how very fun it was to hurl random objects as far as you possibly could. Only Hermione had calmly and perfectly returned her cushion to its bullseye, time and again, while Draco invented new ways to flick things at her without Professor Flitwick noticing. (This was not hard, since Neville had a tendency to miss his cushion and hit other, heavier objects, e.g., Professor Flitwick.)

When the fourth eraser bounced off the back of her head, she finally whirled around and hissed a Stinging Jinx at him, which he deflected harmlessly and smirked at her.

“Stop it! Prat!”

“Hm? Did you feel something?”

When she glared at him, it made her eyes into little dark wells of passion. She screwed up her whole face and did a thing with her mouth, like that one angry woman in the Caravaggio. It was lovely. It was also the first time she’d spoken to him with anything but monosyllables since last night, and frankly, it was a relief.

He twinged unpleasantly. Looking at her was reminded him of staring at a bad mark on a paper. It was a reminder of an egregious error that he ought to have avoided, but now could only hope to make up with time, given effort. It was, however, some comfort that she didn’t know about it; he could probably salvage the situation if he

maintained decorum thereon. Whatever awkwardness she was feeling — not unreasonable, considering the frankly ghastly breaches of propriety they'd committed in the bathroom — would be temporary.

As usual, the world and everything important in it came down to his own personal ability to hold it together. He was hardly surprised.

Professor Flitwick docked them five points for being off-task. This left Hermione so apoplectic that she didn't speak to him again until lunch.

"It's a good thing you've got the knack of it, Harry," she said pointedly. "That'll come in handy with the grindylows."

"Yeah," said Harry, whose success had overdosed him with optimism. "Hey, think about this: you reckon I can just Banish the water and walk down?"

"Oh, bless, he thinks he's Moses."

"It's a perfectly fair question," said Hermione stiffly. "As I would say to Draco, if I were talking to him. But Harry, even if you could get one that strong, *Bombarda* is an acute spell, and once the force dissipates, the water would come back in. Which, at that volume—"

"Would be not dissimilar to dropping a building on your head."

"—would be painful, probably," she admitted, as Harry hauled open the doors to the Great Hall. "But it's a nice idea."

Harry considered this, thoughtfully, and then said: "What if I run?"

"Run… away from the water?"

"Yeah. Just like, run."

"Harry," Hermione began, in tones of strained kindness.

“No, let’s hear him out,” said Draco thoughtfully, who very badly wanted to watch Harry try it.

They found Daphne sitting unannounced at the Gryffindor table, where she was delicately annihilating a cask of French onion soup between pages of *Witch Weekly.* Some ways down the table, Ron made the fourth corner of a square with Dean, Seamus, and Ginny, the last of whom waved to Harry and the others as they came in — but she was the only one.

Draco dropped his bag like an anchor and sat next to Daphne. Harry stared longingly down the table, but when Draco cleared his throat he followed suit.

Then Hermione did a strange thing. She set her bag down next to Draco’s, stopped, picked it up again, and then circumnavigated the table to go sit on the other side, next to Harry. This put her across from Daphne, who looked up in oblivious cheer and said: “Hail and well met! You’ve got rubber in your hair. Where is Ronald?”

Hermione yanked out the offending article, mumbling an ungrateful *thank you.*

Draco studied her. She wouldn’t meet his eyes.

He frowned.

“Ron’s not here,” she said shortly. “We’re having a row.”

“A great pity,” Daphne said, and she sounded genuinely sorrowful. “Is he being a wanker?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Dear me. Is it that kind of fight?”

Hermione flushed. “No,” she snapped. “Does everything have to come down to that?”

“Come down to what? Greengrass, explain yourself.”

“Oh, no. I believe I was told to butt out, thank you,” she said serenely, burying her nose in a goblet of pumpkin juice, “and I shall not be tricked into doing anything but.”

Having one know-it-all around was an amusement; two was starting to irritate him.

“You know what I reckon?” mused Harry. “I reckon our best plan is to say bugger it and Summon some scuba gear.”

With evident relief, Hermione turned away from Daphne. “And do what? You don’t know how to scuba dive.”

“I’d figure it out.”

“What’s a scuba?” Daphne inquired.

“Wheely thing muggles ride around on,” said Draco.

“Ah.”

“Scooter,” said Hermione. “Scoo-ter.”

“I see,” said Daphne politely. “And what is scooter diving, pray tell?”

“Lets you breathe underwater,” said Harry, “for a little while, anyway. Not that it’d work, Hermione’s right, you need weeks to learn. Aunt Petunia bought Dudley lessons for his fourteenth, he almost drowned.” He sighed.

“Take heart, Potter, it’ll happen eventually.”

“You always say that.”

“I see,” said Daphne, again, in the kindly tones of someone who understood nothing. “And why does Harry want to breathe underwater?”

“For the Second Task,” he said glumly, gazing into his bowl as if it contained the very waters that doomed him. “I have to go under the lake. Problem is, I don’t know how, and I reckon all the other champions are gonna use this one fancy spell I can’t do.”

“But it’s two weeks away! Cutting it tight, aren’t we?”

“We’ve been researching,” Hermione snapped. “We’ve done plenty of reading.” True. “We have lots of ideas.” Less true.

“Why haven’t you just asked the mermaids?”

“Why haven’t we — well, to start with, Mermish is an extremely hard language, and one that’s impossible to speak above the water, which obviously means Harry would need to know how to breathe water before he could ask them, so, return to Point A, about breathing—”

“No, I mean in the dungeons.” When she received no answer, Daphne leaned forward eagerly. “Ooh, you don’t know? This is delicious. I never get to tell you lot something new.”

“...There are mermaids in the dungeons?” said Hermione, dripping with skepticism.

“Not *in* the dungeons. But Slytherin’s under the lake. We’ve windows all over the place, and if you wait long enough, one will come swimming up and tap on the glass. I think they see us like goldfish,” she added thoughtfully.

“But you can’t possibly speak to them.”

“Not in Mermish! But they’ve got a hand language, to talk to land-dwellers,” she said, fluttering her fingers.

Hermione surveyed her with new interest. “Can you speak it?”

“All the Slytherin girls can. It’s something of a tradition. Holleen’s their favorite, they gave her a proper Mermish name and everything…”

“Can you translate?” There was a certain inquisitorial glow about her, which meant either an interrogation or an epiphany was swiftly forthcoming.

Daphne saw it, and so it was with faint alarm that she agreed: “If you don’t mind a bit of looseness with grammar, I suppose.”

Hermione beamed and leapt to her feet.

“Oh! You mean now?”

“Invariably,” said Draco, massaging his nose.

“Yes,” said Hermione, firmly. “Why not? You’re free, Daphne, aren’t you?”

Daphne looked mournfully at her bowl of soup. “Well,” she said.

“Wonderful. Come along, it won’t take a moment. Harry, put that down.”

Harry, who had been furtively reaching for the soup ladle, wilted.

“But I’m hungry.”

Without missing a beat, Hermione pivoted, pointed her wand down the table, and barked, *“Accio.”*

A Cornish pasty zoomed into her hand. She tossed it to a startled Harry, dumped his bowl of soup back into the pot, and threw back the last of her tea in one go.

Daphne falteringly raised her hand.

“What?”

“Can I have one?”

“Fine!” Another pasty was delivered unto its end, who nibbled it happily. “But hurry! Lunch ends in thirty minutes! No lollygagging!”

“Yes, sir, right away, sir,” drawled Draco.

Hermione pointed at him, opened her mouth, inhaled, and closed it; then, blinking quickly, and stalked away.

Bemused, he looked at Harry, who with palms raised to heaven he indicated that he was not touching it.

They followed Hermione down the staircase off the Entrance Hall, tripping down hairpin staircases with a haste that was perilous to ankles and necks. At first Daphne tried to offer directions, but soon fell into wondrous silence when Hermione forged ahead, taking turns unsuggested, and cutting through long identical hallways as if she had a map of them written on the back of her hand.

“Hermione,” called Daphne, “have you been to Slytherin before?”

“No. Why would I?”

“You just seem to know your way around, my dear.”

“Yes, I memorized the Map,” she said absently, peering around a corner. “It’s not quite the same, obviously, but once you get a sense of the pattern, it’s not hard to get a heading… this is it, isn’t it?”

She hooked around a corner without waiting for an answer, and they were in front of the Slytherin common room doors. Draco gave a slow, intrigued whistle, and she very slightly smiled.

Then she stopped and turned away. He scowled.

What was her problem? He hadn’t said anything— she’d been perfectly happy last night, right up until — anyway.

“I didn’t know there was a map of Hogwarts,” Daphne said idly. “Password’s ‘capricorn,’ by the way.”

The wall rippled, and a lacquered black door emerged from between unfurling wings of brick. Daphne hooked an arm around the handle and, with a playful flourish of a bow, she opened the door.

In the emerald vault of the Slytherin commons, the scent of tea cakes and mulled wine floated around the watery atria. Girls and boys in dark robes floated through the green light, exchanging cool murmurs that echoed on the stone. When the door creaked, half the hall fell silent, and a dozen pale faces turned like a den of arctic foxes to watch them come in.

Daphne took a sharp breath and quickly wove her arm through Hermione's. Hermione made an indignant noise and tried to tug it free, but Daphne refused to let her go.

With a prickle of heat on the back of his neck, Draco noticed the pattern of the other Slytherins' stares: they swept over and away from Harry in disgust, and flickered with dull disinterest over Draco himself; but wherever their eyes fell on Hermione, they stayed there.

Hermione made a small noise when he stepped in line next to her, as if he'd startled her.

"Come on," Daphne said, quite calmly. "My room's this way."

She bundled them out of the common room, tripping down a narrow corridor to a tall oak door.

The handle was sculpted in the shape of an adder, and when she put her finger to it, the lock clicked open. Behind it lay a high-ceilinged stone chamber with chocolate wood floors, furnished in old world abundance: a green leather claw-foot sofa, a twelve-foot bookshelf in gleaming mahogany, against which rested a long silver cane; a writer's desk sporting a tin of tropically colored quills. Throned amongst the quilts on the queen bed lounged the fattest, furriest, ugliest cat Draco had ever seen, and he included Crookshanks. It looked like someone had glued a face to a pile of cotton, and then punched it.

“You’ve a cat!” exclaimed Hermione.

Daphne threw the door shut behind Harry. “Oh, yes, that’s Duchess,” she said. “She’s my darling chubby baby girl, and you must pet her if you want to sit on the bed.”

Duchess peeled her ears back and hissed. Hermione cooed.

He’d forgotten that Hermione had a soft spot for small creatures of raw spite. Maybe she felt a kinship with them.

“Thank you,” said Daphne, quite proudly, and she locked the door behind them.

A giant window in the shape of a bay leaf was cut into the wall, and the turquoise waters of the lake strained green light into the room. Dark towers of kelp swayed in bleary distortion through the water, and schools of tiny silver fish glinted here and there across the glass. Daphne hauled a chair away from the desk and hopped up on it, where she lit her wand with *Lumos* and angled it around the window like she was searching for something.

“Normally I don’t do this,” she explained, “as they’ll come and go as they please, but in the interests of time — they respond to light more than noise, you see. Their eyesight is quite good.”

“It would have to be, at the bottom of the lake,” murmured Hermione, and she tapped her knuckles on the glass. Harry put his hand on the back of Daphne’s chair, carefully, to stabilize it. Draco leaned one shoulder against the glass and casually flicked a Knocking Charm at it, which made Hermione give him the silly sideways look she always did when he used magic for something she wouldn’t have.

He quirked his lip at her. She tilted her head and smiled with the corner of her mouth. The glow from the water turned her face a jeweled blue, and sent tiger-stripes of silver rippling over her. Her collar was still askew and the light went winnowing down across the shadows there, over the noticeable swell of her jumper, her slender

legs skinned in black winter tights. It reminded him of the prefects' bathroom.

He inhaled and turned back to the window.

A shape swelled out of the water. Daphne clapped her hands together and gave a yelp of joy: as a humanoid silhouette emerged from the lake's indigo fathoms.

There were few words to describe how eerie it was: his brain told him, in some alarm, that there was a human being on the other side of the glass, but equally salient parts of his brain replied that it was wrong. The proportions told it for a lie. It had the chest of a starveling corpse, the ladder of its ribcage hanging over a ghoulish hollow of a stomach, and its bony arms were skinned in the leathery gray of dead flesh. An amphibious head perched on the pencil-thin column of its neck, with a wide frog-mouth and bulbous, watery eyes, the pupils dilated to the size of sickles, like fish. Its hips fused into a single, writhing snake of muscle, which it used like a rudder to steer itself through the current.

A hand slapped onto the glass. It was long, clawed, and webbed, its fingers more like bat-wings than human digits. Hermione jumped. Harry jumped, too.

Daphne, not startled at all, clapped again in delight. "Oh, good! She wants to talk!" she said. "Now, you all say hello, too. It's polite." She smacked her hand onto the glass, fingers spread.

Hermione and Harry tentatively placed their hands beside Daphne's. Draco preferred to watch, until Hermione kicked him in the ankle, and rolling his eyes, he flicked his sleeve back and applied his palm to the cool glass.

The mer slid her hand along the glass, leaving a trail of something yellowy and translucent, and aligned her fingers with Daphne's. When she peeled it away, it left a print in mucus. Daphne's hand left a print in fog.

Daphne made some gesture that involved tapping her mouth and scooping her fingers along her cupped palm. This she traced a hook-shape over her face, dotting it like a question mark with a tap on her chin. The mer yawped, a deep, haunting croon, and then mimicked her.

“Oh, bless, she wants to help!” Daphne clasped her hands and turned to Harry. “What did you want to ask her?”

“Merlin,” said Harry wondrously, gazing at the mer with the same stupid amazement he’d found for hippogriffs. Give it teeth and magic and a spooky affect, and Harry would just about keel over for it. “What’s it like to live underwater?”

Daphne started gesturing. Mermish hand language involved a lot of finger movements around the body and head, interspersed with sketches on the glass, like a visual pictography. That intrigued him. Hermione had found her notebook and was scribbling so fast he was surprised the quill-tip didn’t burn off from friction.

The mer swiveled its head at Harry and gave another low-bellied croon. It darted its hand in a half-circle around its face, and then pointed with two fingers at Harry.

“She says, ‘Like you live, only wetter.’”

Harry laughed. The mer yawped again and swished its tail with a certain animalistic satisfaction, like a purring cat.

“How does she breathe?” he wondered. “What does she eat? What are those pebbly things she’s wearing?”

“Goodness, we don’t have time for all that. Read a book, my dove. Hermione—?”

“Yes,” said Hermione quickly. “We want to know what’s *in* the lake, first of all. Start with that.”

“Hm. I’ll try if you like, but I’m not… entirely positive that’ll translate,” she admitted. “Bit like asking, ‘what’s on the planet,’ isn’t it? Or a bird, ‘what’s in the sky.’”

Hermione frowned. “I see. Tell her… try telling her that some wizards are going to be coming into the lake, and we’d like to know if there’s anything they need to be careful of.”

Daphne obeyed. After a short flurry of gesturing, the mer cut her off with a squawk and smacked her skull twice with the flat of her hand.

“Oh! She says she knows about that!”

“She does?” Hermione was fascinated. She huddled closer to Daphne, as if she could siphon knowledge through osmosis. “How?”

“She says… the wizards have been building something in the lake. Kicking up dirt. Bad for the fish.” Daphne watched carefully, her pale brows dented with concentration. “And… she says… the purple man said it was for the wizard game. Sorry — purple officer? It’s got the formal case, but Mermish is so strange, I don’t know how you’d make ‘purple’ a formal word.”

“As a title? Purple is commonly associated with royalty,” said Hermione curiously, “so it could be a type of king, or a lord, or someone powerful. Only the context, ‘man,’ suggests it’s a wizard, so perhaps that means it’s an important wizard, a kingly wizard, someone with high standing—”

“Ministry representative,” said Draco. The others looked at him. “If I had to guess. Their robes are purple.”

Daphne cried and applauded. “Clever clogs! See, this is why I’m terrible at languages, I’m hopelessly literal. We should have had Pansy do it, she’s much brighter than me, and she’s got a lovely Mermish accent — ooh, I missed the participle there, this is going to be rough. It’s a list, I think? Grindylows, for one… lobalugs… a hippocampus, but it’s domesticated… and the squid.”

“Oh, good! Just the squid, nothing else?”

“Hark at her,” said Draco, “one dragon, and now it’s ‘just the squid,’ is it? Why don’t we take down a confederation of giants, while we’re at it? And a griffin for dessert? Just another breezy Tuesday, for Hermione Granger—”

“Shut up,” she said, a touch pink. “What, are you scared?”

“‘What, are you scared?’ What are *you,* nine?”

“At least I’m not quivering in my boots at the mere suggestion of tentacles—”

“I’ll show you who’s quivering, thank you—”

“Hang on,” said Harry, speaking over their undercurrent of nonsense, though, irritatingly, just as they’d begun to approach their normal rapport. Hermione broke off at once and went back to scribbling with suspicious focus. “I don’t have to fight the mermaids, do I?”

He sounded very sincerely worried. Personally, Draco could think of things harder than jinxing a creature that looked like a skeleton hopped into a hydraulic press with a newt, but for Harry, the prospect caused some distress.

“Good question!” Daphne smacked her palm with the flat of her hand, and the mer lashed her hand across her throat. “Oh, that’s a strong ‘no.’ They’re only there to supervise. She says—” Her lips thinned in suppression of a laugh. “She says it’s immoral to fight a baby.”

“...Am I the baby?”

“Only by implicature.”

“Can you ask her if she knows what the champions have to do?” said Hermione, while Harry grappled with this. “They have to retrieve

something from the lake. It's something they'll 'sorely miss,' if that narrows it down."

Daphne gestured again. The mer hesitated.

"She says no."

"Drat," muttered Hermione. She drew a line through something. "Alright. There's still… oh, does she happen to know how Harry might go about breathing underwater? Long shot, but it'd be helpful."

Daphne pointed to Harry, tapped her throat, made the half-circle gesture, and then the question mark.

The mer blinked, a slow shuttering of translucent eyelids. She swiveled her head back and forth, and Draco recognized it as a gesture of deep thought. It was *thinking,* he thought, abruptly; she was accessing her memory and using it to answer questions. It was capable of cognition and problem-solving and even some level of humor.

He didn't know what to do with that. There was something unnerving about the idea.

"She's asking whether you haven't tried gillyweed," reported Daphne.

"What's gillyweed?"

Not unreasonably, Harry addressed this question to Hermione, who shook her head and, not unreasonably, turned to Draco — who didn't know, because Herbology was an endurance trial and he hated it.

Daphne obediently relayed the question. "It's a plant, apparently! It gives you gills."

"Gills?" said Harry, slightly green.

"Gills," breathed Hermione. "Perfect. Exactly. How do we get it?"

“She doesn’t know.”

“She doesn’t *know?”*

“Well, it’s plentiful at the bottom of the lake,” said Daphne, defensively, “but if you could nip down for a scoop, you wouldn’t have this problem in the first place, would you?”

“Can she get it to us?”

“It’s not harvesting season,” said Daphne, after a quick conferral. “She’d be willing, she says, and she’s very sorry; she likes… er. She likes ‘the polite baby.’ But it won’t be prepared for months.”

“Sorry,” said the polite baby, raising his hand, “but do they stick around? The gills? Do we know if they wear off?”

“So we’ll have to find a store somewhere,” murmured Hermione. “Or buy it, I suppose.”

Draco leaned his head back, thinking. “Hogsmeade doesn’t have an apothecary.”

“Snape does.”

“Snape’s not an herbalist.”

“We’ve stolen before—”

“Of *necessity—”*

“This *is* necessity—”

“Of course it is, but it’s not a victimless crime, is my point.”

“Some victim!”

“Again,” said Harry, “gills? Permanent? Anybody.”

“Not likely,” said Hermione.

“Acceptably likely,” said Draco.

“Hard to tell,” said Daphne, “but for her part, she says you oughtn’t worry about it; *she* thinks they’re quite fashionable, and you’d look good with them.”

“That’s great,” said Harry plaintively. “Wonderful. Ask her if she can convince Cho.”

In the last, long, black days before the Second Task — days that opened in peals of thunder to a sky dark as nightfall, peppered the world with lightning, and then slipped wrathfully back into night, leaving the windows dim and darker — Draco sank gradually into despair. He had thought, with the innocence of a child playing a puzzle game, that solving the egg would solve their problems. He was wrong.

Hook and crook met no meat on this issue. Not a sick fool in the world would gamble his life on Harry’s Bubble-Head Charm, which at the height of his concentration could produce only a semipermeable barrier for three minutes. Even Hermione’s version, a wholly impermeable shield, petered out around twenty-six minutes — though she blustered that she could have sustained concentration with less noise — which said nothing good about Harry’s chances of managing longer. The Second Task leaked dourness into the days that preceded it.

Somewhere in these vanishing hours, they all passed an unspoken threshold of time where even if, at this point, they discovered a spell or enchantment that could save him, Harry would lack the time to master it. Everyone understood this, but no one said so, perhaps for fear of hearing it confirmed back to them by one of the others; and yet that enforced silence intensified the cold spell of ennui. Evening study sessions at the library became futile and ghoulish. Stacks of antique spell indices assumed a certain penitential affect, like bars

on a cage. Hermione churned out pages upon pages of notes about grindylows and hinkypunks that Harry would read and silently put away, because nothing in them would help him if he couldn't breathe.

She had been friendly but religiously polite to Draco, ever since the prefects' bathroom — a frightening development, because on a list of her many virtues, 'politeness' would not appear given fifty feet of parchment and a pixie-sized hand.

"She just misses Ron," said Harry.

They had broken into the quidditch pitch. Steam rose from their bodies in the afternoon mist, the heat of their sweat melting the crust of frost on the bleachers below them.

Harry had grown into his Nimbus over the summer, and Draco often caught him marveling at its weathered name in gilt, the snitch-bright glitter of M.M. on the case.

His talent grew more disgusting every year, and Draco still, given his best efforts, could not beat him in an outright race.

He maintained cover by denying that any of these attempts were his best efforts.

"Yet again, you've classically missed the point," he said. "We're talking about me."

He didn't want to talk about Hermione, or how she might be missing Ron. They weren't talking about her. Or her and Ron. Or whatever Ron's sentiments for her were, which were none of Draco's business and made him feel oddly, vaguely resentful for no reason whatsoever, being that she hadn't shown evidence of returning them.

Which also would not be his business.

"It's all mixed up, though," said Harry. He leaned back on the bleachers and carded his fingers through his sweaty hair. "You and

me and Hermione and Ron. In the hopper, right. Can't be normal when Ron's gone. Even though, again, it is his choice not to talk to me, which is, I guess, fine."

"Why."

"Why what?"

"I mean that doesn't make any sense."

"It's because we're all in the hopper together."

"I am not in 'the hopper' with anything. Personally, politically, or spiritually."

"Okay. But you are, though. Anyway, it's obvious she misses him," he said, "because now they're fighting, they can't pick on each other, and they're both miserable."

"She picks on me."

"Not the same. You do your homework and iron your shirts," said Harry, shaking his head, like this was an enduring character fault. "She's gotta work for it, with you. Ron and I are open season."

Fair. "Speaking of. She picks on *you* plenty."

"But she doesn't like to," said Harry peacefully. "I'm a nice boy."

"Oh, please."

"I'm a sweet lad, Draco."

"You're an upjumped cuckoo bird, is what you are."

"A perfect angel."

"As was Lucifer."

“You’d know,” said Harry innocently, and Draco was too lazy to do more than a rude gesture. “Anyway, Hermione’s going through it, just like the rest of us. The Task is driving her nutters, and now, with Ron, it’s all like a table. You cut one leg off a table, and like — it’ll still stand, but you can’t put anything heavy on it.”

“Legs do not generally part from tables of their own accord.”

“Wasn’t all his fault.” Harry bent forward, massaging his calf. “You two *are* a bit— you know.”

“Good Lord. Not this.”

“It’s true. He wasn’t imagining it, you two are always scuttling off to the library together.”

“To solve *your* riddle, thank you—”

“No. Before.” Harry smacked some dirt off his knees and turned to him, expression serious but not unkind. “You’re always partners in everything and you’re always gossiping about the homework before Ron and I’ve even looked at it. And then last year, with Arithmancy and Runes and the Polyjuice Potion… and then you two even dropped out of Hagrid’s class to go do your own thing—”

“I don’t recall McGonagall barring either of you two from Arithmancy,” said Draco coldly.

“Hop off my arse, wouldja,” said Harry, sounding strikingly like Ron. “I’m not trying to be mean. Just look at it his way, right? How’s he supposed to feel, with me in the Tournament, and you two going off on your own all the time?”

“He can feel however he wants about it. So long as he keeps it to himself, it’s none of my concern.”

“Right, so that's a lie,” he said patiently. “Unless you can look me in the eye and say you don’t miss him, which I still wouldn’t believe.

You've got to miss doing the little nose-wrinkle thing with him when me and Hermione act like muggles. You haven't done the nose-wrinkle thing in weeks."

Ron's vow of silence had dragged on into the new month. It was making relations in the Gryffindor common room somewhat strained, especially for Fred, George, and Ginny, whose lack of insight into the situation warred with a desire not to cross an emotional picket line. Everyone knew that there had been a fight of some kind, but no one knew what exactly about, and no one but Colin Creevey was tactless enough to come outright and ask.

Draco wished they would. At least Colin had taken his Ear-Expanding Hex on the chin, like a man, and been on his way.

"Plus," said Harry, "you were a real twat about the Burrow."

"He was something of a twat, himself."

"It's not different."

"Who was it that started the fight? Was it me? I don't remember that happening."

Harry granted this with an uncomfortable jerk of his head. "Wasn't *just* him," he muttered. "You missed the beginning. He came in with the article, right, and he was a good sport to start with — we all sat around and had a good laugh. But then he — I dunno — he started asking all these questions, about how Colin got the picture, and if we talked to any reporters, or if Hermione and I had been spending more time together — you know, weird questions, but not offensive, not really. Only Hermione kind of took it the wrong way—"

"Shock. Surprise."

"—and she said, ah, if he thought she and I were — er — I think she said 'closet snogging,' every time his back was turned—"

Draco choked on a snort.

“—then he was an idiot, et cetera — and then I said something about wishing they’d both shut up, which, you know, really set them off—”

“With diplomacy like that, who needs war?”

“Yeah, yeah. So they got to shouting, and I — you know, I shut down, because I can’t — when people shout, my brain goes all—” He shook his hand vaguely over his ear. “And then he said something about snogging Krum and Hermione really blew up, and she told him — er, I’m not gonna repeat what she told him, if that’s alright—”

“English lacks a sufficiently strong synonym for ‘thank you.’”

“But anyway, that’s what had him fired up before you came in. And he’s been feeling shit all year. He’s been doing his best to tamp it down, but it’s not like any of us have really had time to notice, with the Tournament everything.”

“How dare you be distracted by fighting for your life in a deadly game of skill and chance? Shame on you, for neglecting poor Weasley’s feelings.”

“I’m not saying we didn’t have good reasons, but he has good ones, too. And we all know he can get mean, he and Hermione fought all through third year. The point is, we should take it easy on him.”

“No.”

“...No?”

He chose his words carefully.’

“He has a bad habit,” he said, “of going after Granger when he needs a free hit.”

Harry frowned.

“No—”

“I wouldn’t mention it,” he said neutrally, flicking dirt from his knees, “but he won’t hurt you if he can avoid it, and evidently can’t come up with much to hurt me, so she’s caught the brunt of it. It’s why he spent so much time yelling at her, did you notice? I did.”

“She bites back more than you or I do,” said Harry, “maybe that—”

“More than I do? Really.”

“But he just—”

“Wanted to do damage? Certainly. Oh, yes. The only reason he mentioned me at all was to bother her. It’s a fine strategy, it’s the target I don’t accept. ”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “and— okay. That was a shit thing to do, but one, you’ve got a thing with muggles and everybody knows it, including Hermione, who sticks her neck out for you way more than you deserve; and two, going after his house, especially when you’ve got a mansion—”

“It isn’t my fault that I have a mansion.” He wasn’t going to touch the thing about muggles. Hermione understood how he was. Harry and Ron didn’t get it, which wasn’t their fault, but they just didn’t.

Harry gave him a look.

“It isn’t,” he muttered.

“Yeah. Okay. Well, do me a favor and don’t say that to him, whenever he comes back, right? If you ever want to talk to him again, that is.”

“The jury is out.”

“No, it’s not,” yawned Harry. He stood up and stretched so high that the joints in his shoulders crackled.

“What makes you think so?”

“A feeling,” said Harry, naming his favorite form of evidence. And he smiled a smile of rare confidence, an expression Draco had seen only sometimes, which took as its source the conviction that the gears and levers of the world worked in an inexorable rhythm towards goodness, and they would soon return to it, and when they did, the smile’s owner would have the double pleasure of being both right and happy about it. This was an expression Draco had never made and never would, and so whenever Harry showed it he had the faint awe of witnessing something impossible.

Which was not to say he didn’t look stupid. He did. Jammy moon-eyed git.

Harry turned the smile relentlessly up at the broad ceiling of clouds, and slinging a leg over his broomstick, he kicked off through the glacial winter morning, sailing up into the sky as if gravity had flipped and drawn him home.

The next time he saw Hermione was in Potions. She wanted to talk about the Second Task, which was about the only subject she would discuss freely with him anymore, and so he indulged her, mostly because the alternative was brittle decorum the likes of which made her seem frankly possessed.

“If you don’t want to steal, you could always ask him outright, you know.”

“Being known for his generous disposition.”

“He *is* your godfather.”

“Raise your voice a little, I don’t think the court reporter heard it—”

“Don’t be a worrywand. It’s worth a shot.”

“Fine. I have to ask him to take a letter to my mother, anyway.”

It had been three weeks, with no word from her. When he let himself think about it, it put him half of a mind to march himself home and see what all was going on, but Snape didn’t exactly make himself available for consultation. He’d canceled four in five office hours, and rarely stayed after class longer than it took to make an excuse and hurry out. His lessons had become somewhat hurried in tenor — even Neville was starting to relax, free from supervision, and his brewing showed improvement from it — while his interest in normal sources of joy, like docking points for sloppy Windsors, had plummeted alarmingly.

He looked tired. Draco worried about him.

She blew some smoke off the cauldron-lip and frowned. “Why would Professor Snape take a letter to your mother?”

“He’s my godfather,” he said evasively, slitting a murtlap’s belly with a deft stroke of the knife. “Pass the forceps.”

Forceps were passed. “I know that,” she said. “I’ve a godfather, too, but I don’t use him as a postal service.”

“Really? Such strange creatures, muggles.”

She scowled. He splayed his fingers, not quite an apology — more of an easing-off — but it acknowledged the ice was thinner than he’d seen.

It was a joke. She understood that.

“You’re avoiding the question,” she said brusquely, and poked him with a stirring rod. “Tell me.”

He thought about not telling her — Snape probably would have advised against — but Snape was a crotchety old bugger, and

anyway, Draco didn’t see the point in hiding anything. It wasn’t as though she could change it, one way or another.

“The Ministry watches owl post.”

“What.”

She had stopped stirring. He made a distressed noise and repossessed the rod to remedy her mistake. “Some of it, anyway. I quite agree, it’s a devil of a thing—”

“That’s illegal!”

“Oh, Lord.”

“You have rights!”

“It doesn’t feel like it right now.”

“They *watched* you? For how long?”

“It doesn’t make a difference, to be honest,” he said. “Unless you’re worried about people reading your Christmas notes, which are, I admit, politically loaded—”

“I’m worried about people abusing your civil liberties.”

“The only person I let abuse my civil liberties is you,” he said, annoyed, “for reasons that currently escape me, as I’m working my fingers to the bone stirring this cauldron *by myself,* while you foment revolution.”

“I’m serious.” She touched his arm. He glanced at it and then at her and then at the cauldron, which was fascinating, or soon would be, once he remembered what he was doing with it. “Why didn’t you complain?”

“...To whom?”

“To Dumbledore! Or, fine, not Dumbledore, but someone important. Your lawyer! Or — you know — to me,” she said, faltering. He dropped his eyes to her hand, and she hastily withdrew it. “You never said anything—”

“About what? It doesn’t matter.” She was staring at him like he had missed something unfathomably important. Then she seemed to relocate her hand remained on his arm, and snatched it away, almost knocking over a beaker in the process. She resettled herself in her chair and did not look at him again.

“I would have told you if it were important,” he said tartly, wondering if she were peeved about being kept out of a secret. But it was *his* mother, and *his* post, so he frankly didn't see where she was entitled to know any of it, except that Hermione usually felt herself entitled to all the information in a particular room.

She ignored him. It needled him for the rest of class, her silence, and he was about to resort to pitching things at her when the hour-bell groaned.

It preceded a shriek of chairs and footsteps, including Hermione’s, who removed herself with a polite *goodbye* like the cracking of crystal. And Draco excused himself to go talk to his godfather.

He hated this. It would be preferable, in his mind, if they could reset everything to the way it had been right after the First Task, when everything was simple and delightful and he felt like the god-king of knowledge and adventure.

Snape’s cauldron was empty. The Potions Master erased the blackboard with a sweep of his wand and set about strapping his knives into his kit. His book lay open on the desk, beside the cauldron, the instructions ringed in familiar doilies of black scrawl. Even the title, ‘Choking Solution’ had been struck though, and replaced with an uneven line: *liquid benzonatate (c30h53no11).* Beside it lay a spindly chain of hexagons.

“It is a formula,” said a voice behind him. “You should familiarize yourself. They will appear on your N.E.W.T.”

The door swung shut, and the candles in the potions classroom flickered. In the dim, smoky room, studded with green luminescent bottles and burbling cauldrons, it felt like a sunken study, or an underwater cavern. With not an ounce of daylight, it could have been any time at all. Draco didn’t understand how one could tolerate a whole day without sunlight. It would do things to his brain. In fact, maybe that explained a good deal about Snape, come to think of it.

He turned around. Snape stood with his arms folded in a militant shield over his sunken chest. His brittle black eyes peered out from a face of malnourished thinness. The long, bony fingers of his right hand pinched the handle of his wand, which he pointed at the desk, where the book snapped shut.

“Hello, Uncle Severus. Does this mean you think I’ll pass my O.W.L.?”

He couldn’t help it. Fishing for compliments was one of his hobbies.

Snape made an irritated noise in his throat. Draco smirked and hopped up to sit on the desk.

“That is not a chair.”

“My mistake, sir.” He didn’t move. “Can I ask you a question?”

“I lack the time to instruct you on what a chair is.”

Sometimes he nearly suspected his godfather had a sense of humor.

“You’re hilarious, sir. Do you happen to have any gillyweed?”

“Why do you ask?”

Draco weighed his options, and decided for the rare honest play. “Potter needs it for the Second Task,” he admitted. “It’s rather rare,

we don’t know where to find it. I thought you might have some.”

His godfather’s voice grew an edge. “And you think I would simply give it to you, if I did?”

“Please. I would remunerate you, naturally. I’d not waste your time with begging, nor mine, sir.”

Snape slowly lifted his hand to his face. Because his back was turned, it took a moment to realize he was massaging his head.

“Do you know, Draco,” he said, quiet with unhappy memoria, “sometimes you remind me so strongly of your father that I feel rather haunted.”

“Really? How?”

Oh, and hang him for that, honestly, that naked and humiliating pitch of eagerness. Stuff a sock in his throat and keep it there. Gag him until he was of an age to stop embarrassing himself.

Snape took a while choosing his next words. “A perhaps unreasoned confidence in his own powers,” he said, “and a truly remarkable collection of synonyms for bribery.”

To his ear, it sounded like Snape was calling him shallow, and he didn’t care for that at all. “Tosh. Bribery is the financial manipulation of a public servant,” he said, clipped. “What I’m suggesting is embezzlement, if anything.”

A mysterious tremor broke out in Snape’s cheek. “Another sentence that might come from beyond the grave. But I cannot help you. I have no gillyweed left.”

“Oh,” he said. Then: “What do you mean, ‘left’?”

“Precisely what I said. Ordinarily I should have several bushels, but the school apothecary has been mysteriously pilfered, of late, and several ingredient stores were eradicated completely. Gillyweed was

among them. I am sorry to say that Mr. Potter will simply have to hold his breath."

"Someone *stole* it?"

"Obviously."

"Who? Do you know? Did they leave clues?"

"I have not the slightest idea," said Snape delicately, though his eyes cut sidelong at Draco. "I had suspected the same anonymous personage responsible for the disappearance of my prize boomslang skin, last spring. I inferred that it might prove similarly… of use… to them."

Draco cleared his throat and lifted his chin.

"Seems unlikely, sir."

"Mm."

"Just based on — probability, you know. The same person striking twice. I wouldn't put my money on it, personally."

"No? That is concerning."

Draco drummed his fingers restlessly on the desk. "You might… and sir, I don't mean to point fingers."

"How rarely that refrain precedes anything but."

"But before the First Task, the Restricted Section of the library was cleared of books on dragon-taming. Now, under normal circumstances, I wouldn't go so far as to suggest sabotage—"

"Then you are more a fool than I had believed," said Snape curtly. "Of course it is sabotage; it can be nothing else. This is the Triwizard Tournament. The prize, far greater than money, is the sort of glory that makes one's career. Books will go missing, potion stores will be

stolen, and if Potter's competitors have not already conspired against him, I would be shocked at their lack of competitive acumen."

"Yes! Exactly!"

"Your exuberance is unmerited. It takes precious little cunning to infer. Potter is the youngest, the smallest, and the least legitimate, by any reckoning; he is the obvious target for a conspiracy. In eliminating him, each stands to raise their own chance of victory by eight percent. They will attempt to cut him out of the running in the Second Task, mark me, and compete amongst themselves in the Third." He jabbed his wand at the board, and the last few instructions sprang out of it in a pellet of chalk.

"Sir, I couldn't agree more. Now, about that—"

"You should let them."

He stuttered. "What, sir?"

Snape finished the inscription with a sharp flourish. "I do not repeat myself. Be candid: have you given any thought to what happens if Potter wins?"

Draco fumbled for an answer that wouldn't embarrass him.

"He gets a thousand galleons," he suggested. "Rita Skeeter writes several indecorous news features."

"No. Cassius Warrington will be humiliated."

That rankled. "I don't know about 'humiliated,' sir. It's a hard tournament, at the risk of redundancy."

"You cannot truly think it matters." It was the same scorn offered to students who gave exceptionally creative wrong answers. It stung. "Potter may be Merlin's gift to magic — I happen to know for a fact he is not — but politics is nine tenths optical. Cassius Warrington is a pureblood adult. Potter is a half-blood. The thesis of Albert Runcorn's

political career has been that one of these things is indubitably superior to the other. This Tournament," he said, "is an empirical test of that hypothesis."

Which was a sobering kind of thing to hear, but not particularly helpful. He respected his godfather tremendously, but he was concerned that Snape severely underestimated the perils of 'let it ride' as a strategic game plan. Or he just didn't care. Considering his remarks about Harry, it was quite possible he didn't.

The hour-bell tolled again, signaling the start of dinner, and with a riotous complaint, his stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten lunch.

"Professor. About my mother—"

"You worry for her."

"A bit," he said. "Occasionally. From time to time."

"She has been occupied, of late. She sends her regards."

"So — you've seen her, then?"

"Just last week."

"At the Manor?"

"Do you imagine your mother has been elsewhere?"

But she hadn't sent a letter? Not even a note?

He tilted his head. "Did she mention how the roses were doing, sir?" he said lightly.

Snape gave him the wary look of someone stumbling into a burgeoning lunacy.

"...Sir?"

“She did not,” he said icily. “Indeed, most anthological matters fell outside the scope of our concern, as I thought they did yours.”

Snape was lying.

His mother wouldn’t have sent Snape back without a message for him, even a coded one. *The white roses are flourishing in the rains,* or, *the reds will wilt soon.* Something to indicate if she was in danger. No message spoke louder than any could.

“I see. Well, when you see her next,” he said coolly, “would you tell her I asked? For politeness.”

“Do you presume that I have nothing better to do—”

“Never, sir. I just think she’d be glad to know that I haven’t abandoned her. She hasn’t replied to my last two letters, you see.” He slung his bag over his shoulder and said, casually, “Ostensibly because she was traveling. But if you say she’s at the Manor — I suppose I should believe you, shouldn’t I?”

Snape said nothing; he didn’t need to. The silence in the classroom turned gelatinous and oily, like a solution on the verge of breaking.

“Your mother is not well.”

He was sober, but sincere.

“She’s been—”

“Worse. Yes.”

Another silence. He wished the first one would come back.

“Is she…”

“Before I ask a question,” said Snape quietly, “I always inquire first, of myself: how much would it suit me to know?”

Which was its own kind of an answer.

“Thanks,” he said roughly. “Sorry to bother. Will you tell me—”

“Please understand,” said Snape, and he abruptly jolted into new levels of terror heretofore unknown, because that was worse than anything else he could have said; Severus Snape saying *please* was one of Armageddon's klaxons. “I take no joy in keeping secrets. It is an onerous, convoluted, and deeply unpleasant duty, and one that I should never have undertaken, had I a life that better suited me.” He paused. “As it is, I never go to the effort except from obligation.”

Draco nodded. He understood. He did. She was his own mother; he knew how she felt. If he were mad, he wouldn’t have wanted his son to hear about it, either.

He trotted down the stairs from the dais, hands in his pockets, while his insides fused into a single large knot of frustration and worry. He wondered if he could reach his mother directly, without having to pass through the medium of Snape, with all his apparently bothersome discretionary vows. Perhaps Hermione had some muggle contraption that could trace letters — of course, that would require telling Hermione why he was worrying for mother, which would raise questions, and that only made the knot bigger — what conclusions she would draw about a man with madness in his family line, it was impossible to tell, and unpleasant to contemplate.

He would solve the problem by himself. He was clever enough.

If some part of his brain was wary of the impossible arrogance of this task, it was at least decent enough to keep it to itself.

-EVERYONE LOOK AT THIS!!!

-I want to walk around holding this on a giant poster and standing outside of people’s windows like in Stand By Me

-you know how i said some people predict things in the comments? sometimes i'll see like, an interpretation of a non-POV character's thoughts, or a long-running motif, and i start uncontrollably barking and clapping like a great white seal. happened twice this week, it's grand. Writing serial fiction is the best.

-Draco: okay. it's getting serious. time to start suppressing my feelings, for real now, on purpose. [immediately turns around and flirts]

-Obviously, your author is a big fan of the "I Am In Control Of This [He Was Not In Control Of This]" phase of a slow-burn arc. We're going somewhere with this, though.

-Okay. Enough talk. Next week, we ARE getting our second task chapter, and it'll end what I think of as the "second act" of Book 4. Upcoming: "The Black Lake."

-It will contain... well, a whole lot of stuff. And Rita Skeeter.

The Black Lake

Chapter 47: The Black Lake

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The night before the Second Task arrived on a peal of thunder that silenced the hour-bell.

The study table in the reference section squeezed to fit three, though one made very little use of it. At the nadir of his desperation, with approximately thirteen hours separating him from the frigid waters of the Black Lake, Harry had given up, laid down on the floor under their table, and started reciting any idea that came to mind.

“I should have become an Animagus,” he said. “Could ask Sirius. He’d know how.”

“Smashing,” said Draco. “Ask if they’ll put off the Task for a few years while you sort it out.”

“Cracking useful, innit,” said Harry distantly, as if he hadn’t heard. “Turning into an animal. Could become a fish… a frog, even...”

“A shark,” suggested Draco, tossing down his quill.

“Ooh, you’re right. Shark’s much better.”

“Yes, because life gets much easier when you don’t have opposable thumbs,” said Hermione. “That’ll obviously be worth the years of research you’ll have to put into it, plus the months-long alchemical conversion process, and the registration fee—”

“See, I was all in, until you brought up the registration fee.”

“—and don’t forget lots of juicy nightmarish consequences if it goes wrong…”

“Newts,” persisted Harry. “Eels.”

“Potter?”

“Hm?”

“I mean this from the bottom of my heart,” said Draco, and did. “I cannot overstate the amount of money I would pledge to your campaign to become a newt.”

“Thanks, mate. Knew I could depend on you.” Harry yawned. It was late enough that Madam Pince would soon come creeping around with a candle snuffer and throw them out.

Hermione’s nerves had suffered too much to tolerate the grating of hijinks. She snapped her book shut. “This is ridiculous. Harry, you’re not becoming a newt.”

“What an utterly heartbreaking sentence to walk into,” said Fred, swinging around the corner. “Harry, don’t listen to her.”

“Dream big. Prove ’em wrong,” echoed George, strolling in behind him. “Tell you what, when I was six, I wanted to be a wampus.”

“He’s not lying, he really did.”

“Ran around on all fours for a month before Mum straightened me out.”

“What’d she say to you, Georgie, that did it?”

“That I couldn’t be a wampus until I passed my N.E.W.T.s,” he said wisely, thumbing his nose, “and after that, God help her, it was out of her hands. Wise woman. Funny enough, McGonagall said the same thing. Speaking of—”

“She wants to see you, Hermione,” said Fred.

“Is she in trouble?” Harry sat up, and promptly smacked his cranial plate on the table.

“Dunno,” yawned George, amidst yowls of pain. “Don’t think so, but the old girl didn’t seem happy, either. She’s waiting in her office. Told us to escort you.”

“Actually, she told Ron,” corrected Fred, “but since he’s got a busy schedule—”

“Oh, packed — Sulk, Sulk, Double Sulk, dinner, Stare Out Window at eight, Cry Into Pillow—”

“—don’t forget Long For Harry’s Tender Embrace, that’s a staple—”

“Can’t blame him, though, that’s the Gryffindor pastime. Anyway, he delegated.” Fred rattled her chair good-naturedly. “Up with ye, Young Granger. Don’t look like that, bet you’re getting a commendation or something.”

Hermione was not reassured. She darted a look at Draco. He raised his eyebrow and pushed his chair back — but she declined with a tiny shake of her head.

“I’ll meet you in the common room,” she said. “Get a head start on *Eighteenth-Century Charms,* there might be something we’ve missed. And start with the appendices, they’re more efficient. And—oh!”

Trailing instructions, she made it only a few steps away from the table before she stopped, turned around, and hurried back to jab her wand under the table.

“Episkey!”

“...Thanks, Mione.”

“You’re welcome.” She turned to Draco. “Don’t let him concuss himself before I get back, would you?”

He lazily saluted.

Her smile was frail and transparent, like waterlogged paper. Then she followed Fred and George out of the library.

He watched her go. What could McGonagall want with her? Exceptional compliments on her paper? A chat about theoretical Transfiguration? A job?

“Jellyfish,” said Harry, thoughtfully, by and by.

He peered balefully under the table.

“Amusing as it would be, watching you transform into a creature that quite literally lacks a brain,” he said, “I do worry about being able to tell the difference.”

The clocks announced that it was morning, though the sky gave them little reason to believe it. It poured from midnight through breakfast, stopping playfully now and then for recesses, only to take up again whenever Harry started looking too hopeful about it. Draco dressed in layers of thick black wool — finding himself unexpectedly grateful for Mrs. Weasley’s warm, if somewhat lumpy, emerald jumper — and swept on his thickest cloak, an iridescently waterproof item in petrol black, with a spotted fur ruff and a cavernous hood that shrouded half his face. The sabled mantle broadened his shoulders and more than faintly evoked a viking.

Harry stumbled down to breakfast about ten minutes before it ended and collapsed across from Draco in a pile of wiry limbs. Hogwarts’ finest, he was not, at least not at this particular moment. Going by sight, Draco would set the over-under for his sleep quotient at three hours.

“W’zm’nee.”

Draco relocated a plate of eggs into Harry's orbit, Summoned a mug, and emptied all that remained in the coffee pot. "Eat," he said. "Drink. Elocute."

"Wuzza?"

"That was none of the above. Try again."

Harry sectioned a gelatinous ovum of egg with his spoon, held it at eye level, and grimly ingested it.

"Have you seen Hermione?" he said thickly, scrubbing his mouth with the back of his hand.

"No. Have you?"

She hadn't appeared in the common room last night, though they'd waited for her until one or two o'clock. Whatever it was she had to talk about with McGonagall, it had driven them far into the wee hours and perhaps even beyond, for when Draco came down that morning, Crookshanks was still lurking lonesomely in the armchair by the fire.

It needled him that she hadn't come back. Hermione wouldn't miss a single minute of preparation, not this close to the wire. And it would kill her if Harry went to the Second Task without saying goodbye.

"No. Stop looking at the door," said Harry. He shoved up his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"I'm not."

"You are. It's making me nervous."

"I'm making you nervous."

"Yeah, you're not really projecting confidence, here."

"Confidence in *what?"*

“Exactly,” said Harry blearily. He refilled the coffee mug. “Did you see her last night?”

“No.”

“That’s weird, right?” He frowned. “Do you think it’s worth a look…?”

He was relieved he hadn’t had to suggest it. “Might as well, I suppose.”

“She wouldn’t like us doing this,” said Harry doubtfully, but he was rummaging through his satchel. “Something something, outrageous invasion of privacy...”

“Yes, yes. She can take it up with us when we know she’s not lying somewhere with her ankle shattered in a trip stair.”

“...And there’s something I wasn’t even worried about until you mentioned it, so thanks.”

“Really?” he said absently, clearing a space for the map between dishes. “First thing that occurred to me.”

The Map unfurled at the whisper of *mischief managed,* its inkblots flowering into towers and long labyrinthine corridors running into each other in many-axled joints. The whole castle opened up beneath them in a perfect diorama, fully studded, not one room neglected, not one name left out. Unfortunately, this was not an advantage. At this hour, there were so many people moving in so many different directions that the paper practically wriggled with the amount of ink that moved on it, and each name blurred into the ones around it. Draco could hardly pick out his own dot, trapped as it was in the smear of black lettering across the Great Hall. Across the grounds, more names, including several in French and Bulgarian, ran in ceaseless undulating waves that washed up on the shores of the Black Lake, where the names ran so thick it became an unbroken border of black: meanwhile, in the castle, the hallways were packed and streaming with names that winnowed in and out of

sight as students dove off down hidden corridors or slid down staircases or simply hurtled along down to their destination. It was not picking a needle from a haystack; at least a needle was not a piece of hay. Finding any particular name on the Map just then would be like finding a single four-leaf clover in a field the size of a quidditch stadium — while sitting in the top box.

“I can’t see her. Can you?”

“Of course not, it’s hopeless,” he snapped, and flicked the Map back at Harry. “Might as well try to Summon the witch.”

He wasn’t worried about her. Obviously, if he was worried about anyone, it was Harry, who at the very least deserved to have all of his friends there to support him while he drowned.

“...Which wouldn’t work?”

“No. You can’t Summon someone, only their clothes. And anyway—”

“HEY! ’ARRY!”

Hagrid came swaggering into the hallway, trailing an eighth sea from the rain-slick tail of his greatcoat.

“Beau’iful day for it, innit?” he inquired, without a trace of irony. “Been out gettin’ the unicorn babies back inna their paddock. Their horns’ll be comin’ in any day now! Anyway.” Hagrid sat down on the Gryffindor bench, which shrieked in alarm at the unexpected load and sent a first-year flying on the other end.

“Nervous, eh, ’Arry?”

“Bit,” said Harry.

“Ha! Tha’s alrigh’. I’d’ve bin worried before I saw yeh take on tha’ Horntail, but I know now yeh can do anythin’ yeh set yer mind ter. I’m not worried at all. Yeh’re goin’ ter be fine. Got yer clue worked out, haven’ yeh?”

“Yes. Well,” said Harry, when Draco made a shrill inquiring noise, “we worked it out, Draco and Hermione and me. Together. Us.”

“Us?”

“They’re alrigh’, you know, those two,” said Hagrid, and Draco could have sworn on his mother that the half-giant winked at him. “Now, no belly for real work, mind. Can’t hardly tell a dugbog from a bowtruckle, neither. But tha’s alrigh’, you’ve got loads of tha’ yerself. ’Spect you’ll be fine. Nothin’ yeh can’t do with a few good friends.”

Except breathe, unfortunately.

“Thanks, Hagrid.”

“Don’ thank me yet! Dumbledore says I’m ter take yeh down to the Lake.” He patted Harry on the shoulder and rose to his feet, sending a cascade reaction down the bench that displaced a sixth year into his porridge. “Give yeh a chance to practice on the way down, eh? Get yeh all warmed up?” He mimed a boxer’s circling fists, grinning; to everyone’s luck, he did not actually feint a punch, which might have caved in Harry’s skull. Harry, oblivious, laughed and hopped up like skull-crunching was simply his idea of a good time.

“Keep the Map,” he told Draco. “See if you can find Hermione on it — come to think of it, you could ask Ron if he’d seen her.”

This last was adorable. Draco’s reply was silent and scathing.

“...Or not, I guess. He, er… well, if you see him, would you let him know where I am? And Hermione, if you find her?”

“Certainly. Any other messages that need sending, while you’re at it? A tax filing you’ve left overdue?”

“Git,” said Harry. “Thanks. Well, wish me luck; hope I don’t drown.”

He sounded like he was preparing to step off a cliff and trying to manifest himself a parachute through force of will.

He followed Hagrid out of the Great Hall, a pair comically mismatched in size. In the entrance, Hagrid opened his umbrella, and holding it carefully to shield Harry's head, he ushered him out into the rain.

Draco watched them and found himself wondering who would have collected Draco, if he had been in Harry's place. Who would Dumbledore have sent for him? Professor Snape? He couldn't imagine Snape holding an umbrella over his head; he'd be as likely to scold him for forgetting the Water-Repellent Charm. Professor McGonagall didn't dislike him, but he wasn't her favorite, either.

Harry had shown up at Hogwarts with nothing, and now he had a small army. How'd he done that? It had to be some sort of skill. Certainly Draco hadn't ever had the knack.

As the hour crept closer to nine, the Map swarmed with print. He peeled open every flap and pored over it with refreshed intensity. Hermione was not in the Gryffindor common room, where no one lingered but a few house-elves; she was not in the library, nor the girls' bathrooms, an exercise in extraordinary impropriety that he justified by reasoning that one could just as easily break your neck on a slippery bathroom floor as anywhere else; nor, he found, with increasing unease, was she in the Hospital Wing. She was not in the dungeons, which were empty, nor in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, where, oddly, RONALD WEASLEY was loitering.

He changed tac, and searched for the Weasley twins. Those two at least could give her last known whereabouts. But they were floating uselessly down the lawns, along with most of Hogwarts Castle, to the cluster of black lines around the lake.

When his eyes drifted there, to the very furthest corner of the paper — just where the castle's borders melted into the uncharted thatching of the Forbidden Forest, which not even the Marauders had dared to plot — he found a cluster of names lurking in a small egg-sized hemisphere to the south of the castle. CHO CHANG…

FLORA CARROW… GABRIELLE DELACOUR… HERMIONE GRANGER.

The Map had planted her in the middle of the lake.

Which was absurd. Was he supposed to infer she'd opted for a morning swim? With a cohort of strangers? The Map must have been glitching. With so many people on the grounds at once, it had to happen. Enchantments misfired.

But he didn't know where else she would be. More to the point, it didn't matter. She should have been *here.* Hermione would have mowed her way through ten scores of grindylows just to wish Harry goodbye.

He left the Great Hall at speed.

The doors to the entrance hall floated open, buttressed by arms of icy wind and waves of half-frozen drizzle. He shoved through the packed mass of black cloaks and umbrellas, sidestepped a group of Hufflepuffs puppeteering a paper mache badger, and tripped down the lawn.

A dandelion bloom of fog lingered over the heart of the lake. The rest of it had peeled back from the banks, revealing sets of high wooden stands, dressed in the banners of the four champions.

Though miserable, the weeks of thunderstorms had paid them one favor by melting the ice on the lake, the only remnants of which now clustered in small trimmings of lace around the shores, and dangled in jagged knives from the trees. For the purposes of Harry's survival, this was an improvement. For purposes of comfort, it was not. The waters bucked and swayed, stained dark by the roof of thunderclouds above them, and the wind ripped big ribbons of water across the surface, like stripping fabric from a dress. Foam crashed each time a wave folded onto itself, and the stands groaned in the wind.

He side-checked a short Ravenclaw out of the way and ripped apart two canoodling Gryffindor third years with relish, sweeping down the mud-slick pathway to the lake like he had a hellhound on his heels. A group of girls in long leather dusters and berets giggled when he swept past them, and one whistled, calling something he didn't make out.

Rounding the bend by Hagrid's hut, he sidestepped a rat-nosed Ravenclaw and slammed into a wall.

Or what felt like one, anyway. He went keeling into the side of the hut and slipped on a glassy crust of frost, pinwheeling into the mud.

When he blinked his vision back, starry-eyed and snarling, he found the brick wall was actually a person, though going by expression, the difference was frankly scant: it was Ron. The boy was sprawled across a pumpkin like the centerfold of *Redheads Monthly.*

"Watch where you're going!"

"You watch where *you're* going," snapped Ron, shoving himself upright. "What's got you in such a hurry?"

"One, none of your business. Two, none of your business, and three, how the hell did you get down here? I thought you were in the Defense classroom. Also, none of your business."

Ron's nose wrinkled.

"How—" He stopped, winced, and gave a metered exhale. "The Map?"

"No, there's a tracker on the rod up your arse. We've had your location for weeks. What do you think?"

"I've got a rod up *my—"* Again, Ron stopped himself. He placed his hands together and breathed deeply, and when he opened his eyes, they were the clear, fierce blue of whitewater rapids. "Never mind,"

he snapped. “There’s a secret passageway from the Godric statue into Hagrid’s cellar. The twins showed me. That’s not important, though. Listen, Malfoy: what’s the plan?”

Draco blinked. “What’s the plan?” he said incredulously. He rolled up into a kneeling position, massaging his spine where Ron had knocked it practically through Hagrids wall. With his luck, he’d have displaced a disc. “Oh, now you’re taking an interest, are you? Have you got money riding on it?”

“Shut up. I know you and Hermione came up with something for him, so what is it? And if you say it’s the Bubble-Head, I’ll give your head another knock, because we both know Harry can’t, and it was a waste of time—”

“You’ve got an exceptional nerve, you know, coming in at this hour —”

“Malfoy!”

“Fine,” he said, startled. “There isn’t a plan. Currently, Potter’s best bet is to part the waters like the Red Sea.”

Ron’s eyes bugged. “He can’t do that.”

“No, *really?”*

“I just — Merlin, what have you been doing for the past month? You sent him out there with bloody *nothing?”*

“Fat lot of help *you* were!”

“I thought you had it handled! I thought you and Hermione would figure it out!”

“Well, next time you take a sabbatical from caring about Potter’s life,” snarled Draco, shoving himself upright, “we’ll be sure to give you some take-home assignments.”

“Oh, fuck *you!”*

“Fuck you!”

“Fuck you more!”

“Fuck you for running off and leaving him—”

“Fuck *you* for what you said about Burrow—”

“Fine!”

Ron blinked in surprise.

“But admit you were horrid to Granger.”

“Wh— I didn’t say anything about Hermione!”

“Parents? Animals?”

“Oh. Don’t give me that. You *are* a shit about her parents,” snapped Ron. “I don’t know why she lets you get away with it, when she damn well wouldn’t let me or Harry do the same.”

“Are you joking? She doesn’t let me ‘get away’ with anything. She jumps down my throat every time I mention blood—”

“You’re lucky you still have a throat, after some of the things you’ve said,” said Ron incredulously, “and she cuts you massive slack, mate, I don’t know how you miss it. You’re a big — big bloody elitist, is what you are. Do you even know how much it bothers her, the way you talk to Daphne?”

“Why,” he said, his teeth gritted so tight they’d soon crack, “does everyone insist on bringing up *Daphne Greengrass?”*

“Because it’s bad as French, sometimes! The *way* you get around each other!” Ron threw up his hands. “Like you’ve got this secret club you don’t even bother to explain to us, the airs and the etiquette

lessons and the ‘suitable’ dates and everything, and then you’re surprised when we’re offended, like: ‘Gosh, don’t be stupid, you’re so far below us it’s not even offensive for us to exclude you! Oh, but don’t worry! It doesn’t really matter! The only people who really care are, you know, *all of our families!* But we’re willing to sit with you peasants, so clearly, we’re the good ones!’”

When he was finished his breath guttered in steaming bursts from his nose, like dragonsmoke.

“And Hermione just — *takes* it,” he gasped. “For you. And I don’t have a bloody clue why.”

Draco drew himself up to his full height. It put him roughly at eye level with Ron.

“What you don’t know about me and Hermione could fill a library.”

A cool splash of light rain stung their faces, like a wave of sand.

“No shit,” said Ron, like he was very stupid indeed.

Draco closed his eyes. It occurred to him how deeply silly the whole thing was.

They were shouting at each other in the middle of a pumpkin patch. Meanwhile, Harry was standing alone on a dock in the lake, the poor bastard, preparing for a Task he wasn’t remotely competent to handle, and Hermione was still *missing.*

“This is, you realize,” he said, “the worst possible place, or time, to have this conversation.”

“What doesn’t happen now, happens never.”

“What?”

“S’ what my mum says,” he mumbled. “Usually when she wants a chore done.”

There was a sober beat.

“Is she well?”

“Huh?”

“Your mother,” he clarified. “How is she?”

“She’s… good, I think.”

“And your father? Enjoying his work?”

“I reckon,” said Ron, bewildered.

Draco nodded stiffly. “They were generous hosts,” he said. “Custom demands a certain level of reciprocity.”

“...What?”

“They can come for tea,” he snapped.

Ron blinked at him. His mouth twitched.

“Be careful with that,” he said. “You don’t want my mum getting a good look at your inheritance. She’ll be auctioning off Ginny’s maidenhead over sandwiches.”

“Dowry haggling is a hallowed tradition. My mother would give her a fair price.”

Ron snickered. Draco took a deep breath.

“I have said things.”

He stopped snickering.

“Uncharitable things.”

“Malfoy,” Ron began, tiredly.

“I have,” he said, “a talent for it.”

Ron quieted, his head cocked, like he was more interested than offended. “So, what?” he said. “It just ‘slipped out’? I’m not s’posed to take it seriously, because you call takesies-backsies? You were fucking *awful.”*

“You know, I *do* actually — never mind. You — it was inconceivable that you wouldn’t take it seriously. That was the point. If someone had said that to me, I would have dueled them.”

“And that’s what you wanted? To hit me? Do you honestly think that’s better?”

“My point,” he said, with difficulty, “is that I am exceptionally good at lying.”

They surveyed each other, furtively.

“You’re such a twat,” sighed Ron.

“Fine then, never mind!”

“I figured it out,” he muttered. “While I was away. I knew I’d botched it as soon as I left, I was a shit. I know. It was my... I started the fight, me and my stupid mouth, but that's why I felt like I couldn't... I wanted to come back, but I didn’t know how. I thought maybe — and this makes me sound like a total arse, okay, I know that, but — have you ever just wanted to be missed?”

“Obviously.”

And Ron seemed surprised.

“You're not the first one to do this, you know. I thought you had remembered.”

“Oh,” he said, pausing. “Yeah. Did you... I mean, but everything's easier, in second year.”

“Typical Weasley, putting the work off to the last minute.”

Ron snickered.

“Yeah,” he said vaguely. “Like — I dunno. They respected you, though, even when they were pissed at you. And they need you. Harry needs all of us, that’s how he is, he hasn’t got anyone else, and Hermione — I mean, sometimes I think you’ve got remote control of each other’s heads or something, I dunno what all’s going on with that, but whatever it is, ‘need’ is probably in it somewhere. And yeah, I’m jealous of that, sure. No point trying to put the kneazle back in the bag on that one, I guess. But that’s not all it is. You get it, don’t you? How it’s different?” He paused. “And then you come in talking about my house—”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“Okay, sure, but you said it, though—”

“Fine. You called me a twat.”

“No, I meant that one,” said Ron at once.

Draco waited for offense to settle in, but it drifted over him harmlessly, stinging lightly without taking.

“So what?” he said. “What do you want?”

Ron considered him. “I want you to say something nice about me,” he decided.

“That’s it?”

“Yeah. I want you to say something nice.”

“Fine. You’re good at chess. Square?”

“I — no, I mean — well. Hang on. You think I’m good—?”

“Oh. Not this.”

Ron was perplexed. “What d’you mean?”

“If this is about being needed,” he said impatiently, “then there’s a boy out there who stops wanting to live when you’re not talking to him, and I assure you, he doesn’t feel the same way about anyone else. Also, if you don’t come back soon he’s going to try to teach me to arm-wrestle, and I will quite simply never forgive you.”

A horn crooned from the stands, rippling queerly across the water. A bellow of excitement followed from the crowds.

“Shit!”

“Well said.” He broke into a run.

“Wait — hang on! Malfoy! *Draco!”*

“What?”

Ron seized his arm and hauled him back, and nearly dislocated his shoulder, at that. He really did have an arm for quidditch. “Here,” he blurted, fumbling through his pockets. He wrenched out a handful of something that looked like shoelaces marinated in bile, and Draco balked in horror.

“What the hell is that?”

“Gillyweed,” Ron said proudly. And, ignoring Draco’s cry of horror, he slapped the pustule of gray noodles into Draco’s palm. The texture was worse than it looked, and that was no small thing. “Get that to Harry and tell him to eat it. It’ll let him breathe underwater.”

“What? How do you know? And where did you find it?”

“Explain later. The Task’s starting. Go!”

He gazed with doubt at the slimy hash in his palm. He had a very hard decision to make: whether to let Harry take his chances, alone, with nothing, or to trust Ron Weasley — a man with no great knack for Herbology, or any other field of magic, really — when he said that he had solved a Task meant for seventh-year wizards of tremendous skill.

He closed his fist around the gillyweed and ran.

“Oi! And where’s Hermione? I couldn’t find her!”

He ignored him and raced down to the lake, his cloak sweeping the mud behind him in a small spray of displaced frost.

The precise combination of acrobatics and violence that carried him to the top of the stands would later elude him, though he had a keen physical memory of his ears clouding up from the intermittent roars and his legs tingling from the strain of a breathless ascent up the stairs. It was the only way into the stands, though he knew Harry would not be there. The judges sat in a gilded box of their own, framed by scores of crowded stands. There was a tent on the dock, tucked under a hemisphere of shimmery Heating Charms. It was gold, and embroidered with the Hogwarts crest.

A harsh wind lifted from the scalloped bowl of the lake and thrust its icy fingers into the stands, snatched a loose red scarf from its owner’s neck, and passed it into the waiting hand of Theo. He was the youngest member by a decade in a box full of Ministry officials, his father among them.

“Lost your seat?” he roared to Draco. “Come up, we’ve a spare! You remember my father!”

Sibelius Nott inclined his face from beneath the deep cowl of an umbrella, observed him, and gave a thin-lipped nod. Behind him sat Brutus Travers, looking small, wet, and miserable, clutching a dragonhead cane, and on Theo’s other flank sat a man Draco

vaguely recognized, though not by name, for he had last seen him when he'd dropped a bookshelf on him.

He was an auror. He wore a bowler hat, and a ghoulish scar running up his right cheek, plunging through his eye, and splintering off at his eyebrow. The scarring on his cornea was glassy and thick.

"Draco, this is Odin Davis," said Theo, "my father's right hand, which makes him the Minister's, what, right knucklebone, I suppose? Number one silver bullet stockpiler in Britain, by the way, if you ever need one, just don't call on full moons—"

"Theodore."

Sibelius' mouth moved little when he spoke. Most of the sounds came from growling ululations in his throat. Theo's mouth, meanwhile, kept running like a carriage careening down a slope.

"He vetted Mad-Eye for the Defense position, did you know? Did you even know Mad-Eye was vetted? Of course, it had to be an auror, after last year, and Mad-Eye was the only one Dumbledore could get my father to agree on."

"Theodore!"

Theo waved a hand over his shoulder and drew Draco out of earshot. "Anyway," he said conspiratorially, "the good money's on Cassius to win it, but I've put my whole inheritance on Potter for second place, after that performance with the Horntail, and also to shut Goyle up about Krum. Didn't want to, mind, but Pans said I had to start showing off these so-called 'principles' I'm hiding up my bloomers. Don't tell her I said that, her darling head won't fit through the doors. This is all to say I'll have to snap my wand and kill myself if Potter takes third, so I hope he's a strong swimmer."

"He can't swim," said Draco, who had heard only half of this. He was scanning the crowd for a way into the champions' tent.

“What,” said Theodore flatly.

“He can dog-paddle, he’s not helpless. But he can’t swim properly. His m— his family never taught him.”

“He can’t *swim?”*

“Nott, I didn’t realize you cared. Have you told him how you feel?”

“Draco! Really! Do you realize how embarrassing it’s going to be if Hogwarts finishes *last?* After what Diggory did at the dance?”

“It’s a low priority at the moment. And — hang on, what’s your problem with Diggory?”

“Are you blind? That business with Macdonald, are you serious?”

“That? I never understood what your problem was — you’re already friends with Zabini, and he’s the loudest rumor in the castle since Godric’s harem—”

“A rumor I’m fairly certain Blaise started, because he thinks it’s funny, and that’s different. Blaise is rich and discreet and irrelevant, he’s basically an upjumped merchant, but Diggory is a Diggory, which is, supposedly, important — but listen, does Potter have *any* hope? At all?”

“He might. I need to get to the champions’ tent.”

“You’re killing me here,” said Theo, dumbfounded. “Now?”

“Or anytime before the Second Task starts, you know, you’ve at least forty-five seconds to decide—”

“Fine! Fine! Give me a moment.”

Theo wrestled back into the box, clambering without much dignity over Odin Davis’ knees, and grabbed his father’s shoulder. Sibelius cast him off with a sharp gesture of the elbow, and chastised, Theo

drew back; but then his father turned his head, and they had a brief, fast exchange in low voices interspersed with nodding, talking like coworkers engaged on a joint project. Sibelius reached into his robe pocket and with an almost bored expression dangled a small billfold of purple leather, hooked on one finger, which Theo plucked out of his hand and made off with. He gave neither acknowledgement nor thanks. Neither of them looked at each other when it was done.

Draco had never known his father, except as a young boy. The proper conduct of fathers and sons, in public, or otherwise, would forever be a mystery to him. If Lucius had lived, it was quite possible he would have treated Draco the same way, and it wouldn't have meant that he loved him any less. But he couldn't imagine Arthur Weasley doing the same.

"Here," Theo said tightly, stuffing the billfold into Draco's breast pocket. "That's a Ministry pass, it'll get you through the wards around the tent. Down the staircase, around the back, second door, and if anyone asks you what you're doing, just scowl."

"Thank you," he said, after a stunned beat. Half of Theo was utterly insufferable, half of him downright decent, and the problem was that he could also be both at once.

"Don't thank me," he muttered. "This isn't generosity, I really do have a bet with Greg. Go."

Perhaps to relieve any lingering awkwardness of gratitude, he shoved Draco down the stairs.

He plummeted past three rows of seats before catching himself, which both gave him a head start on running and freed from his lips a word that made every man in Sibelius Nott's box turn their heads.

The wards around the champions' tent admitted him with a burble of magic. A Ministry attendant squeaked at him as he swept past, and he flashed the billfold without opening it. The attendant quailed and

scuttled back, thankfully declining to inspect it any further. The flap to the champions' tent bulged and parted at the twitch of his wand.

The tent, lit well by camping lanterns, was warm and crowded. Fleur and Cassius lay on sofas around a deep fire pit, relaxed supine like marble statues, adorned with as little clothing as possible to reveal the artist's talent for form — close-fitting swim shirts and pants that terminated high on the thigh, in pale gold and ice-silver. Behind them lurked the dark idol of Krum, his red undershirt pulled taut across a bear's chest of muscle, and as Draco swept in, they traded chilly looks.

Harry sprang up from his chair. "What happened? Is Hermione alright?"

"Eez it time to start?" said Fleur, eyeing him with so little curiosity it registered as active disgust.

"Nothing. Possibly. No. Potter, come here."

Cassius' eyes followed them as they went.

In a musty corner of the tent, he flashed the slimy contents of his palm, wedged them firmly into Harry's hand, and then wiped his fingers on Harry's shirt.

Harry reacted as any cogent person would: he yelped and jerked his hand away.

"Ew! Yuck! What?"

"That's gillyweed, you ungrateful brat, and don't drop it. It'll probably taste worse with dirt on. Here's what you're going to do. You're going to put that in your mouth, and you're going to keep it there, and when the Task starts, you're going to swallow it."

His eyes swelled nearly beyond the rims of his glasses. "And it'll work? I'll breathe underwater?"

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Magic, idiot.” He had no idea.

Harry grinned. Draco, having been around this block more times than he cared to acknowledge, sighed and held out his arms.

The hug punched open valves in his lungs he’d forgotten about, cracked that disc from earlier straight back into place, and, had he been choking, would have forcefully dislodged any solid objects loitering in his trachea. Harry had a promising career in mediwizardry.

“I knew you’d figure it out!”

“What are you doing back zhere?” Fleur shrilled over her shoulder. “Champions are not to receive ‘elp!”

“Nothing! He’s not! He — er — brought me a bite to eat,” blurted Harry.

Fleur’s mouth thinned. “Personally, I do not like to win by cheating,” she said. “But perhaps zhis eez because I am French.”

Draco narrowed his eyes. “Votre dossier suggère que vous n'aimez pas du tout gagner.”

Cassius snickered.

She whipped her head around, smacking Cassius in the face with several newtons of blonde. “Qu'est-ce que tu m'as dit, petit furet d’homme?”

She was filling her lungs for another run of inflammatory French when the tent flap burst, and in flounced Percy Weasley, followed by Dumbledore, Karkaroff, Maxime, and Crouch.

“Champions! Gather!” announced Percy, who was clearly having the time of his life. “Miss Delacour, Mr. Warrington, thank you! Mr. Krum! Hello, Mr. Potter!”

“Percy, mate, we shared a shower.”

“Speak up if you have a question, thank you, Mr. Potter!” said Percy loudly. “Otherwise, silence, please! We’re in a hurry! And you, Mr. Malfoy — Mr. Malfoy?” He peered hawkishly over his spectacles, blinking, and for a moment he resembled his mother very much. “What are you doing?”

“...Leaving?”

“Indeed! Please do!” said Percy, strangled.

Dumbledore smiled serenely at him as he passed. If there he caught a wink somewhere, hidden behind that crag of snow-white beard, then he ascribed it to a hyperactive imagination running on adrenaline afterburn.

He climbed back up the rickety staircases into the stands, and crested a row of seats so packed there was no hope of recovering a good one for himself. He searched the stands, navigating by the ginger constellations of the Weasley clan: Fred and George led the Gryffindor boxes in chorus, while Lee Jordan conducted from his mount atop their shoulders. Ginny and Neville bundled together beneath a fleece blanket near the back. Ron sat with Daphne in a box by the railing. He had loaned her his scarf, and she was swaddled in an unusual shade of red, warm, preening, and happy as a clam.

He wanted to know where Hermione was. He would have seen her by now. She was impossible not to notice, with the hair, and the magnetism, and whatnot.

Across the lake, the fog curdled. He wondered why the Ministry was bothering to maintain the Disillusionment Charm, even now, when it

was obvious the Task would be in the lake.

Where was she? It was distracting.

The Map said she'd been on the lake. But that wasn't possible. She couldn't be on the lake, and unless she was in the dungeons, she couldn't be beneath it. The dungeons didn't extend that far, anyway. She would have to be in the lake. Under it.

Draco almost tore the Map when he ripped it out of his bag.

"WELLLLLLLLCOME TO THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT!"

A hiss of its password sent ink blooming over its pages, slower than it had ever been before.

"Our champions have prepared for months! Studying! Practicing! Training! Learning! AND! It was all! For! This! Moment! Deep in the fathoms of the Black Lake, champions will have precisely one hour to recover something taken from them! Any later… well! They won't have a second chance!"

Curlicues of ink twined together into the shape of the lake, and one darted across its surface, swirling into a cluster of names at its heart. *Hermione Granger.*

Flora Carrow had come to the Yule Ball with Cassius. Cho had gone with Harry. Gabrielle Delacour he didn't know, but he could muster a guess.

And Hermione, of course, had made the mistake of going with Krum.

"WISH THEM LUCK, LADS! We'll start on my whistle! On the count of three: One! Two! *Three!"*

People. Something taken. She was *in* the lake—

"Weasley!"

At least four heads turned. A lash of his wand cut a path through the crowd, scattering people and cries of dismay, and he darted through the fleeting chasm.

“Oh, hello, Draco!”

He ignored Daphne. Most of his brain had been shifted onto autopilot.

“She’s in the lake.”

“What? Who?”

“Look! Harry’s doing something!” Daphne pointed. A wide white screen of rippling parchment so large it must have been skinned from dragonhide had unfolded over the judges’ table, and across this screen spilled a bleary vision of the four champions, flickering between them, in the same way as the World Cup’s Spell-O-Vision projector. First a wide shot of Cassius and Fleur, still standing on the dock, flicking flawless Bubble-Head Charms from the tips of their wands, and executing a pair of nearly synchronous swan-dives into the water; then to Krum, who had done something to the upper half of his body, and now hurtled through the water in a blur of gray, cutting too deep into the kelp for the Spell-O-Vision to follow him; and then, finally, Harry, who was thrashing under the water, clutching his neck. He did not seem able to breathe.

“I’ve killed him,” Ron said hoarsely, transfixed.

“I don’t care. Do you hear me? Granger’s in the lake. The prize is hostages.”

Ron tore his watery eyes from the screen. “What?”

“THEY’RE OFF!” bellowed Bagman. “Now, I said first thing, a Bubble-Head is the way to go with this one, and that’s just what Warrington and Delacour have done. Textbook Charm work, flawless execution — of course, it’s down to them to keep concentration,

which will be no easy thing, with what we've got in store! Now, Krum, on the other hand, he's taking a risk with human Transfiguration, devilishly hard, sometimes irreversible if you get it wrong, and he's done a full head-and-shoulders, which is even harder. He'll be aiming to get points for sophistication, he lost those in the First Task… and Harry Potter, well, he's just not having a good time, is he?"

Harry had stopped thrashing and started to sink. His hands floated above his head. Through the green filmy texture of the waves, the light winked through pale webbed slits between them. Rough ridges scarred either side of his neck, and a marbled vein of blood spiraled from one flap.

"What are we s'posed to do?" Ron said helplessly. "If she's down there, it's up to Harry."

"We find Dumbledore—"

"Tell him what? Lodge a complaint, will you?"

"—slap him with a lawsuit that'll make the Board piss itself, I'll take this place to the fucking cleaner's—"

Harry's eyes opened, and they were luminous, with wide slitted pupils, like a frog's.

"GILLYWEED!" howled Bagman. "Yes! There's something I didn't think we'd see today! Rare as hen's teeth, only grows in certain underwater conditions, farmed by mermaids, and they won't sell it for less than a pound of flesh, those greedy gulpies! But Potter's found some! And he's moving fast!"

"—or hex his beard into snakes, if that doesn't work — this is heinously fucking irresponsible— she could *drown!"*

"Oi!" someone hollered at Draco, waving him down. "Siddown! You're blockin' the view!"

Draco wrenched out his wand, and the fourth year paled as he realized his mistake.

Now the projector switched to Fleur. Cassius had dove deep to the bottom of the lake, while she floated near the surface, her swimsuit silhouetted by cool sunlight.

“You’d think that was safer,” remarked Bagman, “but in fact not! She’s very visible up there, which means — unless I’m wrong — ah, but I’m not!”

Grindylows swarmed out of the weeds at Fleur’s feet. Their horned faces leered out of the dark, a knot of tentacles swirling behind each one. They shot tiny, wriggling jets of boiling water from between their fangs, and Fleur didn’t see them until they were too close; one leapt up and snared its tentacles around her ankle.

“Ooh! Bad luck, Miss Delacour! You want to deal with grindylows early. Otherwise—”

Otherwise, they’ll swarm. The voice in Draco’s ear was Lupin’s. It had been a cool, bright day in November, and the D.A.D.A. class had been on a field trip to the Lake, and Lupin had picked his way through the shallows in waders, shouting: *They’re pack hunters, grindylows! Nothing to sniff at, if you get one on its own — carnivorous, paralytic venom, but stupid as the day as long. Their real strength is in numbers. Give them five minutes, and it’s not one you’re dealing with, it’s fifty. I — whoops! There’s one, now!*

And then he’d reached into the water and hauled one up by the tentacles, shaking it around like a beater’s bat, and laughing as it squirmed helplessly. Lavender had swooned. So had Harry.

It had seemed a lot more helpless in Lupin’s hand than it did now, with three latched to Fleur’s legs, and pulling. She kicked and screamed. Senescent cracks of light flared and soared from her wand, curses that veered shy of the grindylows and blackened nearby fronds of kelp with char.

“She can’t try anything too nasty, or she’ll hit her own legs,” remarked Bagman. Four more grindylows rose out of the weed.

But the Spell-O-Vision changed, and it was Krum, hurtling through the water, as a dark shape of immense size shifted and roiled in the depths below him.

Harry was cutting through the water like something born to it. The same couldn’t be said for Cassius, who was floundering through a kelp thicket, but even he fared much better than Fleur, who had taken on so many grindylows that her Bubble-Head was starting to flicker.

Beneath the screen, the judges had taken to chatting with one another. Karkaroff and Maxime were conferring politely, with occasional gestures to the lake. Meanwhile, Barty Crouch appeared very green indeed, and somewhat thinner than Draco had last seen him. Dumbledore was speaking to him in a harsh murmur that left little room for interjection, his whole body turned towards Crouch, while Crouch himself gazed unseeingly at the lake. At one point he shook Crouch by the shoulder, jolting him, and still Crouch barely turned his head.

What was the point of this thankless misery? The Task was bad enough: why leave him feeling like he was drowning, too? The champions would have done anything the Tournament told them to do. They didn’t need to take hostages. There wasn’t a reason Hermione was at the bottom of the lake. If Harry didn’t make it— if she drowned—

Think. He twisted his signet ring around his finger and bent hard, stabbing a ring of pressure into the flesh of his finger. Pain twinged. It reminded him of his mother and father. It reminded him of the world outside the Tournament. This wasn’t quidditch. There were other games to play.

None of the hostages were purebloods. Scratch that — Carrow was. But Carrow had a stain on her ledger. Hermione and Cho both had

muggle parents, and if Theo was right, the Delacours were half-breeds. And why hadn't they taken Roger Davies, for Fleur? Everyone else's Yule Ball date had been taken, but for her, they took family. Krum had family, too, didn't he? He'd barely known Hermione for a month. How did she count as *what you'll sorely miss?*

He was going to sorely miss the structural integrity of his skull, if he didn't save her.

Minutes ticked by. Fleur had turned to panicked hacking at the grindylows with erratic curses that missed as often as they struck true. Krum was fighting something too vast for the projector to capture correctly, with tendrils that kept flickering in and out of view. Harry and Cassius hadn't been in sight for full minutes. It was hard to think. He wanted to know what they'd used for her breathing apparatus. They wouldn't make her do her own, would they? They'd give her something to keep her breathing. Her Bubble-Head Charm was strong. Not that strong, though. And Hermione's focus turned to eggshell under pressure.

The pressure in his head intensified. No use. He was going to stop breathing.

He should never, under any conditions, have felt helpless. That was the point of having everything, wasn't it? He was heir to fifteen generations of pureblood breeding, an exceptional potioneer, a consummate spellcaster and curse adept, a natural on a broomstick, a perfect swimmer, and he could do what? He could do bugger all. If she drowned then that was that, and a great use he'd been, very bloody grateful she'd be that he'd come into her life. What fucking use was *any* of it if he was going to stand here like the fat stone legs of Ozymandias with a front-row seat to her murder.

The wind cut a filmy knife of freshwater spray into the air, catching the first several rows of seats. Siphoning Charms erupted over the sea of cloaks like a garden of silvery flowers. Karkaroff and Maxime raised their own wands in defense, Siphoning the spray from the very air, but Dumbledore ignored them, so engrossed was he in his

heated conversation with Crouch. Crouch didn’t raise his wand, either. He just kept staring at the lake.

On the Spell-O-Vision, one of the grindylows leapt for Fleur’s face. Its claws scored the side of her Bubble-Head Charm, and it popped. A small explosion of air bubbles bleached the water around her face and she vanished under them. No one could hear her scream — it was eerie and silent, like Colin’s moving photography — but the stands compensated with a roar of dismay. Bagman was hollering something about keeping calm. The Beauxbatons students were the loudest, but people from Durmstrang and Hogwarts were on their feet, too: it didn’t matter that they were rooting against her. Nobody wanted to watch a young girl drown.

Dumbledore leapt to his feet. Maxime was already up, shouting something at Crouch, but he remained unresponsive, and in any case, Dumbledore didn’t wait on his cue: he swept down the dock and shook out the billowing sleeve of his periwinkle robe, aiming his wand at the lake.

The incantation was lost to the roar of the stands. The effect was not. An invisible cleaver plunged deep into the lake, and towering wings of water soared up like the white pinions of a forty-foot swan. Water surged from the spell’s path in a thousand glistening strands. Spears of foam raced to pierce the iron shield of the sky. The sound followed after a heartbeat’s delay, like the lagging trail of thunder: a clap like a sonic boom. It rocked the stands and brought the whole howling mass of students to their knees, clasping their ears.

From between the wings of water, Fleur rose like a gothic Venus. She was limp, her skin pallid and clammy from water and cold, her hair twisted in soggy rattails, like a dark gold collar around her neck. Her head lolled on her shoulder.

Dumbledore drew back his wand, the other hand outstretched, as if balancing a length of invisible wire. Fleur drifted forward, her toes skimming white foam from the surface of the lake, and floated onto the dock. She settled onto the wood, and her body was still. Then

Dumbledore touched his wand to her temple, and there was a flare of light like the striking of a match.

Fleur shot up, rolled over, and vomited about a gallon of water onto the dock.

The water from Dumbledore's spell plummeted back into the lake. The splash folded up and pounded the stands. Almost too late, Draco threw up a Shield Charm, and water slammed into the translucent shield like the backhand of a great beast. It shuddered, white lights of pressure flickering across the surface, but it held.

Not all students were so lucky. Ron and Daphne caught the full force of it, and emerged from the deluge a moment later, soaked to the bone and gasping for breath. Screams of commingled delight and irritation broke out; some people found the impromptu splash much more charming than others. Ginny was wringing her hair out, cackling madly; Lavender, whose makeup had been turned into something by Monet, was not.

Residual water drizzled from the stands above him, dampening Draco's hair. Most people had been doused. But even this indignation was met by an approving roar of relief: Fleur was alive.

Bagman was bellowing something about disqualification. Dumbledore had returned to the judges' table, where he was arguing with Crouch about something. Mediwizards, Ministry workers, and a few teachers, McGonagall among them, were racing down the stairs to the docks as if there was a prize in it for them. Maxime had flung herself to her knees beside her student, and was holding Fleur's head to her chest with an oddly maternal affect; Fleur, disgruntled, pushed her aside and leaned over to vomit some more over the dock.

"Beauxbatons doesn't teach Care of Magical Creatures," said Daphne, breathy with relief. "Poor thing. She couldn't have known."

“What kind of bloody school doesn’t teach Magical Creatures?” demanded Ron.

“Their focus is a very — ah — abstract kind of magic, Beauxbatons. No creatures, no Divination, no quidditch team. Easily the best school in Europe for magical theory, though.”

“An UNFORTUNATE END, for Miss Delacour!” said Bagman, far too chipper. “But she seems well! Thank you, Professor Dumbledore! But don’t sit down just yet! I believe our first SUCCESSFUL return may be upon us!”

Fleur’s face suggested that she had a few ideas for an ‘unfortunate end’ of Bagman’s own.

The lake stirred. Bubbles rose from the soup of foam left by Dumbledore’s spell, and colors shimmered under the water.

A pair of heads broke the surface. Disappointment lanced his gut. It was Cassius and Flora, who clung to his back the bucking current and took greedy gulps of air. Flora looked like she had been run several times through a centrifuge with a bucket of soap-water and a weasel. Cassius lifted his arm weakly, to wave at the stands, which had exploded for him; Flora hid part of her face in the water, and shivered.

“WELL! WELL! PLEASE, QUIET!” Bagman was trying and failing to contain the stands. Draco had rarely seen Slytherin so wild. Marcus Flint and Millicent Bulstrode were half out of the box, roaring; Gregory Goyle was doing some sort of fan-dance with his jersey. Theo was on his feet, applauding heartily, but he was quite pale, and Draco wondered belatedly if he hadn’t been anxious for Cassius, after all. It must have been stressful to have the performance of Slytherin House on trial, before the Ministry and all three schools — but Sibelius Nott didn’t appear to be pleased or displeased, either way, so perhaps it was his father’s presence that set him on edge. Fair enough. It certainly did Draco.

Madame Maxime and some Mediwizards helped Fleur limp off into the champions' tent, while several more waited with Dumbledore, at the end of the dock, to help the pair. Cassius hauled himself gracefully onto land, where Dumbledore shook his hand and said something that made Cassius' smile flag, just for a moment.

"THE FIRST CHAMPION!" cried Bagman, with gusto. "CASSIUS WARRINGTON, FROM HOGWARTS, HAS SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED THE SECOND TASK! LET'S HEAR IT FOR HIM— oh, well, you're doing that already."

Mediwizards swarmed. A blonde woman with an alligator handbag was hurrying down the dock, full-speed, while camera flashbulbs peppered the air with lightning. Cassius leaned back to help Flora from the water — but once she was wobbling upright on two legs, he withdrew his hand and stepped away, with a brisk, cold double-step that made clear its sole purpose was the establishment of distance. He tucked his hands behind his back. Flora ducked her head and let her hair hang around her face, glowering silently, while Cassius lifted his head and his hands to the roaring hundreds. They didn't look at each other.

Then Madame Pomfrey swept Cassius and Flora under one arm each, and like horses, she drove them fiercely toward the champions' tent, very nearly bulldozing the blonde woman under her feet. A pair of Ministry workers took her by the arm and led her away, squalling in protest, while the water once more turned to froth.

"AND ANOTHER!" roared Bagman. "OUR THIRD CHAMPION RETURNS — JUST OVER THE WIRE — WHO'LL IT BE?"

He hoped it wasn't Harry.

As soon as he discovered this feeling, lurking insidiously under his breastbone, he reeled in unhappiness at it, and tried to shove it into a drawer — but it wouldn't go. It had to be Krum. A mutinous share of his will demanded it. He wanted Harry to live. But it had to be Krum.

The worst part, he thought, was that it didn't even surprise him, that feeling. It settled in with the faint cold sting of snowfall, seen approaching from a distant sky. He knew the reason. He'd known for a while, really. It was just horrible. Only in a moment as horrible as this could he let the other thing come into his brain, because there was nothing to fear in it now — not like there would be at any other time, anyway — and so he could take it and glance at it, peripherally, with the closest he had yet come to acknowledgement of the thing that for several months had been living in the cellar of his mind.

He liked her. He liked her too much.

Two more heads broke out of the lake. Neither was Harry's.

Krum burst from the water with a hoarse shout, and latched onto the side of the dock. Hermione clung to his shoulders. He had never seen her less happy in his life, and that included several interludes of mortal peril. She was spluttering, soaked, spitting water and rage, her hair a damp wilderness trawling in the water behind her, a Waterhouse's Circe to Fleur's Venus — certainly not lovely, unless you had a taste for drowned cats — but alive, and breathing, in furious good health.

He leaned on the railing and ducked his head in a humiliation of relief.

Hermione clung to Krum as if he were the last buoyant object in the world. The usual irritation swelled and then passed feebly through him like flour through a sieve. He could not give a real goddamn, in that moment, if she was cozied up to Viktor Krum, or even if she went and snogged him — which would still be disgusting — because the wretched dunce had gone and saved her. Which put Draco in the intolerable position of having to be *grateful* to a man he otherwise wanted to divest of all his toenails, individually, serially, and creatively.

This could not be allowed to happen again. The peril part, or the watching part, or the someone-else part. He refused it. It was not to

be borne.

“IN SECOND PLACE: VIKTOR KRUM! COMING JUST INSIDE THE TIME LIMIT — WHOOPS, CAREFUL, THERE—”

Hermione was struggling to get out of the water. She slipped on the dock, almost toppled back into the lake, and was caught at the last moment by Krum and a mediwizard. She snapped at them in displeasure and pulled herself up, but having both the dexterity and upper body strength of a robust twig, she ended up almost hauling the mediwizard into the lake. Krum laughed, and she shouted some more at him. Draco smirked.

Finally they deposited her on the dock, and she crawled up. She surged to her feet and shoved away the mediwizards, grimacing, only for her ankle to twist, knees stiff from the frigid waters, and pitch her immediately face-first onto the dock.

He sucked a breath through his teeth.

Hermione sat up, pressing the back of her hand to her nose, her face a crumple of pain. When she lowered her hand, a stem of red laced the distance from lip to nostril. Krum extended a hand to help her up, and she swatted it away, saying something sharp and inaudible. The mediwizard appeared to have progressed from pleading to orders, and was gesturing for two more mediwizards to come assist him.

She lashed the back of her hand across her lip, a short, sharp gesture of irritation more than pain, and he recognized it. It was his gesture. It was also hers.

If he could have Apparated to the dock, he would have. If he could have performed a Disillusionment Charm, he would have. He would have given her — privacy, at least, or some room to breathe. He would have jinxed one of the mediwizards who kept bothering her, astoundingly, as if she hadn’t just been dropped in a freezing lake and punted out, soaking wet, in front of everyone she’d ever cared about impressing. If asked, he could write an article on everything

Hermione would have hated about this situation, and she could have written a book.

The feeling of indignation, none of which was wholly his own, swelled to fill the full breadth of his chest and permeated him with the heat-dizziness of anger. The least they could do was not touch her.

He hated that feeling. It usually meant he was going to do something stupid or dangerous.

Draco eyed the distance between the railing and the dock, judged it, and sighed.

It was a ‘both’ kind of day.

He vaulted the railing.

Several screams broke out. Someone shouted something about stopping him, which was nice, but unnecessary. He floated for a moment in freefall, and landed with a hard shudder on the dock. His knees buckled and he dropped into a crouch — Madam Hooch’s first lesson had been how to land a fall — and then let his momentum carry him back upright, sweeping his cloak out of the way. With admirably little wobbling, he swaggered down the unoccupied dock.

Several people were shouting at him, but he ignored them. McGonagall had managed to scuttle Krum and Hermione back to the champions’ tent, and he swept in after them, tagging on the heels of a group of mediwizards too distracted by their work to bother about one extra head in their midst.

Inside the bustle was so intense that no one paid attention to him. This was convenient, because it meant no one threw him out, but irksome, because it meant that — well, no one paid attention to him.

“Granger!”

Hermione heard him. It gratified him that she turned at once — away from Krum, who huddled near a space heater, shivering and scowling at anyone who came near, especially one voracious bottle-blonde woman with a camera.

Her face was drawn and pale, framed by dark wet picots of baby hair. A brave mediwizard had wrangled her into a thermal blanket, which might as well have been a bedsheet, for all he was concerned, so little was it doing to allay her shivering. She stumbled to her feet, still stiff and awkward with cold; she breathed a hard, long sigh, and then — as he opened his mouth to yell at someone for another blanket — and she jumped him.

He caught her. Whatever he had been going to say fell dead in his throat, and the sound that emerged instead was a bleak strangled thing.

“Granger, you’re *wet.”*

She was. She was soaking, and the cold pierced through the front of his robes like he’d been dropped belly-first in the snow. A hiss of discomfort issued through his teeth. Her arms wound around his neck and her small fingers threaded up the back of his head like chips of ice, leaving a dazzling little map of numbness up his nape. She buried her head in his chest, and her hair soaked through his shirtfront in seconds. All the heat in his body staged a hasty retreat and regrouped in his face.

She was shivering. It was hard to tell if that was the cold, or the shock, or both. It wasn’t like her. He didn’t mind it. Oh, he would be furious at her for getting him wet, in a few moments, but apparently his sense of self-interest was still enjoying its vacation.

He placed his hand on her back and drew his thumb across one shoulder blade. The pressure drew her into his chest, and he could feel her worming her way into his body, seeking heat.

“Shameless,” he said, thinly. If he’d had any more sense he would have said about half a dozen worse things, but he didn’t, clearly, and he was very close to throwing in the towel and filling in the cavity where his sense used to be with something more dependable.

Her nose dragged an ice-cold line against the underside of his jaw. A shudder rolled up his spine, like someone had threaded a needle up his vertebrae.

“Is he alright?” she whispered.

“What?”

“Harry!” Her breath was a cold wash on his ear. “Did he have a plan?”

It was reassuring, in one sense, to suddenly understand her. She didn’t want to be overheard. To give the judges reason to think Harry would cheat.

On the other hand, he hated her, and himself, and also thermodynamics. And he felt more than a twinge of spite.

He palmed the back of her head and threaded his fingers through her hair. Because of their closeness no one had interrupted them, though the mediwizards hovered only as far away as propriety required, and Viktor Krum rubbed his hands impatiently to warm them, his eyes fixed darkly on Hermione. Draco caught his eyes, held them, and he did not bother to school his own smirk.

Dimly Draco felt her breath trip against his throat, once, at the graze of his fingers across her skull, and the swipe of his thumb through the hair over her ear. Vaguely he noticed the fingers of her hand not occupied with his neck increasing from a grip to a vise in his shirt. The place where her embrace had thrown her against him, now secured by a hand at her back, was veiled in two layers of very wet clothes, and it was impossible for her to breathe in without flushing against him. He hoped, somewhat spitefully, that she *was* having

trouble breathing; it might do her good to see how she liked it for a change.

“Yes,” he said softly. Hermione twisted her hand deeper into his shirt — a gesture of triumph, or possibly of anxiety. Then he blew cold air into her ear.

She freed herself with a shriek.

“Draco Malfoy!”

“You asked for it.”

“I hate you,” she said brightly, but there were roses in her cheeks, and the relief made her too happy to be credible. He wanted to laugh, too, for no reason: triumph, perhaps. “You could have just told me.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” he said casually, peeling his soaked shirt from his chest. “Besides, you could have told *me* you were going for a swim.”

“They didn’t tell me either! They just said I’d be sleeping for a while, and I’d wake up when the Task was over! Anyway, they kept me in the Hospital Wing overnight, so I couldn’t tell Harry it was me.”

“Did they?” He glanced at Professor McGonagall, running a Warming Charm over Flora’s fingers, while the girl hemmed and hawed and tried to squirm away. The professor didn’t look happy.

“No, I—” Hermione dropped her voice. “They said I could opt out,” she said, “but it meant they’d have to get someone else — someone Viktor would care about, to make it fair for the other champions. And the only person they could get, on short notice, is his brother.”

“And how old is this brother?” he said, vaguely exasperated. So she’d had a choice, and she’d done the dangerous thing on purpose.

That was typical. He couldn't even be angry at her, for that, it was too textbook.

He should have gone and developed feelings for something easier to deal with, like a hippogriff.

She folded her arms. The effect would have been more impressive if it hadn't unloaded enough water to fill a loch and drawn attention to the fact that she was shivering. "I'm glad you asked, because I did, too. In fact, he's only twelve. It's far too dangerous for someone so young—"

"Said the fifteen-year-old."

"An age of difference, from twelve," she said. He rolled his eyes. "Anyway, I wasn't going to force someone else to go in my place."

She said it as if it were simple. Like *two and two makes four,* moral arithmetic.

"Is that what happened to Davies?"

"Who?"

"Roger Davies. Her date. I'm assuming he had the good sense you lacked, because Delacour's hostage is a relative of some kind. Not that there's any hope for them, she lost out to the grindylows after ten minutes."

"Bad luck," said Hermione distantly. Her eyes were floating in the middle distance over his shoulder, and fast receding into thought. He had five, perhaps ten seconds of her attention left before she was dead to the world. "It's a simple *Relashio…* I don't know what happened with Roger, I suppose he must've opted against. I don't suppose he cares very much about her, or he wouldn't have let her little sister… What did you say Harry used, again?"

"Gillyweed."

“Gillyweed! Where’d you get it?”

“Long story. Don’t praise me yet, he still might have drowned—”

A boom sounded. Bagman’s voice roared blearily through the tentflaps, and Hermione nearly bowled him over in her haste to get outside. McGonagall followed her, almost bowling him over a second time, and once he’d righted himself he joined them outside the tent.

Harry knelt on the end of the dock, flanked by a pair of girls. The first was Cho, spluttering and quite bemused. The second was a short blonde pixie of a thing that Draco recognized from the Three Broomsticks.

Fleur threw herself out of Maxime’s arms and almost knocked Harry back into the water. Cho caught him, scowling.

“Gabrielle! Gabrielle! Is she alive? Is she ’urt?”

“She’s fine,” Harry gasped, but his voice was hoarse. The gillslits on his neck had sealed over, and only a faint thread of webbing lingered between his fingers.

“It was ze grindylows… zey attacked me… oh Gabrielle, I thought… I thought…”

“Come here, you,” said Madam Pomfrey. She seized Harry, bundled him in a blanket like the world’s largest pasty, and almost gagged him with a tall vial of Pepper-Up Potion.

Hermione hurtled down the dock, slipped on the wood, and bowled into Harry with a hug at terminal velocity. Draco wondered why nice things were always happening to other people, and never to him.

“You did it! Thank God, you’re alive!”

“He did it?” said Draco.

“Kind of,” said Harry, strangled. “I lost time — I wanted to stay until all the hostages were gone, but Fleur didn’t come.”

“You haff a water beetle in your hair, Herm-own-nee,” said Krum, significantly.

Draco peered at him in disinterest. He had reintroduced himself to their conference, unwelcomely, and was now holding out another fur-lined robe for Hermione, as if he expected some kind of medal for it. Perhaps he thought he was entitled to her attention because he hadn’t let her drown. He could take that idea and shove it up the same place it came from.

“You,” said Draco sharply. Krum’s eyebrows hiked up at his tone. “You’re the reason she was in the lake.”

The eyebrows plummeted. “I had nothing to do vith this.”

“Right. Because wasn’t a *single* girl in Bulgaria—”

“I do not condone this,” interrupted Krum grimly. “This vas badly done. I vill speak to Karkaroff on it.”

“Oh, will you, now.”

“Vhat do you imply, pale Englishman?”

“I don’t know. You seemed fairly comfortable in the water.”

He drummed his fingers against his thigh, under the place where the wandsheath rested.

Hermione flicked the beetle away and cast a Warming Charm on Cho’s fingers. She ignored them, and that was probably for the best. “It’s certainly noble, but you were well outside the time limit, Harry. I don’t think you’re going to get full points.”

“Oh, Merlin, well,” rasped Harry, lying spread-eagle on his back, “I might as well just hop back in, then.”

The judges had gathered to confer at the water's edge with a small delegation of reedy-haired merfolk who had surfaced from the waves. Fleur had many cuts on her face and arms and her robes were torn, but she didn't seem to care, nor would she allow Madam Pomfrey to clean them. With a trembling dignity, she lowered herself to kneel beside him.

"You saved 'er," she said. "Even though she was not your 'ostage."

"Yeah," said Harry, thickly, regarding the sky as if he wished it would swallow him.

Fleur gave a stiff nod. She bent down, kissed Harry on each cheek — Cho made a sound of distress — then said bravely to Cho, "And you too — you 'elped."

Cho's eyes widened. "Erm," she said. "I dinnae, really."

It didn't matter. Fleur seized her and kissed Cho on both cheeks. When she pulled away, Cho was the color of beets, and looked terribly conflicted. Harry, also, looked terribly conflicted.

"Excuse me," said Hermione, strangled, and Fleur rounded on her wildly — Draco decided warily that if she continued this carnival of promiscuity, he was going to start throwing Shield Charms — but Bagman's voice thundered over them, offering a merciful interruption.

"Ladies and gentlewizards, the judges have reached our decision." He clears his throat, running a fingertip down a slip of paper. "Once again, marks for each champion are awarded out of a possible fifty."

He pauses for a moment, seeming to expect cheers, but the audience is quiet, waiting. He looks back down.

"Fleur Delacour, though she demonstrated excellent use of the Bubble-Head Charm, was attacked by grindylows as she

approached her goal, and failed to retrieve her hostage. We award her twenty-five points."

"I deserved zero," said Fleur throatily.

"Cassius Warrington, who also used the Bubble-Head Charm, was first to return with his hostage, though he returned one minute outside the time limit of an hour." Enormous cheers from the Slytherins in the crowd; Goyle leapt up and punched the air. "We therefore award him forty-seven points.

"Viktor Krum used an incomplete form of Transfiguration, which was nevertheless effective, and was second to return with his hostage. We award him forty points."

Karkaroff shouted something, but he was quelled by a look from Madame Maxime.

"Harry Potter used gillyweed to great effect," Bagman continued. "He returned last, and well outside the time limit of an hour. However, Mr. Potter was first to reach the hostages, and the delay in his return was due to his determination to return all hostages to safety, not merely his own. He was incredibly brave, *incredibly* daring, and, if I do say so, demonstrated the finest sportsmanship yet seen in the Tournament, which, one might think, is a virtue worthy of considerable reward—"

"Merlin's sake," Hermione muttered.

"Most of the judges," said Bagman loftily, while Karkaroff scoffed, "feel that this shows moral fiber and merits full marks. However! Mr. Potter's score is forty-five points."

"Moral fiber?" Draco demanded, but everyone else took the good news of this announcement in the spirit it was meant, which was to say, riotous cheering. He'd taken second place, over Krum. With the cumulative scores from the First Task, which now rolled over the

Spell-O-Vision screen, that put him seven points ahead of Krum, and only two behind Cassius.

Somehow. Inconceivably.

Cho screeched and tackled Harry. Being that he was already lying down, this couldn't do much, but she did smack a kiss onto his forehead, rendering him even more catatonic than before.

Draco spun on his heel, flushing.

"When," he said plaintively, "did everyone at this school become libertines?"

"They're celebrating," shouted Hermione, "it's sweet."

"It's not the bloody Folies Bergère!"

"Prude."

He was about to shoot back a question about just who had been *prudish* in the prefects' bathroom, but then he considered how it would sound, and what the natural interpretation might be for any eavesdroppers, and he fell silent abruptly with a constriction of his throat.

The natural interpretation then presented itself eagerly for consideration. He hauled it out in the yard of his brain and shot it.

He ignored Hermione's querying look.

"The third and final task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of May," continued Bagman. "In accordance with their rank in the Tournament, each of the champions will receive different standing. That standing will determine their gate of entry into the Third Task. Thank you all for your support! And now: *Bonjour! Do svidanya!* Goodbye!"

And that was the Second Task.

The wind came snapping up the bluffs like a wet towel, slapping them with shards of mist. Hermione shuddered under the patchwork of blankets Madam Pomfrey had thrust upon her. Krum had a hushed conversation with Hermione — which made her giggle in what must have been hysterical discomfort — and slumped back to the Durmstrang ship. Cho departed with another shy kiss to Harry's cheek, and went with a silent, mulish Flora Carrow to get more Pepper-Up Potion. Fleur and Gabrielle had scurried off into the waiting arms of a blonde witch and wizard who must have been their parents, and Draco felt no sympathy at all for Barty Crouch, whose berating carried all over the glen.

Theo and his father left the stands in a hurry, and were not to be seen on the way back. Draco thought he glimpsed them momentarily through the vast crowds streaming back up to Hogwarts, and called out, meaning to return Sibelius' Ministry badge — but the mousy head bobbed away, unhearing, and after a moment he decided it must have been Terry Boot.

"Funny hint, about the gate," said Hermione. "Better than nothing! But why would they only give you a month? I suppose they mean to give you a break from all that thinking."

"Yeah, fat load of thinking I was doing," said Harry, with a grin. "Maybe McGonagall noticed you weren't raising your hand as often, and wrote to complain."

"Harry Potter, I raised my hand exactly as much."

"Okay, okay. Sure."

"Harry! I did. Draco, tell him I did."

"I abstain," he said, because, for one, he hadn't noticed, and for two, he was miserably cold. He cast a Warming Charm that scarcely worked, through the windchill, and Hermione's head had left a damp

spot over his heart where the air burned with particular cruelty on his breast. “What do you suppose the gate is for?”

“A fence,” said Harry promptly. Draco kicked him. In return he was nearly shoved over sideways.

“A puzzle about land,” said Hermione. She fumbled for her notebook and cursed when she didn’t have it. “I think that’s what it’ll be. The First Task was dragons, fire, and the Second Task was water. Following the pattern, the Third Task should be earth, or air. But air would be hard, because you can’t force all the champions to fly, can you? Although I suppose that could be the challenge, scaling something…”

“Blimey, can’t give us a minute’s rest, can you?”

“No,” said Hermione and Draco, at once. “And anyway, this means we’ve got to prepare you for everything. I want to get you up to speed on Banishing Charms, they’re very dependable, and just your type of magic.”

“You mean they’re easy.”

“No, they’re — direct,” she said, valiantly. “Straightforward. Theoretically linear.”

Harry was laughing, however. “You can call me thick, Mione, it won’t be the first time this week. Draco does it about once a day—”

“In the erstwhile hope that it might change.”

“You’re not stupid! You’re honest.”

Draco had something for that, but someone shouted for them.

Behind them, Ron came floundering up the hill. He was disarrayed from a quick escape from the stands, and had made remarkable time of it, too: the greater share of Hogwarts’ hordes still muddled below them on the hillsides.

“Hey,” he said, in between lungfuls. “Hey. Harry — you — you alright?” He swallowed and staggered to a halt, his threadbare cloak battering his legs. “You’re — not hurt, or anything?”

The awkwardness of the past weeks collapsed under the pressure of his anxious stare. It was impossible to hold onto anything else.

Draco remembered how it felt. Being fourth of three. He didn’t enjoy the inside view any more than the outside. It was like seeing a naked reflection, and not a flattering one, either.

Harry sighed.

“Thought I was fine, at first,” he said bleakly. “But the thing is, it’s been two hours, and my right foot’s still a flipper. They can’t get it to turn back. Pomfrey reckons they’ll have to amputate.”

“What?”

He paused; Ron had turned ash-gray and made a sound like a dying frog.

“McGonagall’s been arguing that I should get to keep it,” he continued, “but Fred and George want to auction it off for charity — you know, to raise awareness for *totally gullible idiots—”*

Ron roared and tackled him into an embrace that was as much a wrestling match as it was a hug. When they freed themselves, Ron turned to Hermione, with the same anxious expression, and she prompted him before he could speak:

“I’m perfectly fine, thank you.”

“Yeah? You’re not — cold, or anything?”

“Obviously I’m cold,” she sniffed, “but I’m not hurt.”

“Yeah,” he said obliquely. “It was bloody mad, putting you in there like that. I can’t believe Dumbledore…”

He trailed off. The three of them stood at awkward orthogonals, shivering in the rancid cold.

“Sorry,” said Ron, after a moment. “I’ve been stupid. I thought you two were… I’m really sorry. I should’ve been helping.”

“Oh, Ron,” said Hermione, nasal and thick, like she had a headcold. Draco rolled his eyes. *Oh, Ron,* indeed.

“Don’t be stupid,” blurted Harry. “You were entitled. We should’ve told you — I should’ve told you — all of us want you here.”

“No, but it doesn’t matter, right?” said Ron hoarsely. “I could’ve — I dunno, done something sooner, I shouldn’t have left it off. It’s your life, mate. Who cares if my feelings got hurt?”

“I do,” said Harry, very intensely. *“I* do.”

Ron ducked his head, shuffling his feet. “Well,” he said, “erm. Thanks. I, er — reckon I’ll just — hang with you lot, then. If — oh. And, er, Hermione. What I said about — about you and — you know. I was — that was all wrong, I reckon, I was asking for a hard knock on the head. You're not... you're not a thing, like you said. I know that. I was stupid. It's not your fault I don't... But I was thinking maybe you could tell me about your hobby — what's it — Scrumpy? Yeah? And we could talk about that, you know? Maybe?” He wore an embarrassment of hope on his face.

“I love your family,” she burst out. “I love the Burrow. I’m sorry I said anything that made you think otherwise — I didn’t mean it — it’s beautiful, and it’s my favorite place on earth, after Hogwarts. I was happier there than — than I even am at home. It’s wonderful.”

He faintly glowed. “Really?”

“Yes.”

Draco thought, privately and snidely, that she might reevaluate her rankings if she had ever been to Malfoy Manor.

But then, whose fault was that? He hadn't invited her. He couldn't. It was one thing to negotiate the question of his mother, which would be a diplomatic ordeal unto itself, but the Manor itself wasn't all unicorns and nifflers. It was a pureblood house, and it took its identity seriously. There were objects that he'd have to warn her off, rooms where she'd have to tread carefully, portraits he'd have to warn her not to disturb, and all manner of traps and things buried under the floorboards. The pleasure of a stress-free summer holiday was something Ron could offer guilelessly, and he couldn't.

Then again. Hunting for historical artifacts in a haunted house with nothing but her wits and her wand to protect her might very well have been Hermione's idea of a good time.

"You can come back anytime," said Ron, with the shameless eagerness of someone closer to what he wanted than he had ever been before. Draco narrowed his eyes. "Really. Mum would love to have you. Dad adores you. You're always — always welcome there, you know."

Hermione gave a wet sigh and hauled Ron into a hug. Ron buried his head in her shoulder.

Draco watched them. He hoped she left his shirtfront soaked.

They drew back. Ron glanced at Draco. Draco lifted his chin. They exchanged a freighted stare.

"Krum's a knob, isn't he?" said Ron, apropos of nothing.

"Yes," he said immediately.

Ron nodded. "Big ponce," he remarked. "Overhyped, I reckon."

"Wildly overvalued, as a player."

“He’s not even that fast, he’s just tricky with it.”

“Put him on a slower broomstick—”

“—he’s not impressive at all. All style, no substance.”

“Exactly,” said Draco.

Ron nodded jerkily.

Draco sighed.

“Potter,” he said, “you might ask Ronald where he procured the gillyweed. Since it was his idea.”

“His — what — you came up with that?” Hermione whirled on Ron. Her obvious pride conflicted with a poorly hidden sense of surprise. “But that’s brilliant! Where did you get it?”

Ron was taken aback. “I didn’t come up with it on my own,” he said at once, hastening to defuse her expectations. “To be honest. I wouldn’t have had a clue, except I overheard Mad-Eye talking about it. I was headed out of Potions, and Mad-Eye had come down to have a word with Snape, and he asked Snape if he had any gillyweed left, because Mad-Eye was running low, and Snape said no, someone nicked it—”

“Nicked it?” said Draco sharply. “Someone stole from Professor Snape?”

“We stole from Professor Snape, last year,” Harry reminded him. “You say that like it’s harder than it is.”

“That’s different. I’m his godson.”

Ron shrugged. “I figured it was Warrington. But he went and used the bobblehead thing, so I dunno where it went. Anyway, I figured that Mad-Eye might have some left, so I snuck in—”

“Into Mad-Eye’s office?” demanded Hermione. “Alone?”

“It wasn’t so hard,” he demurred, but his cheeks tinged with pleasure. “Honestly, I reckon he might have wanted me to do it; he wasn’t being too quiet, with Snape. And all I had to do on the office was ‘alohamora,’ which is pretty weak, for an auror.”

“You think he wanted to help Harry?”

“Might not’ve wanted his student to drown, yeah,” Ron said.

“Certainly, but why not be direct? He could’ve offered the gillyweed to Harry whenever he wanted.”

“Guess he wanted to be subtle. Raises less questions. Don’t think the teachers are allowed to help, either, though if you ask me, Maxime and Karkaroff have gone right off that rule, Krum’s shark transformation was *way* too advanced for a seventh year…”

“Thank you,” said Draco, pointedly.

“Anyway, who knows why he does anything? They don’t call him ‘Sane-Eye Moody.’ I’m not checking the gift unicorn’s horn.”

“No, you’re right,” she said, but she sounded doubtful, and Draco suspected that if it had been left to her, she would have hauled said unicorn in for a biopsy.

As a winter’s midmorning faded into a dull, tinselly clear afternoon, they finished scaling the hill. The path, which had so comfortably fitted four in their first year, now winnowed to a tight squeeze for three, and out of awkward mutual respect, the group broke symmetrically: Harry and Hermione drifted forward, pressing more hurriedly through the cold in their wet blankets, while Draco and Ron found themselves lagging on the path behind.

“It isn’t a trio, by the way.”

At first Ron did not acknowledge him, and Draco thought his voice had been perhaps lost to the wind.

“The article was a pathetic rag,” he said, “and it misquoted my birthday. It hasn’t any interest in the facts.”

Ron grunted. “S’fine. I’m getting over it. We’ve all made up, there’s no use—”

“Peace, Ronald, I’m making a point. If there were any permutation of three, however—”

“Mate, you’re in a ten-foot hole and you’re calling for a shovel.”

“If there *were,* ” said Draco, flatly, “you wouldn’t be the one outside of it. Surely you realize that.”

The castle was crowned with a faint dusting of snow, the last of the season, and from beneath this jeweling of silver the windows gleamed like gold bangles against the coarse skin of its walls. When the winds blew, the snow lifted and swirled tender fingers around the parapets.

“You’re off your rocker,” said Ron, but it was guarded.

“Modesty flatters no one, and least of all gingers. You’re Potter’s favorite person living. Full stop. And Granger would give her right arm for your sake. They pined like ripe fools for you. And as you said — in second year, you were fine, all three of you. Without me. So I don’t know where you get the idea you’re dispensable. I have a much better claim to it, and it rankles.”

“Harry likes you, idiot.”

“Of course he does. I’m marvelous,” he agreed. “I said he had preferences, not that he was insane.”

“Come off it. You know damn well that Hermione—”

“Is beholden to you in ways that she isn’t to me,” he said. “And never can be.”

“‘Beholden’? Are you joking? It’s not the nineteenth century,” he said incredulously. “She’s a person, she can do as she likes. And so can you, for all your bellyaching.”

“There are things I cannot do.”

If unburdening himself was supposed to bring relief, he was sorely disappointed. The declaration still left him feeling hollow and cold, like the words had emptied out a place in his chest where he was holding them.

“If this is a pureblood thing, you don’t have my sympathy, mate. Boohoo, you’re afraid of your mum—”

“My mother isn’t a threat to anyone. I’m not talking about her. There are people whose minds I can’t change, who have power the likes of which you cannot fathom, and I don’t— I can’t—”

“Merlin, you’re *scared.”* For the first time in his life, perhaps, Ron sounded sorry for him. “They’ve really got their teeth in you, haven’t they? What do you think is gonna happen? Someone’s gonna pop out from under your bed if you whisper ‘muggle rights’ three times in a mirror?”

“The good name of the House of Malfoy is all that stands between myself and a significant danger,” he said, thinly. “The likes of which I am thankful your family has never contemplated. But it is contingent on my ability to sustain it. There are things I have done to jeopardize it, and — I have walked a very thin line, and I have walked it admirably, but I am approaching the limits of my dexterity.”

Ron rolled his shoulders.

“That’s crock,” he announced. “If someone comes after you, we’ll just whack ’em.”

“No.”

“Whadja mean, ‘no’? You’re the one always bragging about being this great stinking wizard. What’ve you got to be afraid of?”

“It surprises me that I have to explain this,” he gritted, “but if I am — indiscreet — if my name is brought into question — the punishment for my failures won’t fall on me.”

Ron kissed his teeth while he thought about this. Ahead of them, Harry and Hermione were giggling about something together, shooting looks over their shoulders. In the dim light, with their hair stained identically dark by water, they could have been siblings.

Abruptly he wanted to steal them somewhere far away from Hogwarts, put them in a secret room under the world, and lock the door against everything that wanted to harm them. He could pile up charms and locks and then sit outside the walls with his wand out and a curse on his tongue, and then he would never again have to stand on the lakeside while they toiled against something he couldn’t change, drawing desperately on his own thin supply of little luck and less faith.

The feeling inflamed his nerves and seared through up the aching core of him, a rash of yearning so keen it tipped the threshold into pain. He was helpless to it. He was terrified of it. The feeling didn’t care.

What was the point of having power, if you couldn’t use it? It hadn’t saved his father. That felt treasonous to think, but in the reeling aftermath of that feeling, it seemed like only a minor treason, a forgivable one. And it was true. Lucius had never been safe, and his family still wasn’t safe now. The question sunk into the bottom of his mind: what was the point? What was it to be pureblood if it couldn’t save him from that feeling? What was the point of Malfoy, if it didn’t mean *my word is Merlin’s?*

“Here’s my advice,” decided Ron. “Grow up.”

Outrage kindled.

“Piss off!”

“Wot! You’re being a nancy! Three-headed dogs, giant spiders, dementors, werewolves, Quirrell, Yaxley — *dragons,* for you and Harry — a murderer, a convict, a hippogriff, and whatever else Harry got in the lake, maybe he socked a mermaid or something — you’re telling me you’ve faced all that, and what scares you off is a pack of snot-nosed anemics with a grudge? Get a grip,” said Ron incredulously.

“You won’t be so cavalier when they’re on your doorstep.”

“Better mine than yours, from the sound of it,” he said. “Least I won’t piss myself if they call me names.”

“I resent you passionately.”

“That’s the spirit,” he agreed. He was walking with a spring in his step, and picked his way across the grass as if each blade ushered him eagerly towards his destination. “Anyway, none of this matters, because there’ll be no trio, or threesome, or what-all. It’s four against millions, alright? We’ve got to band together to meet the enemy.”

“Death Eaters?”

“No, mate. Keep with it. *Krum.”*

He snorted. The matter slipped into an uneasy state of rest.

Under the archway to the Transfiguration Courtyard, a blonde witch accosted them. She had been there in the champions’ tent, but only now did Draco take note of her, from the starched bottle-green polyester of her pantsuit to the thin, savagely plucked hook of each eyebrow, which perched in a leer of perpetual shock above her cat’s-eye glasses.

“Congratulations, Harry!” she said, beaming at him. “I wonder if you could give me a quick word? How did you feel? Were you worried? Was it fair? Do you think they chose the right girl?”

Draco made a quick deduction. Hermione must have done at the same time, because she gasped and ripped out her wand.

“You!”

“Hermione,” said Harry, in alarm, “hang on—”

“You petty, miserable, jealous *cow—”*

She lashed her wand. Skeeter leapt clear. The jinx shattered against the castle wall behind it, erupting in a jagged crown of crystal spikes.

“Hello,” said Draco, intrigued. That was a wonderfully nasty jinx; he’d never seen her try to curse anyone before.

Hermione’s hair was starting to crackle the way it did when her anger infected her magic. She was bristling and straining against Harry’s guarded arm, and some part of him drifted into imagination about Harry letting her go, just to see what exciting thing she’d do next. It was a marvelous thing to see. Showing off made her very nearly lovely.

“Touched a nerve, I see!” shrilled Skeeter. “Good journalism will do that, my dear! But my! What a temper! I’m sure my readers would be *terribly* interested to know that the Gryffindor princess has a mean streak—”

“Princess? *Princess?”*

Draco laughed softly. It was possible she was going to kill her, and it was going to be absolutely wonderful.

“Hermione, come on,” Harry muttered, “let’s just go—”

“Harry Potter, you *let go of me.”*

“Let her go,” Draco said coolly. “She’s every right.”

Harry shot him a plaintive look. “She can’t *jinx* her—”

“’Course she can. I’ve got a great lawyer. Granger, carry on.”

Hermione’s wand wavered, darting her eyes from Skeeter to Harry to Draco, torn between vindication and doubt.

“I know what you’ve been doing,” she said suddenly, and this, more than anything she’d said before, made Skeeter flinch. “I know you’ve been creeping around the castle, and I’ll bet Dumbledore doesn’t know about it. I thought it was Colin, at first, but then you wrote about the Yule Ball, and I realized — it’s *you.* You’ve been sneaking around, haven’t you, Rita?”

Skeeter pursed her lips.

“I haven’t a clue what you mean, my dear,” she said, with the saccharine condescension of someone talking to an animal about to be put down. “I don’t know who this ‘Colin’ is, but gracious me, Miss Granger, if you’ve been hallucinating a woman crawling around in the walls—”

“Does Dumbledore know you’re around?” interrupted Ron. “Because you’re not Ministry, and you’re not wearing a press pass, so I’d reckon you’re not supposed to be here.”

One of her pruned brows arched impossibly further. “Professor Dumbledore supports a free press,” she sniffed. “But if you’d care to comment, I will gladly take a quote, my dear. To whom may I attribute it? I’m afraid I don’t know who you are.”

Ron bristled. Harry shoved his way in front of all of them.

“Here’s a quote. Write this down,” he said clearly. “I’m not dating Hermione. She’s off-limits, and so’s anything about my parents, or my friends, or me. If you *do* want to write about someone, here you

go: this is Ron Weasley. He’s the best chess player in Hogwarts history, he’s got a right hook like a battering ram, and we shag nasty like rabbits every night. Ask Draco, he watches. If you or your readers have a problem with that, you can, and I quote: ‘get bent.’”

And he dragged Hermione off to the castle, with Ron cackling madly in tow.

Draco waited for them to fade out of earshot. Skeeter was scribbling furiously, and her Quick-Quotes Quill had already covered half a page. She made an inquiring, hopeful noise when he stepped closer. He lowered his voice.

“Count yourself lucky that she missed,” he said. “I wouldn’t have.”

He left her to linger on that remark, reflecting that having power was still good for something, after all.

-There it is! I hope it was worth the wait.

-Not many notes this week; it's the end of act 2 of Book 4, and I'm excited to inform you that everything Gets More in the third act.

-It's not a neat-and-tidy ending, for that fight, but things are finally getting better instead of worse.

-Thank you, thank you, thank you. If you commented in the past week, I'd owe you your favorite magical object from the series. This is a stressful handful of days, so it's been really great to have someplace to escape.

The Misfortune of Amos Diggory

Chapter 48: The Misfortune of Amos Diggory

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

My dearest, darling, beloved boy,

Mea culpa. Forgive me. I am bad, faithless, and thankless, a low creature of little brains and less heart. If you can find it in your power to absolve me, I will bear the debt of it for ever.

How embarrassing it is to admit, but in a fit of girlish foolishness I stumbled upon a Dark artifact — stall thy hand! Hear my defense! — and mistook it for something far less insidious than it was. Its curse left me paralyzed for a fortnight, capable of doing nothing but singing Pirates of Penzance. Dreadful! I much prefer Yeomen of the Guard! I recovered steadily, thanks to Severus. Never worry for me. I am a Black! Fiercer than wolves, smarter than foxes, and stronger than bulls.

A final recommendation — I know you will detest me for failing to attach reason to directive, but every once in a while, I must exercise a mother's prerogative to command, while her son is still young enough to listen. Please limit your acquaintance with Alastor Moody. He is a dangerous man, and I fear that his great age has made him volatile and foolish. Severus and I both worry that he will take this chance to grind old axes, and finish the work that he failed to execute during the War.

You ask me what I fear, precisely; I return that I cannot tell you, at least not in print. But that man is no friend to any Malfoy that ever lived, nor any Black, either. He is a creature without loyalties, and without a leash. I leave it at that.

Say hello to all of your little friends for me. I have attached a letter for Theodore; please deliver it to him, if you can.

I love you more than tea and biscuits and silk dresses and the first thaw of winter, young prince of all my kingdoms.

All my heart,

Mummy

It took two readings for suspicion to set in.

Professor Snape had slipped it in with a set of test results from Potions and he had torn it open on the way to Herbology, reading under the desk while everyone else troweled away diligently.

A ridged smear of something rusty colored the side of the seal and the line of the envelope. Narcissa always used the Black seal, which was a crest of three ravens and a skull, impressed on a round of bone-white wax.

He checked the smaller envelope she'd enclosed, but the letter for Theo didn't have the same mark. She must have sealed it before his, and nicked her finger on the paper. That made sense.

He quashed his unease and pocketed both letters. There was nothing he could do about his mother's condition from here. Running awry of a Dark artifact wasn't unlikely, in Malfoy Manor. It did raise questions about what the help was doing, however; maybe he ought to ask Dobby to check on her.

He missed her. He missed her sensibility and her grace and her easy way of making problems disappear with a twitch of her wand or her lip, and the way the world around her was easily sectioned into the good and the distasteful, the elegant and the improper. Perhaps she could even tell him how to make his feelings simple again. She

would say something like: *Don't be absurd, Draco, one always goes a bit mad in the winter, but you'll be yourself again come June.* And then the feelings would disappear, and that would be that.

The dry winds of march aired the last of the snows from the rooftops, and a blustery spring gnawed their faces numb each time they poked their heads out of doors. Post was delayed because owls had to batter their way through windstorms. The trees had no sooner sprouted their first green nubbins of hope than the wind cruelly sheared them away. A brown owl with a harrowed, flustered affect landed atop Harry's egg muffin, seized it, and left in its place a letter from Sirius, which Harry's expression soon revealed to be a bad trade.

"He's coming to Hogsmeade." He threw the letter down, expression stormy. "If he's caught, I'm going to kill him."

"Made it so far, though, haven't they?" said Ron genially. Ever since their reconciliation, he had been remarkably optimistic, and eager to please; he had done his Charms homework a week early, on Hermione's suggestion, sung Harry's praises in the Second Task to anyone who could be plausibly accused of asking, and had even complimented Draco's choice of pocket square that morning. He was, altogether, being a surreally good sport about the whole thing, and it was this that made Draco suspicious; Ron's turn had been too extreme, and too prompt, for him to think the matter settled.

"Uh oh," said Ron, squinting at the ceiling. "Incoming."

The day's *Prophet* landed in his outstretched hand, and he unfolded it furtively, hiding it from Harry and Hermione.

"Don't tell me," muttered Hermione, hunched over her book. "I don't want to know."

Ron scanned it, mouth twisted askew, and then shrugged. "Well," he said, "it's not as bad as it could be."

“Oh, God.”

“I, er… she doesn’t say you’re… Harry’s… girlfriend anymore.”

She grabbed for the paper. Ron whisked it out of hold, but this only brought it into Draco’s reach, who snatched it from his other hand and wrenched it open.

‘HARRY POTTER’S SECRET HEARTACHE,’ declared the headline. He was on the verge of voicing his monumental amusement when he noticed a name several paragraphs beneath it.

…Krum, who is openly smitten with the devious Miss Granger, has already invited her to visit him in Bulgaria over the summer holidays, and insists that he has ‘never felt this way about any other girl.’ However, it might not be Miss Granger’s doubtful natural charms that have captured these unfortunate boys’ interest…

Draco thrust the offending article back at Ron, nonplussed.

“I’m going to speak to Dumbledore about her,” said Hermione, deadly serious, as if this were on the order of capital punishment. She also didn’t answer him, which made his fingers itch for a wand and something to point it at. “I’m going to get her press pass for the Tournament revoked.”

“On what charges?” Harry said wearily, steering the *Prophet* away with his fork. “Criminal hearsay?”

“She oughtn’t be allowed on the grounds!”

“She oughtn’t be allowed to hold a quill,” snapped Draco, and shoved away his plate, his appetite lost to bad temper.

The results of the Second Task had failed to improve the atmosphere at Hogwarts one bit. As it became clear that the Tournament would come down to a horse race between two Hogwarts champions, it became more popular to pick a victor, and the choice was not, in

anyone’s estimation, altogether difficult. Cassius’ success had infected all of Slytherin with extreme bigness of the head and smugness of the face. Victory made patriots of many a reluctant ombudsman, and green pins and scarves fluttered in the hallways, paired besides ties of yellow and blue, and even once, memorably, of red — though Dennis had been forcibly parted from his delusions about bipartisanship by Ginny Weasley, who unceremoniously ripped it from his chest and punted it in the common-room fire as soon as Harry stepped into the room.

Gryffindor, of course, swore by its underdog — Seamus had started taking public pledges to tattoo Harry’s name on his chest if he won, the proceeds from which went to a fund for the celebration party — but one quarter of a large school, especially when the rest was strongly allied against, could very easily feel like none.

The other schools seemed to find Harry’s second victory in two runs suspicious. Black looks abounded from the passels of blue- and red-clad students. Some of them broke into hissing when he passed. Draco declined to translate some of the things that were said about him in French. Hermione, meanwhile, must have known a bit more of the Bulgarian than she let on, because at one point a group of passing boys from Durmstrang shouted something that made her mutter a Lace-Knotting Jinx over her shoulder.

Over the unmistakable yelp of someone tripping down a flight of stairs, Harry said tiredly: “Bad?”

“I haven’t any idea what you mean,” she sniffed, sweeping a de-linting charm over her sleeve.

“Think that was Peeves,” agreed Ron, and they went into Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Moody had them practicing Counter-Curses. Moody’s curriculum in general leaned more on the spellcasting aspect of Defense than Remus had; where third year had taken them on a tour of Dark creatures, fourth year introduced defending themselves from Dark

witches and wizards. It was unclear whether this was curriculum or Moody himself.

Hermione swished her wand out and cast a few warmup jinxes on the table, hexing an inkwell into a mushroom and back again. Draco rolled his wand between his thumb and finger and watched Moody as he mercilessly ripped through Lavender's weak countercurse, then moved on to Dean.

"You should have hit her," Draco murmured, and Hermione worked her jaw as if another curse sat inside it.

"Who? Skeeter?"

"Yes. If you're going to use fear to get what you want—"

"That's not what I was doing," she said quickly. "I wouldn't do that."

"It was, you would, and it was perfectly fine, except you didn't commit," he said patiently. "You didn't scare her, you pissed her off. That's worse than doing nothing. If you're going to use fear, *use fear,* but then you've got to keep up the pressure, or no one will take you seriously."

"You think it would be better if I'd taken her nose off?" she said scornfully.

"Better her hands, it'd stop her from writing. Give her a while to think about whether she wants to risk it again."

She shook her head and flicked her wand, conjuring bluebell flames that flickered out as soon as she twitched her wrist. She repeated the exercise several times, making the flames dance in small shapes on her wand-tip, like a sparkler.

"It's funny," she said distantly. "I wonder if Viktor talked to her."

"It's possible. Does *Viktor* often read *Vhitch Vheekly?"*

“Don’t be childish.” She spun a ring of flames and rotated it like a lasso, thoughtfully. “But he did ask me to visit him over the summer. Right after he’d pulled me out of the lake.”

“What.”

“It’s odd, isn’t it? I know. We were alone, even you didn’t hear us, and you were standing right there. And she knew about the Yule Ball, even though it didn’t have press. We assumed that Colin was her source, but he didn’t even go.”

“Are you going to Bulgaria?”

“What?”

“You,” he said shortly, “were invited somewhere. Are you going?”

“I — well — frankly, I don’t know. I have lots to do for S.C.R.U.M.B.Y., and I’ll be too busy for much traveling. Then he said he could come visit me, to help—”

He snorted.

“What?” she inquired sharply.

“In muggle London? Viktor Krum?”

“Yes,” she said hotly. “He’s interested in muggle-born rights—”

“Oh, I expect he’s fascinated.”

“And he promised to use his connections to get me in touch with someone in the Wizarding Civil Rights Union.”

“From the goodness of his snow-white heart,” he drawled, and lashed a Freezing Curse at the far wall. It shattered into frost against the window, and startled Neville so badly he toppled over.

“Merlin’s *sake.* What is it?”

“I would just be careful with what offers you accept.”

“Draco Malfoy, I’m sure you’re not implying what I think you are.”

“I’m not implying anything. I’m telling you he fancies you. Whatever conclusions—”

“He doesn’t fancy me,” she said, shocked, like the idea was intellectual anathema.

He barked a laugh.

“He doesn’t! He just likes to talk to me, that’s all. Most people don’t treat him like a real person. It’s very sad, actually.”

“Which is why took you to the ball. To talk.”

“Yes. Yes, to talk! And *you* took Daphne, but that doesn’t mean—”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“Because I’m not interested in Daphne,” he said pointedly, and her flames plummeted, hitting an inkwell. The inkwell exploded.

He examined it with interest. So did several others. Hermione watched the ashes gutter and burn, blinking at them.

“So—”

“Don’t say it.”

He pressed his lips together.

“I did—”

“Don’t *say* it!”

He glanced at her.

“Are you smiling?”

“Dreadfully sorry, I know you’re allergic,” she said.

He watched her curiously. She twisted up the side of her mouth in that bunched-up smile she did when she couldn’t help it, like she was too full of fondness and it was welling up in her mouth. He made a sound of amusement and tilted his head at her, mirroring her, sort of gently mocking — imitating her, a bit, with the corner of his mouth. To remind her. She went *tsss* with her teeth in that way that meant *you think you’re so funny,* and his smirk was a strongly worded *yes,* and then she was saying— it was tricky, but he could usually get it — it was a close-lipped smile and a line between her brows and a softness around the eyes, which were typically so stern and full of fire, as if to say: *You are the most fascinating thing in a world that has magic in it,* which was a line he’d thought himself ten seconds ago, looking at her.

And there went the Charms classroom. Pity about it really, lovely space. They’d replace it one of these days.

Mad-Eye’s leg scraped the floor. Hermione pivoted and presented a different kind of *I am a forty-year-old career professional in the body of a fifteen-year-old* smile, meanwhile Draco contemplated bleakly that fancying her might be the worst thing to happen to his class rank in years. His heart rate was doing him an embarrassment and he was reeling in his thoughts with a fishing net. When Mad-Eye took out his wand, he was actually grateful, because the jolt of anxiety gave him something to steer with.

Staring down the end of the grizzled old auror’s wand was an unwelcome confrontation with mortality that he tried not to let bother him. Moody, for his part, appeared to be having too much fun; he feinted at him three times, cackling every time Draco dodged.

Finally Draco planted one foot behind the other, a duelist's stance, and he did not flinch, the next time Mad-Eye jerked at him.

"Better," grunted Mad-Eye. "Stay still. Stop trying to dodge every curse, boy. Just parry them. You've got the knack."

Then he raised his wand.

Draco caught the Reductor at three feet — a bolt of writhing white energy, crackling in midair — and with a sharp wrist movement, he redirected it into the wall. It exploded a small tuft of stone, which Mad-Eye conjured back into place with a flick of his wand.

"Good," said Mad-Eye approvingly. "Square work. Careful with that refraction, though. They're faster than diffusing it, but in melee, they're riskier, and a reckless one could hit one of your friends."

"I assumed we were dueling," he muttered, but Mad-Eye had moved on to Hermione.

She held her wand perfectly in front of her eyes, shoulders square, feet apart. The stance was flawless. The countercurse, however, was not: when Mad-Eye feinted, she flinched and took three scrambling steps back. Mad-Eye grunted, shook his head, and finally leveled his wand at her.

When the curse came, she yelped and threw up a Shield Charm that bounced the curse straight back at him.

Mad-Eye squawked, ducked, and the curse soared into a glass paperweight on his desk, which promptly exploded.

A titter of laughter came from the class. Mad-Eye straightened up and glared at her.

"That," he said, "was *not* a countercurse, Granger."

"I know," she said, in a very small, very high voice. "I know, I know it's not. I'm sorry. Can I try again?"

“Care to first tell us *why* you chose not to use a countercurse?”

“I panicked.”

“So we think, girlie. Say more.”

“I panicked, and — and I went for the first spell I knew would work. That I could do.” She lowered her chin.

“That being a Shield Charm.” He used his wand to scratch his eyebrow. “Oi. Brats. Does anyone want to tell Miss Granger why a Shield Charm is a piss-poor idea for close combat?”

Draco flicked up his hand, lazily. No one else did.

“I know why,” she interrupted sharply. Mad-Eye gestured for her to go on. “The Shield Charm has part of a Refractor Curse built into its magical footprint. It reflects everything. If it absorbed all the energy that struck it, the charm would create an enormous energy well for the caster, and eventually it could make them pass out.”

“Very good,” grunted Mad-Eye. “Full marks. Except that reflecting spells leave you liable to do what I just warned Mr. Malfoy against. Hitting your friends. Or, in this case, your teacher.”

“Yes, sir.”

“A countercurse is a defense for close-quarters, precision fighting. Brawling. Not a lot of people appreciate this, because most wizards couldn’t fight a niffler in a paper bag, but brawling takes more precision than dueling. Why? You fumble a dismount, send a curse wide — *boom.* That’s your lieutenant. Your brother. Your wife. No. A good Shield Charm is what you want on your vanguard. And for what it’s worth, you’ve got a very good Shield Charm, Granger.”

“I… thank you, sir.”

“We’ll do it again,” he barked, and she raised her wand, but her wrist was trembling.

Two more efforts, and she finally caught the white bolt on the tip of her wand, instead of dodging it. It wasn't as far away as Draco's had been, but she held it there, her brow shiny with concentration, until the energy winnowed out of sight, and vanished in a crackle of static. When it finished her whole body went slack, and she lurched forward to lean on the desk, sweat beading on her cheeks. Draco cast a quiet Summoning Charm at her chair, and it slid up to nudge her ankle, whereon she summarily collapsed into it.

"Textbook," muttered Mad-Eye, though it was hard to tell if it was a compliment. "Keep practicing that, Granger. In the field, you won't get three tries. That's it, for the rest of you. And I don't mind if you leave early, so long as you *check that corner,* Finnigan!"

Seamus, who had been about to sneak out the door, jumped and waved guiltily at the professor. The hour-bell groaned. Harry and Ron waited for Draco and Hermione at the door, both worried and impressed.

"That was a good catch," Harry told Draco. "You got it farther away than mine."

"Yeah, but yours was faster, Harry," said Ron loyally. "Better reaction time. That's key."

"I don't know that it matters," said Hermione stiffly. "He was going easy on us. In a real duel, he would've had all of us down in seconds."

"No kidding, brains, he's an auror," Ron said amicably. "I should hope he can take any one of us, or we're all doomed." He turned to Draco. "It *was* a neat counter, though."

"Thank you. For the record, diffusing a curse is a waste of energy," Draco muttered, as they rounded the landing beneath the D.A.D.A. classroom. A wide, spacious atrium lay between theirs and the grand staircase, with a set of windows overlooking the Transfiguration Quad, and students milled around, chatting, to fill the passing period.

“In a duel, you’ve got seconds to respond to every opening. Refracting a curse saves the effort of casting your own. I was being efficient.”

“Which you know, since you’ve been in so many duels,” said Ron.

“I might have. You don’t know how I spend my summers.” There was a book on it in the Manor library, but Ron didn’t need to know that. The book had been rather old, anyway; its focused on traditional pureblood honor duels, not freeform fights for survival. It was possible some of the advice was out of date.

“I wish they let us join Dueling Club as fourth years,” said Hermione suddenly. “I would’ve liked to know something about it, before I had to do it in front of everyone.”

Draco side-eyed her. She’d never shown much curiosity about dueling before. It wasn’t her style of magic; it was fast, instinctive, and required more than a modicum of hand-eye coordination. “Contemplating a career as an auror?”

“No, but — I mean, it’s helpful to know, and it’s not like we haven’t been in magical fights before — wouldn’t *you* like to know these things? Preferably before we’re having jinxes thrown at us willy-nilly?”

“Are you sure you’d have time?” said Ron. “Even with Scrumpy?”

“It’s S.C.R.U.M.B.Y.!”

“Sorry! Sorry. Right. Got it.”

“Maybe if you shortened the acronym, you’d save enough time for another club,” said Harry.

She huffed in irritation.

“Granger, why did you want to d—”

Someone shouted. A surge of movement from the center of the atrium sent students scattering like water displaced by a stone. Red lights flared from the center of the crowd, the sign of magic, and someone roared.

Draco cast a Buffering Charm and shoved through the crowd, which was wrestling past him to get in the opposite direction.

A circle yawned in the center of the atrium, where Marcus Flint was squalling on the floor with Neil Macdonald, who'd hooked his elbow around the bigger boy's throat in the most textbook headlock of all time. It was almost embarrassing. Neil lacked four inches and at least a stone of Flint's girth, but he was hauling him around like a puppet on strings.

"TAKE IT BACK! You lying, trollsucking shit, *take it back—"*

"GERROFF," howled Flint, scrabbling at the arm on his throat. "G'RROFF ME—"

Neil hauled him up, and with a mighty flip, threw him onto the floor. Flint went sprawling. Now with both hands freed, Neil lunged for his wand, which had been knocked astray. Flint did the same, but Neil was faster.

He whirled on Flint — BANG! — and a blast of white light filled the hall.

Draco threw an arm across Hermione and hauled them both around as the light momentarily blinded them. In the bleary blinking that followed, there was only one boy in the circle; and he dangled from his fingers the squealing, writhing body of a garden snake.

Hermione shoved her head under Draco's arm, peering into the circle, and gasped. "Is that — *is that Flint?"*

"One suspects," said Draco, queasily, as Neil levitated the thrashing snake up and down on his wandtip, then bounced him forcefully

across the stones like a coil of wire. Chill echoes of uneasy laughter erupted from the crowd around them, mostly Hufflepuffs, who failed to show much dismay at their fellow student's misfortune; whatever Flint had said to Neil must have been remarkably bad.

"Full human," said Ron wondrously. "I've never seen McGonagall do that."

"Because it's illegal," snapped Hermione. "You can't use involuntary transfiguration on another subject, wizards have gone to prison for less."

"Good," said Harry firmly, "it'll build character."

"Harry!"

"What? Flint's a git, and I'm not sorry it's come back to him."

"Flint? Who cares about him?" she demanded, and Draco blinked in pleasant surprise. Harry, too, seemed startled by her vehemence. "He'll be fine! Or he won't be! But Daphne nearly got thrown out for being mean to Millie Bulstrode, and she's a pureblood! Neil could get himself expelled!"

"You didn't hear what he said to him," said a low, sullen voice. Hermione jumped, and Susan Bones appeared at her elbow, her plump jaw set in stubborn satisfaction. For a girl whose face was usually slack and jolly, this was a strange new expression, and not one that set Draco at ease.

"Oh! Susan," Hermione said, pressing a hand to her chest. "I didn't see you. What — what *did* he say, if you don't mind?"

Susan gave her a disgruntled look, as if unable to tell if she was serious; and then turned to stare coldly at the scene unfolding before them.

"Amos Diggory lost his job this morning," she said.

“What?”

“What?” said Ron loudly. “Old Amos? You’re kidding!”

“My aunt told me,” she said slowly. “They fired her, too, but she knew it was coming for a long time now. She was a Fudge appointee. It was just a matter of time.”

Her mouth held the words in a strange, brittle way, tinged with a cynicism that she couldn’t quite sell. They weren’t her words, but someone else’s, someone older’s, and she clearly didn’t believe them.

“I don’t suppose your aunt gave a reason,” said Draco.

Susan gave him a plaintive, piercing look. “Unprofessional conduct,” she said. “At least, that’s what they said for Diggory. They just said my aunt was a security risk.”

“Security?” demanded Ron. “Bones has been head of Law Enforcement for ages, what’s the risk?”

“There isn’t one,” snapped Susan. “She’s a brilliant Secretary. And she was always loyal to the Ministry, she kept working for them even after Runcorn won and everyone told her to quit— but—”

“But what?”

“But my dad’s a muggle,” she said.

Then she cupped her hands around her mouth and bellowed: “STEP ON HIM!”

Another billow came from the crowd. A crest of gold hair appeared over the forest of dark heads, and a prefect badge glimmered through the sea of robes — Draco felt a whisper of hope that it was Cedric, come to set his boy straight — but this was a gravely misplaced hope. A group of Slytherins swelled out of the crowd, bound in packs, as it always seemed they were, these days —

among them Theo, Pansy, Daphne, and the sneering blond idol of the Hogwarts Head Boy.

“Oh, Merlin,” said Theo, massaging his eyes.

“Bloody hell,” said Pansy, eager.

Cassius Warrington gripped a pair of first years by the hair, wrenched them apart, and swept between them into the circle. “What’s going on?” he demanded. “Just what the hell sort of situation do we have here, anyway?”

“Remedial etiquette,” said Neil casually, whipping Flint to and fro like a riding crop.

“Remedial—? *Is that a student?”*

“Technically, right now, he’s your closest genetic relative,” said Neil.

Warrington’s jaw dropped. He lagged for an understandable beat of astonishment; and when he recovered, he snapped, “Twen—th—*fifty* points from Hufflepuff! For inappropriate use of magic! And if you don’t put him back on the count of three, I’ll take another fifty! One; two—”

Neil’s eyes glittered. “Take them.”

Susan whistled in approval. A cluster of Hufflepuffs roared, signifying their consent to this sacrifice.

“Cass,” said Theo, blinking tiredly, “leave it, would you? Let’s go get Snape.”

“Nott, I’ll be about my business, and you go be about yours,” he snapped, which made Theo scowl. “I don’t question you about *your* obligations. Now. Macdonald, set him to rights, and we’ll handle this like gentlemen.”

“See, Cass, but that depends,” said Neil, “on your interpretation of ‘rights.’ For instance: *I* would say he’s found his calling.”

“Another fifty, then,” said Warrington, coldly, “and a month of detentions for you — with Snape, so don’t get any ideas about watering flowers with that pansy of a house-head you’ve got. And I’ll be having a word with Dumbledore. *And* my father. And *put him down.”*

Neil kissed his teeth. “As you like,” he said, and then wrenched his wand high into the air.

The snake soared. It just missed the arm of the chandelier, and before it could return to earth, Neil flicked his wand, and another BANG! filled the chamber. Flint sprang into being somewhere around the chandelier, and then hurtled back to earth, roaring, while the crowd erupted in screams and peeled apart.

Draco was rocked back on his feet. He groped for a handhold and found one on Hermione’s shoulder, who stood her ground and drove her elbow hard into a fleeing Ravenclaw — shoved her way through the crowd, sprinted into the center, and flung her wand high, crying: *“Wingardium leviosa!”*

Blue blossomed from the outstretched limb of her wand, flowering up her arm and crystalizing around the tip of her wand. Fingers of ghostly light rose and caught Flint in a perfectly symmetrical net of hexagons. The spell snapped him up just in time to whisk him over the heads of the crowd — sweeping his shadow precariously over Neil, Cassius, Theo, and Pansy, who had all dropped to their knees. Theo had thrown himself across Pansy like a human shield, though needlessly, because Hermione’s net buoyed Flint gently and carefully to the ground, where he dropped to the ground and curled into a ball, shuddering.

Hermione turned, her wand still gleaming faintly blue, and breathed shakily, wiping away a spray of sweat-damp curls that had sprung loose from their clip. She glowed slightly with the fear and exertion of

the magic, and her collar had been rumpled slightly in the crowd, with sweat jeweling her temples, but her eyes were narrow and sharp and focused, and she was just — incredibly good. It was a spell even Draco couldn't have managed, not that strong, not on a weight like Flint's, with the force of gravity bearing down on it. He'd known it before, but — there was a difference between knowing and seeing.

"What?" she breathed, and he looked sharply away.

Neil planted his boot on Flint's shoulder and pushed. "You see that?" he said. "That's Hermione Granger. She saved you. Say thank you, twat."

"Stop that," she said. "Neil. That's not—"

Flint rolled upright, utterly wrecked: his hair askew, blood dribbling from each nostril, and a glaze of bloody, unseeing hatred painted across his ugly face. "How dare you," he rasped.

"Cass." Theo stepped into the circle, reaching for Warrington's elbow. "Cooler heads, lad. Pans, get Flint—"

"Hell do you want me to do, levitate him? *I* can't manage a Leviosa that strong."

"How dare I?" Neil said pleasantly. "Hurting you doesn't take half the daring you seem to think it does, friend. You were always piss at spellwork."

But Flint wasn't looking at Neil. Neil didn't seem to exist to him. The black inkpots of his beady eyes, crusted with red, swiveled and tightened on Hermione, who took a startled step back.

"Pans," said Theo flatly. He shouldered past Warrington, fumbling for his wand. "Now—"

"Now *what?"*

Flint lifted his chin with awful dignity. “I don’t need your stolen magic, mudblood.”

And he lifted his wand at Hermione.

And several things happened more or less at once. For one: Daphne let out a bloodcurdling scream which appeared to come from a different body altogether. For two: Theo roared, and lunged for Flint, reaching for his outstretched wand-arm.

For three: Draco ripped out his wand and executed the most flawless *Bombarda* since Filius Flitwick took his Board Exams.

Flint shot into the wall. *Crack,* skull on stone, a horrible sound. Draco stalked forward, shaking out his wand-hand, and the *Impedimenta* caught Flint in the stomach. He slowed like he’d dropped into tar. The third spell was a jinx Flitwick never taught, and for good reason: a lash of his hand fused Flint’s teeth together into a seamless plate of cartilage. Flint screamed, but the sound was arrested by the smooth grill covering his throat.

There was screaming. The crowd broke into chaos. The circle snapped closed in a dead crush of fleeing students and someone was hauling on his arm but he shook them off and wrenched his wand back up at Flint. A spell shot past his head from behind — flickers of magic threaded the riot behind him — and he dodged, swiveling away from the immobilized boy. He shot a point-blank *Petrificus Totalus* at Warrington’s head, which toppled the boy like a felled redwood. When he spun around on his heel there was another Slytherin — one of Flint’s friends, a chaser — *Stupefy* — another one — *Impedimenta* — and he was still whirling, so he used the momentum to send another *Petrificus* at Flint, for good measure, and it was strange, but there was a rhythm to it, like racing, like flying, like the best games of quidditch — jinx, parry, jinx, a dance in three-four time.

He couldn’t see Hermione. She had vanished into the uproar. His pulse was warm and fast in his temples, and he could hear it rapping

out the beat of a skirmish, the swift twostep of charm and countercharm.

Where was she? She wasn't that tall. A body crush would sweep her under like a riptide. She could get trampled. He should have moved her.

He lifted his wand, but then a thunderclap split the air, and everything froze.

It was like time had stopped. He could feel his body, but couldn't move it. The air slowed and stilled like tar. Even the jinxes flying overhead slowed and fizzled out.

The high and furious brogue of Professor McGonagall split the newfound silence.

"What is the meaning of this?"

She swept down the staircase like Michael descending from the clouds, her robes billowing, her wand sweeping across the whole tumultuous assembly, as if she couldn't decide where to point it first. Mad-Eye Moody hobbled a few paces behind her, jaw set grimly. "What is going on?" she bellowed. "Who is responsible?"

The freeze broke. The crowd collapsed, most people dropping to their knees at the sudden reintroduction of gravity; Draco was among the first to stagger upright, followed swiftly by Theo, who had swept Pansy under his arm. Draco swept the crowd with his eyes and found Hermione hunkered near a gargoyle with Neil, Harry, and Ron, protected by a pair of glittering and electrically bright Shield Charms. As McGonagall thundered down the stairs, Hermione flickered one of the charms out, met Draco's eye, and gave a little nod of reassurance; he nodded back jerkily, and hoped that the deep unclenching of relief in his stomach did not otherwise reveal itself.

She was fine. And he was an idiot, for worrying.

Flint was making sounds that would have been shrieks if he could sieve air through the smooth plate in his mouth, and struggling in ways that would have been violent if he could move. Irritably, Draco snapped his wand behind him and muttered a Silencing Charm.

“Malfoy!”

Damn.

McGonagall swept down on him, and palpably staggered back when she saw Flint. “Did you — could you — who did that?”

She hauled Flint up by his collar, jabbed her wand at his mouth, and unsealed his teeth with a silent spell. Flint gasped for air like a drowning fish.

He shoved free of McGonagall and tore off down the hallway.

“Flint! Come back here!”

“Want me to get him?” offered Mad-Eye. He fingered his wand longingly.

“No, Alastor. You stay. Malfoy — don’t think I didn’t see that Silencing Charm, you’ll be coming with me—”

Mad-Eye snorted. Draco glanced at him, and Mad-Eye returned a cool, cryptic stare that made him wonder if perhaps the Defense professor had seen more than he let on.

“And Warrington, as for you — Warrington? Oh, wonderful! Our Head Boy is petrified. How useful.” McGonagall’s diagnostic spell glittered over his face and dissipated. “At least it’s not worse,” she said tightly. “Poppy can deal with the superficialities. Potter! Weasley! Granger! I don’t suppose any of *you* can point me to the perpetrators?”

Harry and Ron offered her identical good-natured shrugs of the un-snitching, and she sighed.

“Am I right in assuming all three of you have suffered an errant episode of acute collective blindness?”

“Sorry,” offered Harry. She waved him off, too exasperated to speak.

“At the risk of stating the obvious, professor, it was a riot,” said Theo calmly, tucking his wand back into his robes. “No one saw who cast the first spells.”

Pansy cleared her throat, which turned into a yelp, for Theo had elbowed her. He caught Draco’s eye and tilted his head. Draco nodded back.

“You seen many riots, boy?” Mad-Eye remarked.

“Pleased to say not many, sir.”

He grunted. “Thought so. Well, take it from one who’s seen plenty: they’re not spontaneously occurring phenomena.”

Neil said, “It was my fault, sir.”

He stood up straight, nursing a long bruise spanning the length of his jaw. The rind of purpled skin failed to quell his calm aura of triumph.

Mad-Eye’s tongue probed his cheek thoughtfully. “Alright,” he said, at length. “How?”

“I jinxed Marcus Flint. He called Cedric Diggory a word I’m not going to repeat, so I turned him into a garter snake,” said Neil calmly. “I know that’s against the rules. I’m sorry. If you want me to talk to Dumbledore, I’m happy to do that. But professor, let me just say, it was a cracking good piece of human transfiguration, and if you’re going to expel me, you should at least let me sit the N.E.W.T. first.”

McGonagall covered her face in her hands. Mad-Eye barked a harsh laugh, sobering when McGonagall glared at him.

“We do not condone human transfiguration on other students,” she spat, “or any wizards, ever, no matter what was said to you, Mr. Macdonald.”

“I know, professor.”

“You may very well face serious disciplinary consequences for this, I hope you realize. Pomona will be horrified; your parents, of course, will be informed. Do you understand? Are you taking this seriously?”

Neil rubbed his jaw. “Yes, professor, very much. And I’m sure they’ll want to know about it, if only because — well—”

“What? Spit it out!”

“The jinx was my mum’s idea,” he admitted.

McGonagall turned around and walked away to the foot of the stairs. Mad-Eye was giggling to himself.

“Yes! I expect it was! I will be writing a *long* letter to Miss Mary Macdonald, explaining that the rules of Hogwarts Castle have *not* changed since she was enrolled, nor have the standards of her house wavered such that I am any less disappointed in her— *do you find this amusing, Alastor?”*

“Bit,” admitted Mad-Eye.

“It isn’t!”

Neil began to grin, tentatively; abruptly, Mad-Eye snarled at him. “What’s so funny? Think it’s a joke, boy?”

“N-no—”

“Think that punishment is funny, do you? Want me to give it a go? Think you’ll find it funny, then?”

“N-n-no, sir.”

“That’s right.” He pulled back, sneering. “Malfoy. Nott. Parkinson. You’re coming with me to Dumbledore’s office.”

“Sir?” said Theo, like he’d been clubbed.

“Why *me?”* demanded Pansy. “I didn’t have anything to do with it!”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“Alastor,” said McGonagall, impatiently, but Mad-Eye flicked his fingers at her.

“Clean it up, Minnie. I’ll sort them out.”

She rolled her eyes and swept off, muttering. Mad-Eye jerked his head at the stairs and started his slow, lilting ascent, without waiting to see if they followed. Trading a dismal look, Theo and Pansy followed him, lifting their chins in similar angles of snobbish objection.

Draco tucked his wand away and picked his way through the quiet hall. He felt a pressure on the back of his neck. He turned his head, and caught Hermione staring from across the atrium.

She didn’t seem to realize she’d been caught; she was watching him distantly, with the warm curious pressure of a scientific examination, like her mind was operating at an altitude several thousand leagues above her body. Her eyes flickered down to his shoes and up again, and a shiver ran down his back.

He wanted to demand what she was about, but Moody was fast leaving, and Harry and Ron were calling her away to help with Warrington.

Hermione tilted her head, her lips just so slightly parted. He raised his eyebrows at her, a bit defiantly.

She wet her lip and blinked twice, and he watched as some cognitive instrument visibly reset itself. She jerked away, and hurried after

Harry and Ron.

He wondered if he'd frightened her.

The weight of her gaze could have suffocated him. He wasn't sorry for jinxing Flint — it had happened and there was no use regretting it, even if he had gone further than the situation merited — but he did worry that she might not see it the same way. She might begin to think he was the kind of person who couldn't control his impulses. He could control his impulses. He just hadn't felt like controlling that one. Marcus Flint was a savage person and whatever he would have done to her would have been worse than what Draco did to him.

Or maybe it wouldn't have been. Draco found, refreshingly, that he didn't care. He only cared if Hermione thought differently because of it. Which would — frankly speaking — make her something of a hypocrite, because *she* had used aggressive magic on people before, and she never seemed too hesitant about Stunning people last year. But then, he hadn't Stunned Flint, had he? He'd chosen a jinx for pain.

She mightn't like that. Might be that it tested one of those iron scaffolds of moral compunction. He twitched, sullen and restless, and stalked the rest of the way to Dumbledore's office.

The headmaster's suite stood behind an eight-foot statue of a griffin, its wings cupped around the sharp double-helix of the stairs.He climbed them. A faint draft jingled lonesomely through the high atria of this part of the castle. A door of shining cherry wood explained by way of gold placard that behind it lay ALBUS DUMBLEDORE, HEADMASTER, and it sat ajar. Inside the office, it felt like he had stepped abruptly into another time of day, and another time in history: ribbed marble pillars twined up to the dark stone vault of the ceiling, while row upon row of big dark oil portraits formed a conference of stone-faced observers who kept a silent and haughty watch over the room. Silk-shaded lamps burned low, and around the room a host of magical instruments — sextants, Sneakoscopes, cauldrons, crystal balls — hovered in magical suspension, drifting

around the ceiling like a host of glittering silver planets. At the back of the room sat a vaulted platform upon which sat a very old harp, a very old mirror, and on the shelf above it, a very, very old hat. A wide rip in the brim evoked a mouth. Draco had worn it once, a century ago.

Beneath the podium rested a titanic claw-foot desk, encircled by plush red armchairs, and in two of these slouched Theo and Pansy. Moody presided, at left, pouring tea into blue china cups on a silver tray. It must have been Dumbledore's, but the headmaster himself was nowhere to be found.

Predictably, Theo was complaining. Draco shut the door with his heel and leaned against it, listening.

"...going to be done soon? Not to be a brat, but we've other things to do today."

"Yes, and I *will* be a brat, if he won't," said Pansy. "I'll have you know we've another obligation—"

"Got a meeting to make, have you?" growled Mad-Eye. That shut both of them up. "Worried the League won't make do without you? Oh, I know all about that," he added meanly, when Theo twitched. "I know what you two have been up to, scuttling around the dungeons. There's not a thing that goes on in this castle Dumbledore doesn't know about, including your little social club. I told him to get rid of it, but he picks his battles, does Albus."

"Sir—"

"But *never* think," he boomed, leaning over the table, "that picking his battles means he's taken his eye off the fight. If he's not picked your battle, it means it doesn't matter if you win it. You understand?"

Theo blinked. "Not in the least," he said. "Does Professor Dumbledore oppose the League of Promising Youth, sir? I thought he supported adolescents developing political connec—"

“Don’t play dumb with me, boy.”

The table rattled. Theo jumped, nearly spilling his chair, and Pansy seized her wand.

“Smarter men than you haven’t fooled me,” snarled the auror. “Far smarter, and far shorter-lived. You think we don’t know what you’re doing down there? I lived through the Wizarding War. I was a general before you were a notion in your father’s head. Don’t think your age will spare you, either. Maybe it will — if it’s Dumbledore. Maybe, *maybe*, if it’s Snape. But not if it’s me. I’ve seen soldiers younger than you, boy, I’ve fought with them. And against them. Regulus Black took the Mark when he was fifteen. Evan Rosier: sixteen. Barty Crouch—”

“Sir—”

“All dead!”

“Sir,” said Theo calmly, “Mr. Crouch is alive and well. In fact, I spoke to him at the Second Task. And I can quite assure you, it would be the shock of my young life to find he had the Mark.”

“I don’t mean Barty. He’d have hunted the Death Eaters until they ground his limbs to dust, and even then, his ashes would chase them across the world.” His tone, in describing the unerring bloodlust of his embittered old colleague, was the closest Draco had ever heard the grizzled professor come to affection. “No. His son. Junior.” He drummed his fingers restlessly on the wandhilt. “My godson,” he said quietly.

Draco jerked, and knocked his elbow into a silver sextant. It ceased hovering and clattered to the floor, loudly, making Theo and Pansy whirl around. Mad-Eye did not move; his only reaction was a minute swivel of his glass eye. He must have known that Draco was there.

“Good of you to join us,” he grunted, and reached for the teapot. “Tea, Malfoy?”

“No, thank you.”

He poured one anyway.

“He named *you* godfather?” demanded Pansy. “Good Lord, why?”

Mad-Eye made a series of rasping grunts, like a knife scraping the rough edge of a plate. It took a moment to realize that he was chuckling.

“Don’t let it surprise you. I was green back then, and we’d been together since auror training.”

“You were aurors together?”

“Fastest rise the Ministry ever saw,” he grunted. “Most arrests in a year. Most convictions, too, though that was all Barty. I was a wreck on the stand, I couldn’t nearly ever get the jurors to listen to me, but when he spoke, a courtroom did what he said. He could sell water to merfolk. And he was *good.* Never broke a rule, and it wasn’t like there weren’t chances. ‘By the book, or not at all.’ Probably why the courts loved him. And he trusted me more than anybody. No one better to keep his boy safe.”

“Well, that didn’t work out,” said Pansy.

Mad-Eye slowly turned his head toward her, like an owl. Theo made a fearful noise, glancing between the two of them, and his hand shifted toward his wand-pocket.

Then Mad-Eye threw back his head and laughed. Pansy smirked.

“No. Can’t say fairer than that. It didn’t.”

“How did he die?” she demanded. “Did you do it?”

“Pans,” exclaimed Theo.

“Oh, shut up, Teddy, they’re only questions. He doesn’t have to answer them. Was it you, professor? Or his father? Was it a battle? The Killing Curse? Did he get tortured? Or—”

“Severus Snape,” said Mad-Eye. “He’s how.”

Draco recoiled. The glass eye slid in his direction, and Mad-Eye’s mouth twitched up.

“Don’t like that, do you, Malfoy?” he said. “Of course you don’t. Snape’s *your* godfather, isn’t he? Expect I’d be nervous, in your position. Well, don’t be. I don’t believe in an eye for an eye.”

His fingers drummed on his wand-hilt.

“...Thank you for the reassurance, sir.”

“Professor Snape killed Barty Crouch?” said Pansy, rapturously. She sounded like the mental image of her Head of House committing murder was the highlight of her day.

Mad-Eye jerked his head. “No. Not that simple. When Snape turned coat — after the Potters died, when the war was ending — he brought names. Junior was the biggest. He and Black — but Black had disappeared, by then, he wasn’t around to hunt, and wouldn’t have been much danger if he was. It was Crouch and Rosier. They’d gone after the Longbottoms. We hunted him down, rounded him up. Barty himself presided, at the trial, and goddamn if Dumbledore didn’t pitch a fit over that — but I told him, you’ve got to let him. And he pulled through, did Barty. Sent his kid straight to Azkaban, two life sentences, no parole. The jurors wanted just one, but it was Barty who said no. He said two. One for Frank,” he added, with nearly imperceptible softening, “and one for Alice.”

Pansy buried her chin in her palm, enrapt. “That’s awful,” she said, admiringly.

“Awful,” agreed Mad-Eye, “but right. And necessary. Sometimes they all sleep in the same bed.”

“I know,” she said.

He cocked his head at her. She shrugged. Theo’s hands wrestled together like mating snakes, though his face revealed nothing but polite boredom.

“He died in Azkaban,” said Mad-Eye. “Crouch. And Rosier. But he died. Picked a fight, got his head bashed in. Dead. Probably suicide, if you want my theory. Happened the same day they caught the Lestranges — reckon he heard about it, and figured the war was over. Nothing left to live for.”

“Oh,” said Pansy, disappointed. “That’s boring.”

“That’s death,” said Mad-Eye, with a grim leer. “Boring as it comes, girlie.”

“The day they caught the Lestranges,” repeated Theo, frowning. “But that — I’m sorry, correct my memory, professor, but that was a while after the war, wasn’t it? Wouldn’t that be around—”

“August, 1988,” said Draco quietly. Three pairs of eyes settled on him. But that was when they had caught Bellatrix. He remembered because his mother hadn't left her room for a week.

“Aye,” said Mad-Eye, softer than he’d ever been. “A bit later than. Near the end of the summer. Tracked them from Witherfell — took us a damn long time, too. Didn’t help that Travers kept sniffing around the department, throwing red herrings, probably trying to get his job back—”

“When you say ‘us,’ do you mean you and Crouch, sir?”

“No. He was gone by then.” Mad-Eye folded his arms.

“They fired him?” Pansy was indignant.

“Fired him?” croaked Mad-Eye, indignantly. “Barty, who knew that office better than his own wand-arm? No. He knew they couldn’t keep him after what happened to Junior. You can’t have a man like that on the force, bad for cohesion, bad for morale, and he knew it. He resigned, and Fudge was grateful enough to give him another post in International Cooperation — a desk job, but he’d get to work with the Wizengamot, like he always wanted. Only kind thing Fudge ever did for him, too, because if they’d made him leave his next job would’ve been a tall glass of Living Death. My next partner was Kingsley.”

Theo sat up. “Shacklebolt?”

“You’re familiar,” said Mad-Eye, pleased.

“Yes. I mean, I’ve heard of him. He’s on the Wizengamot, now, isn’t he? My father—”

“Hates him. Yes.”

“I — w– sir, my father respects everyone he works with—”

“I told you not to lie,” snapped Mad-Eye. “He hates him, and believe me, the feeling’s mutual. Sibelius Nott was one of the worst men I ever met, and if that offends you, I can give you a list of reasons that’d make your toes curl.”

Theo smiled without teeth. “Respectfully, sir, I doubt you could surprise me.”

“Respectfully, boy,” said Mad-Eye, “I reckon I could.”

There was a beat.

“I got him, you know,” he added. Mad-Eye leered, warping the scars on his face into grizzled new constellations. “I had him. *Had* him. If I’d been half the man Barty was on the stand, he’d have been in Azkaban right now. He’s a shit duelist, your father.”

“I’ll tell him you said so.”

“Do that.”

This time, Theo showed his teeth when he smiled.

The door rattled. Another twist, and it swung open, admitted a pair of figures whose silhouettes, it seemed to Draco, had never been more diametrically opposed: one tall, imposing, graced with a fount of white hair and beard, and the other short, lanky, and dark, buried in a volume of black robes. Dumbledore and Snape came in on the heels of a cold whisper of air, their robes stirred, the wind’s touch lingering in their hair, as if they had hurried in from a run about the grounds.

Draco sat up straight, his posture reverting to propriety at the sight of Snape. He itched to ask him about his mother’s letter — its inconsistencies, the stain, the fact that she’d been *injured* and neither she nor Snape had even bloody *told* him — but Snape’s eyes slipped over him without purchase, as if he were one more part of the furniture, and fixed on Mad-Eye.

“Marcus Flint has contacted his parents,” said Dumbledore calmly. “Professor McGonagall is with him. Poppy reports no evidence of lasting injury.”

“Maybe next time.”

“It was our profound good luck that Minerva intervened when she did,” snarled Snape. “It is our *fathomless* luck that his parents appear disinclined to press charges, and Mr. Macdonald should go down on his knees before his better angels that no lasting harm was done, so the Ministry will not have *yet more* cause to surveil us—”

“Piss off, Severus, the boy’s not connected. Ask him.” Mad-Eye nudged Theo, who jumped.

“I — I couldn’t possibly comment,” he spluttered. “I’m not — particularly familiar with Marcus’s family—”

“And that just says it all, doesn’t it?”

“It doesn’t matter!” Snape surged at Mad-Eye, who stood his ground, uninterested and unfazed. For a moment, Draco was shockingly certain he was going to hit him, but the Potions Master heeled at the last moment, and stabbed a finger in his face instead. “Do you think the Commission will care whether the boy was *rich* or not? We face Ministry audit as it is—”

“Pipe down,” said Mad-Eye coolly, and placed his hand on his wand-hilt. Theo shifted his leg in front of Pansy.

“Thank you, Severus,” interrupted Dumbledore. “I appreciate your passion in defending this school from everyone, including its teachers. However, I must ask you not to shout at Professor Moody within reach of young ears, or mine.”

“Ministry audit,” muttered Mad-Eye. “God forbid we get a blessed Ministry audit. What if the quill inventory doesn’t add up?”

“I am not surprised you fail to take this seriously. Those of us who have been teaching for years, however—”

“Hark at him, trying to pull rank,” said Mad-Eye, with impressment. “Adorable. Look around you, Snape. How many Ministry men have been on the grounds since September? Do you think we’re free as birds? Do you think it’s easy for Albus to run this school with a puppetmaster’s hand up his—”

“Alastor,” said Dumbledore. “The children.”

Pansy let out a high nervous giggle. Snape was turning a color Draco had previously seen only in root vegetables.

“You question *my* credibility? You lock yourself in your tower every time he sets foot on the grounds,” he snapped. “You run from Crouch like a child from chastisement. You, who have taken emeritus duties

for fourteen years, retreated to your hidey-holes and your paranoia, while some of us have continued to serve—"

"*Some* of us were plum short of other options, besides Azkaban," said Mad-Eye comfortably, his eye glittering. "It's rich of you to expect gratitude, Severus. And the next time you accuse me of 'hiding,' I'll take it as a warm invitation to discuss your whereabouts on a certain thirty-first of October."

From his tone he clearly expected this to be a brutal hit; but Snape's face hardened into a gleaming sheet of malice, and he said crisply, "Better absent than holding the knife, don't you think, Alastor?"

Mad-Eye gave a hard jerk. He stepped forward— and Dumbledore said, "Enough."

It was the kind of word that could quell an avalanche. Both professors stepped apart, abruptly, and Draco hauled his mouth shut.

Dumbledore turned and smiled at Draco. "Hello, Mr. Malfoy; Mr. Nott; Ms. Parkinson. I apologize for the disruption in your schedules, and for my own tardiness in particular. I trust Professor Moody has had more than enough time to perform an inquisition. I see no reason to waste more of your time with my repetition of the same. Professor Snape will escort you and Mr. Nott back to Slytherin, and I will tarry here a while with Mr. Malfoy, before I return him to his own dwelling."

"What do you want with Draco?" snarled Pansy, and Draco was faintly touched that she bothered. "He didn't see any more than we did."

"I believe you. But I would like to speak to Draco about other matters. Severus—?"

"Come," snapped Snape, and Theo and Pansy shot up. Draco rose, too, and caught Theo as he was going to leave.

“Here’s this,” he muttered, passing along Narcissa’s letter. “From my mother.”

A glimpse of strange, intense relief passed over him. He tucked it carefully into his breast pocket, straightened his lapel, and then swept out, along with Pansy, Snape, and Mad-Eye, who sent Draco a queer look and then shut the door behind them.

In the empty office, the instruments tinkled and clicked softly overhead, like an orchestra of wind chimes. Dumbledore eased himself into the chair behind the desk and reached for a cup of tea. He wrapped his wizened fingers around it and gazed pensively into its depths, as though he had forgotten anyone else was there.

By and by, Draco began to fear for the rest of his evening.

“You wanted to speak to me, professor.”

“Hm?”

“...About the fight.”

“Oh — yes. I am sure that Mr. Flint will have a great deal to say to the Ministry, when all is said and done, and it will be none too pleasant for me; but it will, at least, give me all the information I require. Your testimony, though certainly appreciated if you would prefer to give it, is not necessary.”

“...Alright.” He leaned back, skeptical. “Then why am I here?”

Dumbledore delicately rested his saucer back on the desk, and adjusted the teacup to sit at a precise angle. The tiny click of china filled the room. The headmaster’s expression was complex, closed, and deeply old.

“I am sorry for the question I am about to ask you,” he said. “You have every right to refuse to answer it, on any number of grounds. I would not ask unless I thought that the information was important,

and so important that it was worth the potential breach of your friend's confidence."

"Caveat emptor," said Draco, warily. He racked his brains for what he'd say if Dumbledore accused them of cheating in the Tournament. He could always deny it, of course. He knew Snape had found his potion in the Horntail's toxicology report, but there was no way to trace that to Draco, unless one of the dragonkeepers had seen them — but then, why wait this long? And if it was about the Second Task, then what was Dumbledore's problem? Harry hadn't cheated at all, for that one. Did it have something to do with Snape? His mother? Crouch?

Dumbledore peered soulfully over his pince-nez. "Has Harry complained of unusual pains in his scar?"

Draco drummed his fingers on the chair for a moment, waiting. When no follow-up was forthcoming, he reclined in surprise.

"Is that it? That's all you want to know?"

"It would be an impoverishing remark on my intellectual character, if it was," said Dumbledore, "but presently, it is what I want to know most. Compare it to the first stroke of a sculptor's chisel upon a vast and untouched stone."

"Yes, alright, but what does his scar have to do with anything?"

"I am not trying to obfuscate my intentions, Draco, but my answer to that question very much depends on yours."

"Fine. I don't know. Once or twice, maybe. But it's Potter, he doesn't complain much in general."

Dumbledore leaned forward intently. "Do you have reason to believe that he has experienced pains that he has not reported to you, or others?"

“I don’t know what he’s said to others, obviously, I wasn’t there. If you want to know what Potter’s feeling, you should ask him. Come to think of it,” he added, sharply, “how do *you* know that his scar’s hurting him?” Belatedly: “Sir.”

Dumbledore’s mouth gave a twitch at the delayed honorific. “I keep in correspondence with all my faculty,” he said, “current and previous, insofar as I am able.”

It only took him a beat. That nagged him — it wouldn’t have taken Hermione any time at all.

“Lupin writes to you?”

“Occasionally. When he has reason for concern.”

“And he’s worried about Potter.”

“Harry reported episodes of acute inexplicable pain,” said Dumbledore, not exactly answering, “accompanied by severe emotional distress, and nightmares. If someone dear to me did the same, I, too, would endeavor to alert his custodians.”

“Of course he has nightmares. If you’d seen half of what he has, you’d have nightmares, too.”

“You are precisely correct,” said Dumbledore solemnly, with a readiness that made Draco wonder what Dumbledore dreamed about. “I am sure that part of his malady is a reasonable reaction to intense compounding stress and a series of traumatic episodes. But I am asking about his scar.”

“I told you everything I know. He’s mentioned it twice—”

“When?”

“When? I don’t know, I don’t keep a journal. Once, over the summer. And then once, again, a few months ago. Why?”

Dumbledore lowered his head. He pressed his fingers to his mouth and closed his eyes.

When he lifted his head, his eyes were shockingly bright.

“I appreciate your confidence in me, Draco,” he said. “If you have further questions, I will answer them to the best of my ability. Otherwise…”

The request was clear. He rose to his feet, then paused. “I do have a question,” he said. “It concerns Professor Snape.”

Dumbledore adjusted his spectacles, silently entreating him to speak.

“What’s his issue with the Potters?”

“...Have you raised this question to your godfather, Draco?”

“Yes. He won’t say. Which makes me imagine that it’s either so horrible he won’t tell me, or so petty he can’t admit it.”

The headmaster disguised his amusement by hiding his mouth behind his steepled hands. “I understand. Without breaking his confidence, I can say only that James Potter was not always the great man he would become; and that, indeed, sometimes the most admirable men of their age begin as very unadmirable little boys.”

Draco’s fingers rolled an impatient drumbeat on the chair. “So he was a prat,” he said flatly. “Is that all?”

Dumbledore gave a slight smile. “You carry much of Severus, yourself,” he said. “I hope you will forgive me for saying so, but in some ways, you carry as much of him as Lucius… then again, in others ways, not… No; while I am certain that Professor Snape would agree with your characterization of James, I do not think it would be apt to distill his feelings so simply. That was not ‘all,’ or even most of it, I’m afraid.”

“Fine. Don’t tell me. It’s private, I understand that.”

“Draco.”

He stopped halfway to the door.

“When you see Sirius, ask him about Lily Evans.”

The name *Evans* rang a small, inauspicious, and thoroughly rusted bell.

“Who?” He paused. “And how do you know about S—”

“If I answered that question every time it was asked of me,” said Dumbledore pleasantly, “I would not have half the time I require to do anything else. Say hello to him for me, would you?”

He smiled. The door creaked open, apparently of its own accord.

“And — Draco — I thank you wholeheartedly for your assistance. I swear not to forget it.”

Draco expected that was meant to be reassuring, and at first, it was; but as he descended the stairs from the headmaster’s office, and the draft reasserted itself with a cool finger trailing down his neck, so, too, did a claw of doubt — that it wasn’t a reassurance at all.

Back! God, the last week felt like the longest of my life. It feels like I've been months away, not weeks. I did move, and I've been starting a new job, so there's been lots to color in the time. But it's really nice to be back. Every so often, in a long project, you get phases where you feel unconfident in what you're doing, and you get anxious about whether you can live up to the promises you're making — but the comments section is my cure for that. I have no idea how to express my gratitude for the reassurances you've given me. I feel like I would be amazed if anyone thought my writing was good enough to write some of the things you've said about it, and every week, you guys

rise to the occasion so astonishingly. I dunno. It's been a hard week, so I'm extra grateful to have a place to go. (It's also been a short writing week, which is possibly responsible for the mood!) Anyway. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

-This chapter goes out to the unexpected fun that is writing Mad-Eye Moody and Pansy Parkinson. Whose regard for the other can be summarized as "thank god at least one child at this school seems appropriately grizzled and cynical."

-Next chapter: an appearance from Harry's least responsible uncles; and a conversation that has been about 400,000 words in the making.

-Title: "Padfoot's Return."

Padfoot’s Return

Chapter 49: Padfoot’s Return

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

On the last day of March, a rumble broke out over the castle, and flickers of lightning painted the parapets white. Rain followed a heartbeat later, and the castle firmaments groaned in greeting to the first storm of spring.

They were returning from dinner short one member; Ron had been held up by McGonagall for wedging a third-year Slytherin in a broom cupboard. The context included some remark about Harry cheating; Draco’s charmwork had been involved, but she didn’t need to know that.

“No wonder it broke bad for him,” Harry muttered. “Raised by Barty Crouch and Mad-Eye Moody… Tell you what, that kid definitely checked his corners.”

Draco snorted.

“So Snape was a spy,” said Hermione. The Pink Lady swung forth with a murmur of *Ariadne.* “Which means — at one point — he was a Death Eater.”

“He was a double agent. He had to convince the Dark Lord, of all people, that he was loyal. Small wonder he was convincing.”

“He must have done a pretty good job pretending, if they were going to put him in Azkaban.”

“Wish they had done,” said Harry mutinously. He had received a well-earned T on their Potions essay.

“Harry!”

“Not for long, but c’mon—”

“Dumbledore vouches for him,” said Draco impatiently. “And it’s been fourteen years. I know what you’re thinking—”

“Oh, but I do *love* sentences that begin that way.”

“—but he’s long since disavowed them. He’s not a Death Eater any more than I am.”

The Gryffindor common room glittered in the artificial night of the storm. Draco climbed through the portrait-hole, relating the last points of his conversation with Snape to Harry and Hermione, and walked straight into a detonating flashbulb that reminded him of lightning.

“Creevey!”

“Jesus, Colin,” snapped Harry, somewhat breathless, and then scrambled at once to stop Draco from jinxing him. The ensuing scuffle ended up getting him a hard whack on the head and an elbow to the gut, but he was still better off than Colin would have been, who skittered out of range behind a table. “Just leave us alone, would you?”

“Sorry, Harry! Sorry, Draco! Accident, promise!” Colin wiggled the camera slyly. “Experimenting with the exposure! Didn’t mean to!”

He turned tail and fled.

“Colin, wait—”

“Harry, the photograph—”

“I know. I’ll get him,” Harry said, pained, and he took off after Colin, who darted up the steps to the boys’ dorm, and was gone.

Draco gripped his wand, entertained a few vivid mental images, and then reluctantly pried his hand away.

“I’m going to speak to McGonagall about him,” said Hermione, quietly. “I suspended him from S.C.R.U.M.B.Y., but I expect it wasn’t enough.”

“No S.C.R.U.M.B.Y.? Think of the Geneva Convention.”

She smiled and crossed to the fire, warming her fingers over the persimmony glow. The common room was empty, though voices murmured from upstairs, thumping footsteps, muffled by the rasp of rain at the window. “Trust me, I have other ideas. But I need him to tell me where Skeeter gets her information, first.”

He did like it so when she schemed. It added a charming bit of chiaroscuro to her moral slate.

Draco shucked his robe over the sofa and leaned on the mantle beside her, sharing its warmth. “He’s her contact, obviously.”

“Obviously. But he can’t be her only one. There are things in that article Colin wouldn’t have known.”

“Causes of action for libel, for instance?”

“That you and I are Potions partners,” she corrected, “and what I wore to the Yule Ball.”

“Anyone could have told him that.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, because I’m sure everyone was talking about nothing but.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“Honestly. You act like I rode in like Godiva on a warhorse.”

“I can think of less apt analogies.”

“It was just a nice dress,” she said, which was rather like calling the *Titanic* a ‘pretty nice boat.’

He was going to have a Healer locate his mind's eye and surgically remove it. It would, at the very least, stop him thinking about her coming around the staircase. That was the image that recurred to him, now, and whenever his mind floated away from the work of his hands. The colors of it, the brilliance. The lights, the gold, the smiling. That had been his downfall, in retrospect. If he'd never seen her like that, all dressed up like a grown woman, he would never have started thinking about everything else — the hair, the shoulders, the mouth. He never would have opened his eyes under the water in the prefects' bathroom, and then it would have been safe to look at her now, darkly shaded in firelight, with her hair coming in thick gold-tipped coils down her shoulders, like a flowering vine of marigolds. It might even have been possible to look away.

There were things he could not do.

He remembered this. He remembered his mother. There were things that happened to people who broke the rules.

But you understand, darling, don't you? And you will be careful?

I'm a Malfoy. I can do as I like.

I'm sure you can.

He touched his ring, bent the knuckle, and twisted. The pressure left a red crease that lingered after the pain.

"You don't think I'm cruel, do you?" she said abruptly.

He scoffed. It was an instinct; he wasn't at all prepared to answer that, and had to grapple first with the shock of being asked in the first place.

"Is there an angle to this, or am I supposed to take that generally?"

"I was thinking about Skeeter. Because of Flint. I've been thinking about the things I said to her. And did. Or want to do."

He watched her warily. “And your findings?”

She was rolling her wand over in her hands, an absent fidget, grinding the tip against her palm. “I haven’t decided. But I have this… suspicion,” she admitted, “that I shouldn’t have to think this much.”

“You think it should be easy?”

“No, but I — sometimes I feel — angry. It wasn’t Skeeter’s fault I was in the lake, but I didn’t care. I was angry, and she was there, and I knew it was alright to hurt her because no one would stop me or care. And sometimes I want to do these *awful* things to her, or, or Flint, or — and I don’t know what to do with it, because I know I’m in the right. I don’t know how much that matters, though.”

“So?”

“It bothers me,” she said simply. “I don’t want to be cruel. I never intended to be a cruel person, and I don’t like the idea that being here has made me one.”

When she said *here,* he didn’t know if she meant Hogwarts, or the Wizarding World, or both.

Unbidden, he recalled a very distant memory, from a very different conversation, between two very different people.

I intend to be a thinker and a doer! I’d like to make some positive change in the world.

“And I know you might think it’s simple, or simplistic, and maybe it is,” she was saying. “But I’m asking you because I think you’d tell me. I know you’d tell me. Right?”

“I would,” he allowed, and her shoulders sank infinitesimally in relief. “But you’re not cruel.”

“No?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He discovered he believed this with a confidence he rarely felt about anything, these days, and it was comforting to discover he still had the capacity for this sort of belief. The bedrock kind. The temple floor.

“You don’t have to say that to make me feel better, by the way,” she said, feigning indifference. She wasn’t good at it. She spoke with her hands, and they were too honest; they were already trying to wring themselves for the mistruth. “I can take it. I’m tough.”

“Hermione Granger.” He wondered if it sounded too fond. It was worrisomely close.

She stopped.

“If they cut you open, and withdrew a fragment of a particle of marrow — if they drew a single drop of your heartsblood, and laid it together with one cell of your gray matter — if all that remained of you was a constellation of particles, in other words, you profoundly intransigent idiot — the distilled essence of you, your vanishing remainder, would still hold more goodness in it than this school has under its roof without you.”

She rested her head against the mantle and looked at him frankly for a moment, like she’d never seen him before. He discovered that it was pleasant to say the things that he believed. What a terrible shock.

“So for God’s sake, pull yourself together,” he said.

She laughed with less humor than surprise. Her eyes were shining.

“Sometimes I used to think I imagined you,” she said.

He’d imagined she might come back at him with some sort of equivalently nice or affectionate thing, so this was moderately disappointing. He was brave about it, however.

“That must have been depressing.”

“Did I ever tell you that? Especially over the summers,” she said. “You are so intensely, naturally ridiculous. I *cannot* imagine you in my primary school, it’s impossible. And so when I went home, I’d think—well, you obviously imagined that. People don’t talk like that. Only you do. And years later, you *still* do. You remain, without exception, the most ridiculous person I’ve ever met.”

He ran through four or five different replies of varying bemusement and stupefaction, before settling on: “I talk perfectly normally, thank you very much.”

She wrinkled her nose, shook her head, and snickered. Her laugh blunted his edge of anxiety.

“Thank you, by the way. For Flint.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that.”

“I know,” she said calmly, “and I would’ve stopped him, but I appreciate that — I mean, I know it cost you something, with the Slytherins. I expect they won’t soon welcome you back. And I hope you’ll be careful with them, too, in the future — I mean, I know you think you’re Merlin’s gift to dueling and all, and you are quite good at it, but these aren’t sporting people, and they like to gang up.”

“They’re not going to attack *me*—”

“I know you think so, and you might be right, but listen to me anyways. You’re not used to these people hating you. It’s a very different place to stand.”

His lip curled. There was something slimy and repulsive to the way she described it like an exchange. A sacrifice of capital. It wasn’t like that. Flint wasn’t allowed to touch her. That wasn’t something he’d decided, it was a fact.

“Don’t concern yourself,” he said shortly. “It’s very little to do with you. I’ve been wanting to try out that jinx for months.”

“Right. Well — I’m glad you had the opportunity. To try. They were — a bit unorthodox.”

“They’re independently researched,” he said casually. “If you’re interested, I can show you.”

She thought about it. “For self-defense purposes only,” she decided, “I suppose.”

“Naturally. And French.”

“I don’t need you to teach me French.”

“But if you did, you admit—”

“Why are we back to French? I don’t care about French.”

“—just saying, I’m a man of many talents—”

“Not that it even matters, because frankly, I’d rather not know what any of those girls are saying when I walk by them, I hear them giggling and I know it’s not kind—”

“—not just curses and potions, I’ve hidden depths—”

“—like that girl at the Three Broomsticks — her tone was quite enough. *‘We sleep there.’* Good Lord. I understood perfectly well what she meant when she said *that,* thank you, and let me tell you, I’ve no interest in hearing more.”

“Ça sonnait mieux quand tu l'as dit.”

“What does that mean?”

“If only someone could teach you, perhaps you’d find out.”

The portrait-door introduced itself to their conversation with a noisome creak. A gasp of voices issued from the hall outside, voices that fell short when they came into the common room, for reasons that became clear as soon as their source became clear.

Ron stood framed in the dark round of the portrait-hole, addressing them with a lingering stare of fascination and dismay, like an archeologist unearthing the remains of an animal that oughtn't exist. His gaze rebounded from one to the other across a distance of so little space his head didn't even move.

Draco stepped back, which he realized too late only made it worse.

"Hello, Ron," said Hermione, and though it warbled with awkwardness, it was with a stilted, hoarse gladness that she turned to greet him. She took a half-step toward him as if he'd shifted the gravity of the room.

"Hi," he said. "Sorry to interrupt."

"You didn't." She drifted another few eager steps forward and latched to the back of an armchair, as if she needed to staple herself in place. "Do you — do you want to sit down, and have a cuppa? We can go over the Charms homework."

He softened when Hermione spoke; it was obvious, and it provoked a sharp stab of discomfort in Draco to watch. Making up had left her treating Ron somewhat gingerly, with uncharacteristic softness, and one didn't begrudge him it so much as one found it awfully hard not to notice.

Ron fancied her. Daphne had been getting at it, at the Yule Ball, but he'd been too thick and distracted to listen. It was embarrassingly obvious, now that he had rediscovered how to operate his bloody eyeballs. Ron looked at her like he was the first dirty-kneed fourteen-year-old to invent the idea of a crush. Sappy and timid and longing and standoffish, not a single bit of it original, but all horribly, earnestly felt. Daphne had been right. The more fool him, not listening to her.

Amidst a wave of amused disdain, he felt an unexpected peal of sympathy. It must have taken a toll on Ron, the anxiety of it, the horrible quagmire of fresh feeling. What awkwardness, what jealousy. He must have been — Merlin, he *must* have been jealous; it was quite impossible not to be. Naturally he'd feel resentment. Draco couldn't blame him a bit for that, and in fact very nearly forgave him on the spot. All that would be enough to drive a man mad, even putting aside the fact that she didn't fancy him back.

Which she didn't. Wouldn't. Couldn't possibly. He wasn't being a prat, merely applying the available evidence to the question at hand. Ron was a good mate and a nice fellow and pretty clever when you put him in front of a chessboard, but he was a human bloke, and that was one thing. Hermione was quite another.

For one thing, she was actually, properly deranged — half madness, half fury, all brilliant, approximately nine-tenths natural disaster — all bound up around a moral backbone of dazzling raw platinum and not one spare iota of tact. If she were going to fancy someone, it would be — it would be no one. It would be Merlin come again, with better cheekbones. It would take the second greatest wizard of her age to even hold her attention.

The poor unlucky bastard. Fancying Hermione Granger was a bit like flying into a hurricane and hoping you'd hit the eye before you drowned. He ought to know.

Through a rather inhospitable volley of spring rain, a slim fraction of Gryffindor waded down the wet slopes for the last Hogsmeade trip of the year. It was amusing to watch Harry eagerly skip ahead of the group, stall, and then dither impatiently while the rest of them tramped through thick sluices of mud. It was almost amusing enough to compensate for the wet.

A winding lane behind Hogsmeade led up to the Shrieking Shack. On the razed hill, encrusted with black dead trees, the old building sat under a deluge of rain like shipwreck, jutting black tongues of

splintered wood into the rain. The windows were dark, but at the garden gate, a great black dog sat on its haunches, its nose probing the air eagerly for something.

It shot down the path at a breakneck pace. Harry made it three bounding steps forward before the dog hurled itself into the air, tackled Harry to the ground, and let out a bark of such excitement that it scattered crows from the trees.

Boy and dog went rolling through the mud, and somewhere in the braid of brown and white and black, the dog shifted, leaving in its place a tall man with a great black shag of rockstar hair, who sat laughing in a pile of limbs and dirt and absolutely defiled clothes, one arm around Harry's neck, grinding his knuckles mercilessly into Harry's head.

"Hey! Oi! *Gerroff!"*

"Oh, you want off, is it? Not so big and strong, are you, now, boy? Still not big enough to tangle with your old Uncle Pad— *whoa—"*

Harry had squirmed and flipped Sirius into the mud, sending him skidding to the bottom of a hill. The man gave a bellow of delighted laughter as he went.

"Good arm! Course, you got lucky — caught me off guard—"

"Hello, Padfoot," said Hermione, "and it's nice to see you, and everything, but someone could hear us."

"Aw, yeah, but they won't know it's me," said Sirius, grinning, as he stumbled to his feet. "We've been around for a few days now, and nobody's come up here. It's the weather, keeps everyone indoors. Alright, you lot?"

Draco dipped his head with dignity. Ron shuffled forward and clapped hands with him.

“Good to see you, mate.”

“And you,” Sirius said generously. “Let’s get you inside. Moony’s making tea.”

They rushed in from the rain, and Sirius shucked his raincloak carelessly over a banister, revealing a long, sweeping black tailcoat that hung over his sunken bare chest. Black runic tattoos latticed the feeble landscape of muscle there, deflated slightly from his emaciation, though a promising fullness had returned under his cheeks. He wore thick-soled boots of scabbed leather, which creaked on the withered floorboards of the Shack as he wandered into the living room, hollering: “Moony! Company!”

The stairs gave an announcing creak, and Remus came hurtling down, almost fumbling the last steps. “You took your time getting them,” he said breathlessly. “I was starting to worry—”

“And here it comes,” said Sirius, rolling his eyes. “You would’ve worried if I’d Apparated them. What *don’t* you worry about, old goat, that’s what I want to know.”

“—why I never ask you to do anything that needs doing in the next fortnight. Oh, shut up,” said Remus affectionately, and clapped Sirius hard around the shoulder in what might have been an embrace, or possibly just a hello. Sirius clucked his tongue and fussed at him. “Harry! Hello! Merlin, you’re getting tall!”

“That’s what *I* said,” said Sirius. “Dunno where the hell it comes from, James never was.”

“Pft. Lils had, what, an inch on him, I think? In heels?”

“My dad was short?” said Harry, whose delight at receiving information about his father warred with his obvious dismay.

“Yes.”

“Not exactly.”

“A munchkin.”

“In a tall group—”

“Needed to stand on the seats at matches.”

“He was five foot ten,” said Remus.

“Four eight on a good day, bless his soul,” said Sirius, with one hand over his heart. “I can still hear him, sometimes, asking me to fetch a stool.”

“Right,” said Harry, trying not to sound disappointed. “But my mum, you know, I might get it from her. The height. I mean, you never know.”

He shot a furtive look at Ron, who could already look Sirius in the eye. Ron smirked at him.

“Oh, sure,” said Sirius, flopping into one of the chairs. His leg hooked over the armrest, and he laced his fingers behind his head. “Came from a family of ceiling-dusters, she did. Mary liked to call her the Amazon. And the other Evans girl you could use as a maypole.”

“I think you made that joke to her, once,” said Remus. “She didn’t take it well.”

“Mm, no. Never did have the sense of humor Merlin gave a rock.”

“You’ve met Aunt Petunia?” said Harry.

“Against my will,” said Sirius, lifting a finger, “twice. The first time, I was unprepared. The second time—”

“Was your fault,” Remus said amusedly, leaning against the wall.

“Was an accident! How was I meant to know the dress was supposed to be that color? I was trying to help!”

Draco straightened. The connection between *Aunt Petunia, Lily Evans,* and *Petunia Evans* suddenly resolved.

He still hadn’t the foggiest what all that had to do with Snape.

“Come have some tea, Harry,” said Remus, tipping his head to the kitchen. “We haven’t much food — we’ve been having to steal from the Hogsmeade general store, and whatever people toss out—”

“You should have told us!” Harry was upset. “We could’ve brought you something!”

Sirius flapped his hand. “We’re fine. We’ve both been making do on our own for years. We hunt when we camp — very easy on full moons—”

Hermione shuddered. Only Draco seemed to notice, for Sirius steamed right along: “...and salt whatever we don’t eat, pack it up, go along. Buckbeak’s a great help, too, he’s off in the mountains—”

“Won’t he get lost?” said Ron.

“That creature? Not if you paid him to,” said Sirius. “Wretched thing’s part homing pigeon. He’s been following us around for months now. Thinks Moony’s his mum, not that I blame him—”

“Yes,” called Remus lightly, padding into the kitchen on bare feet. “It appears that all sorts of dangerous things like to imprint on me. I’m sure I haven’t a clue why. Now, Harry, how do you like your tea?”

Sirius turned pink and blew a raspberry. Laughter from the kitchen informed them all what Remus thought of this.

When tea had been served, they gathered in the living room, with Remus and Sirius throned in a pair of adjacent armchairs, the four of them planted in file on the couch. Remus lit a few candles, and the

wind moaned helplessly on the grime-stained windows of the Shack, while a draft hurried in mad circles around their ankles, and chipped tea mugs warmed their fingers. The chill sank into the wet tips of Draco's hair, and lingered there, while the conversation wandered in happy irrelevant circles — Sirius and Remus were very interested in Harry's life, and listened gladly to his tales of Divination lessons, trips to Hagrid's hut, and romantic woe with the kind indulgence of those for whom such trials were long past — until it eventually paddled into deeper waters.

"What's this about Ludo Bagman?" said Sirius finally, setting his empty mug on the ottoman. Remus flicked his wand and conjured a coaster underneath it. "You mentioned him in your last letter."

"What? Oh, yeah," said Harry, blushing and breaking off a heinously long digression on what kind of flowers might be preferred by Ravenclaw seekers. "We think he's got a bet on me. He was trying to coach me, in the First Task — we think, anyway — and then before the Second Task, he came into the tent and started sort of, like, talking to himself about how to deal with grindylows? Which I already knew, anyway," he added, with a nod at Remus, who gave a small smile. "But I think the Ministry's caught on, or at least Crouch has, because they didn't look too pleased with each other, after the Second Task."

"Ludo's bet on you?" said Remus, frowning. He leaned forward on his knees, folding his hands between them. "Why?"

"He needs money to pay Fred and George," explained Ron. "They bet all their savings on the Quidditch World Cup, you see, seven thousand galleons, two-to-one odds, but he gave them leprechaun gold, so now he's trying to get them—"

"No," said Sirius absently, flicking a hand to cut him off. "Sorry, Ron, but a man like Ludo's not concerned with a pair of sixteen-year-old creditors. That bet's not even legal, anyway, your brothers aren't of-age."

“You’re not wrong,” agreed Remus, “but you don’t have all the facts. Ludo Bagman — the Bagman *I* knew, anyway — is a high-roller. This is a man who collects Rolex watches. On a high-profile match like the Cup, he’d easily have six or seven figures riding on it. Seven thousand galleons is nothing to him. He’s got friends who could buy that debt for the cost of a lunch.”

“Well, but he could still have other people going after him,” argued Ron. “Fred and George weren’t the only people he talked to. He was betting big on Bulgaria, right? Bet he made the same wager to other people, too. Maybe some rich ones. People you wouldn’t want to piss off.”

“But why Harry?” added Sirius, squinting in thought. “I mean, assuming you’re right, and that this is a matter of money, which I’m not altogether sold on— Bagman is in Games and Sports. He’s got a finger on almost every match that happens in Britain. If he wanted to rig something — why go *this* big?” He spread his hands. “The Triwizard Tournament? First in a century? Proctored by *Barty Crouch,* the greatest narc of all time? Why not just, say, give the Chudley Cannons a good season, for once?”

“Oi!” said Ron. “But fair.”

“That’s another thing,” said Remus suddenly. He lifted his head. “Are you sure he’s trying to rig it?”

“Pretty sure,” admitted Harry. “He was laying it on thick.”

“I believe you, but what help has he given you, exactly?” Remus tilted his head to one side. “Besides suggesting a very common spell for dealing with dragons, and feeding you advice from the third-year Defense curriculum? He’s not exactly putting his back out.”

“In his defense,” said Draco, “this is not the spit of Merlin we’re dealing with. Bagman was a quidditch player. It may be the case that ‘poke it in the eye’ is his idea of grand strategy.”

Sirius snorted. “Yeah, he’s a mediocre wizard,” he said, “but he’s a wicked gamesman. He’s not rich because he was born that way, let me say that much. If he wanted Harry to win, he’d be winning.”

“I’m in second place,” Harry reminded them, a bit tetchy.

“Not because of Bagman, though,” said Hermione, knitting her brows. “We’ve helped you loads more than him… but honestly, I don’t see why any of this is important. If he’s not hurting Harry, then what does it matter? Maybe he feels bad for him being forced to compete. *I* would.”

“Sympathy?” Sirius snickered, tossing one leg over the other. “Yeah, that sounds like old Ludo.”

“...Well? Why not?”

Remus gave her a teacherly smile. “Ludo Bagman is not a good person,” he said. “He doesn’t have a selfless bone in his body. He was arrested after the War for selling Ministry secrets to Death Eaters.”

Hermione’s jaw went slack. After a moment, she demanded: “And they still gave him a job?”

“Told you he was connected,” yawned Sirius. “The Bagmans and the Rookwoods go back. Crouch tried to put him in Azkaban, but of course, that business with his son sort of overshadowed the case… And honestly, it’s not like he’s the biggest threat to the Wizarding World, is he, little washed-up scumbag—”

“But he worked with Death Eaters!”

Draco rubbed a small circle into his temple. The couch was small, and her mouth was not far from his ear.

“A lot of people worked with Death Eaters,” said Remus, not unkindly, but not gently, either. “And a lot of Death Eaters were fairly

powerful people. If they cleaned out everyone who had a dirty connection somewhere, they would've had to clean out the whole Ministry."

"Then they should've *done* that!" Hermione sat up very straight, holding her spine like a lightning rod. Draco subtly leaned away, wary of getting tagged with a stray elbow. "Maybe we wouldn't have a pack of horrible people running the Ministry *now,* if everyone had just done it right the first time, instead of sticking their heads in the sand! There was a war! People died!"

"We know," said Sirius. "We were there."

Hermione fell silent.

Remus eased upright gingerly, his hands flexing on his knees. "You're entirely right, Hermione. I've often thought the same thing. But there wasn't anything we could do."

"But the Order—"

"The Order was never part of the Ministry. That's what made us effective."

"So you were a paramilitary group."

Sirius gave a honk of surprised laughter. "Is that how they talk about us, now?" he said, grinning. "That's ripping. Makes us sound properly cool."

"It seems so organized. It didn't feel like that at all."

"No. I mean, Mad-Eye was always getting on us about discipline and chain of command, but I don't think we ever got close to meeting his standards. He'd trained in the Auror Academy, and we were a bunch of seventeen-year-old guerrilla fighters. Remember when he tried to make Frank a corporal—?"

“Yes,” said Remus fondly, “but he wouldn’t stop taking orders from Alice, even though he outranked her. So Moody promoted her over him, to commander, and made him the only member of her unit. Just to keep the chain of command intact.”

“Just as well! Once saw Alice down a bloke with three pencils and a torch. Worst thing Frank ever did for the Cause was knock her up.”

“Frank and Alice?” said Harry curiously, and Sirius froze. His smile calcified and then shrank, slowly, into something brittle.

“Longbottom,” he said, after a beat.

“Like Neville?”

“His parents,” said Remus. He and Sirius were both looking at the ground.

“...Are they dead?”

“No,” said Sirius. But neither elaborated.

Ron cleared his throat and stood up. “My tea’s cold,” he said. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Gonna put another kettle on. Anyone want some?”

“Yeah, thanks,” said Harry, clearly grateful for much more than the water, and he stood up. “You, Sirius? Remus?”

“Sure, sure,” said Remus, distantly coming back to himself. “Speaking of Moody, I hear he’s replaced me, this year… is he much better?”

“No,” said Harry immediately.

“Not even close,” said Ron.

“Not at *all,”* said Hermione unhappily. “He doesn’t stick to the book! I don’t think he’s even *read* it.”

“That’s fair, I didn’t either,” said Remus indolently, wandering into the kitchen. Hermione spluttered.

Draco remembered something.

“He’s on bad terms with Professor Snape,” he said. “And Mr. Crouch. Professor Moody has been absent at the Tournament, and Snape thinks he’s avoiding him.”

Remus paused in the doorway to the kitchen, and turned back. “Well, Snape, I understand,” he said. “Mad-Eye hated spies. He thought they were slimy. Dumbledore had to argue him down from dosing Snape with Veritaserum every time he showed up for a meeting—”

“Which I always supported,” said Sirius, “on the grounds that it would’ve been bloody hilarious—”

“My mother,” interrupted Draco, suppressing a flare of irritation, “thinks he’s dangerous. Professor Moody. Any idea why?”

Sirius spoke. “Your mum’s probably not the head you want on this. The last time she would’ve seen him was fifteen years ago, when he was firing curses at her husband’s back.” He shrugged. “I’ll say this for Moody, though: he never ran from a fight. He was a tough nut, and there was no living with him, but he never turned his back on an enemy, not once.”

He pointed at Ron. “If your brother is Crouch’s personal assistant, though, you might ask him if there’s something afoot with Moody and Crouch.”

“I can try,” said Ron doubtfully. “I already wrote him about Diggory and Bones—”

“What? What’s wrong with them, now?”

“They were fired,” said Hermione.

Remus startled. “Fired? Amy? Why?”

“Amy’s sister married a muggle,” she said, “and Diggory — I don’t want to presume, but I think it’s a fair inference to say that Diggory was fired because some people at the Ministry are bigots, and don’t like that his son is seeing Neil Macdonald.”

“Macdonald?” Sirius sat up. “Mary’s boy?”

“I — w— that’s not the point, Sirius.”

“And he’s seeing a *Diggory?”*

“I… I mean, I can’t speak for them, personally…”

“But that’s fantastic!”

“No! I mean, yes, but not for Amos! And not for Neil, either! He was almost expelled for turning Marcus Flint into a snake!”

“I don’t know who that is,” said Sirius, “but if Mary’s boy thought he deserved it, he probably did.” He gave an unwholesome little smile. “If they’re going to play with people’s families, they ought to expect some of us to come back swinging. Might teach them to think twice.”

“You *know* it won’t,” she said impatiently. “And it’s a bad sign of which way the wind’s blowing at the Ministry. The firings aren’t the only thing that’s been suspicious. There have been more attacks, but no one’s done anything — the Dark Mark at the Quidditch World Cup is still under investigation, Merlin knows what happened there — and Bertha Jorkins’ disappearance hasn’t been followed up on at *all.* Not that that’s any surprise, seeing as she’s muggle-born; if I went missing tomorrow, I’m sure they wouldn’t bother to look—”

“Granger,” Draco snapped. That was a horrid thought, and it demeaned them both to consider it.

“What?”

“There’s no need— that’s an exaggeration.”

“Barely!”

“It’s not a remotely appropriate comparison. You’re a student at the safest place in the world. Jorkins was a grown adult somewhere she shouldn’t have been.”

“Somewhere *she* shouldn’t have been?” Hermione’s head cocked at a dangerous angle. “So it’s *her* fault?”

“It’s incredible, you know, the way those words never came out of my mouth, and yet you seemed to hear them.”

“It doesn’t take a genius. She’s a muggle-born, right?” Her tone vaulted precipitously on every third word. “And us muggle-borns, we have to be careful where we go, or we might accidentally trip into a Death Eater, and they’ll have no choice but to hurt us.”

There was a silence of five facets, each one ogling each other with a wary curiosity about whether they would speak first. If it was any thicker it could be used for mortar.

With the grimace of a man striking black ice, Sirius said, “Hermione, I happen to agree with him.”

“Oh, *do* y—”

“Obviously it’s not her fault,” he said, carefully easing himself upright. “But there’s danger and then there’s danger, and better witches than Bertha Jorkins have gone missing in Romania.”

“But you said it was because she was a muggle-born. That it wasn’t safe for people like her. Like me, that is.”

“Dumbledore would never let you come to harm,” said Remus, calm and measured. That was more than anyone else seemed to feel: Draco, for one, had a tight squirming feeling in his chest that wanted to hex something into as many shards as possible, and the other

boys didn’t look like they were on much better terms with their innards. “At Hogwarts, you’re under his protection, and he—”

“Like Daphne was?”

There was a silence like the quiet of the mountains after an avalanche. The wind moaned.

Remus leaned on the arm of his chair and touched his mouth with the back of his knuckles like he was going to be sick.

Harry gawked furiously at Hermione. Draco drummed his fingers on the armrest, debating whether to broach the silence.

He didn’t think she was wrong, actually. Out of order, possibly. Certainly unkind, with respect to Remus. But her point, concerning Dumbledore, was far from wrong.

“I — oh, God, Remus, I — I’m sorry,” she said, after a moment. “I don’t know why I — I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“It’s alright,” said Remus, in a voice so thin it was a whisper. “It’s an entirely fair point.”

“No, it’s not,” snarled Sirius.

“No, it’s not,” agreed Hermione, blinking quickly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to… I don’t blame you at all, it’s not—”

“Nobody thinks it’s your fault,” said Harry, still glaring at Hermione. “It’s not your control. It’s the Ministry’s fault. And Snape’s.”

“Hang on,” said Draco.

“No, yes, Snape’s. If he hadn’t told Nott about Remus—”

“On the understanding that there would be aurors to contain the problem,” said Draco coldly.

“You can’t seriously be defending him! He thought he was sending Lupin to Azkaban.”

“He thought he was protecting the school. Did he accomplish it, perhaps not—”

“He was servicing a twenty-year grudge,” interrupted Sirius. “I’m sure he didn’t intend any kids to end up hurt, but let’s not get ideas about Severus Snape’s better angels.”

“He’s been working for Dumbledore ever since you went to Azkaban,” Draco snapped. “If you think he’s not on your side—”

“He was a Death Eater,” said Hermione, in clipped tones, like she was firing a Stunning Spell. Like she expected that to put down the argument, no objections, no debate, just Hermione and her sodding Right Opinions all the time, and honestly, feelings or no feelings, sometimes he really couldn’t *stand* it.

This was the sort of thing that Theo and Pansy would have understood. It was the sort of thing they wouldn’t even bother to talk about, they understood it so well. Maybe he’d been wrong about them. Maybe he ought to have given them more chances, instead of running off to throw in with a passel of block-headed numpties who couldn’t understand the slightest degree of *moral ambiguity.* Who’d write you off as soon as you so much as flinched in your convictions.

“He turned coat.”

“At the last possible minute,” muttered Sirius, clambering to his feet. “Because he happened to be obsessed with a woman who hadn’t spoken to him in years. Don’t be fooled, that man’s moral compass is a weathervane. If Voldemort had gone for Alice instead of Lily, Severus Snape would be in Azkaban.”

“...What?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, like he’d been clubbed. “What d’you mean, about my mum?”

“Even if he *did* turn, he was still a Death Eater,” repeated Hermione, in short sharp syllables, like she was pruning a rosebush. “That means, at one point, he was perfectly alright hunting and killing muggles and muggle-borns.”

“You have no proof he ever did that. You don’t know—”

“Yes, I do. I do, actually. Do you want to know how?” She didn’t stop for an answer; she barely stopped for breath. “Because you told me. You said so to my face. ‘Death Eater was a real title, it referred to a fledged soldier of the Dark Lord, and there aren’t that many of them left.’ Remember? You don’t get to be a *fledged soldier* just by showing up at the meetings.”

Hermione had an almost perfect memory. He usually liked that about her. Admired it. Envied it, sometimes. He’d never hated it before.

“Fine.” It wasn’t. “So what?” He knew what.

“So what? So what! I don’t know, it’s irrational, but you see, I’m a bit *troubled,* Draco, honestly, by the information that at one point, one of my professors would’ve killed me if he had the chance.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” he snapped. “Nobody’s killing you. Compose yourself—”

“Excuse me?”

Ron stood up. “Oi,” he said roughly. “Time out. Enough. Hermione, c’mon, let’s get some air.”

“No. I want Draco to explain what he thinks.”

Inside him a cold set of claws dragged their points into the soft lining of his stomach.

“Yeah, and I don’t think you actually do want him to do that, right now,” said Ron, with a shocking degree of calm. “I think you want some air.”

“Ronald Weasley, don’t you dare tell me what I want.”

“I’m not. I’m not, alright? I’m saying, this is a great chance — Malfoy, close your mouth, I swear to Merlin — this is a great chance for us to go get some air, and let *Harry,”* he said significantly, “talk to Moony and Padfoot. By himself. You know, get a bit of a family chat.”

“Butt out, Weasley.”

He flashed Draco a short cool glance. “Anyway,” he said to Hermione, “I don’t reckon we’re going to hammer out all our differences before we’ve got to go back, so we might as well table it, right? It’s not like someone’s demanding our urgent opinion on whether Severus Snape’s a bastard. Or Draco Malfoy, come to think of it.”

She snorted.

“I don’t suppose I need to say how rich it is that *you’re* playing peacemaker, Ronald.”

“Yeah, because rowing with you two was shite,” he said angrily, “and I don’t fancy doing it again.”

“Fascinatingly, I don’t recall inviting you into it,” he said.

“You’re not the only people in a conversation just because you’d prefer to be, mate.”

“Excuse me?”

“Fine,” Hermione snapped. “We’ll get some air. As a favor to Harry —”

“Hang on,” said Harry uncomfortably.

“—and to you, I won’t ask Draco to explain himself — even though I don’t think any of us would be particularly surprised—”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” she said, and stood up. “Absolutely nothing at all. In fact, I apologize for — losing composure.” Her cheeks were a rich floral color, almost unreal, as if the words she’d suppressed were suffusing her face with tint. She snatched up her mug and saucer, shot Draco a look that sent searing pain lancing through his stomach, and then delivered both cup and sneer into the kitchen. Ron sucked a breath through his teeth and hurried along behind her, catching the kitchen door on the backswing, and the last thing that could be glimpsed before the door sealed shut behind them was Ron reaching out to touch her arm.

Draco’s stomach had nearly doubled over with cramping.

Remus delicately cleared his throat.

Harry said, “Um. Sorry, Remus.”

“Quite alright, Harry. Consider it forgotten.”

“I mean, she’s been — it’s been really hard on her, with the Tournament, and school, and the stuff about muggle-borns, and everything—”

“You don’t need to apologize for her,” rasped Remus, and smiled thinly. “Your mother said far worse to me, when she was fifteen.”

“...My mum?”

“Oh, I reckon. Lily the Great,” said Sirius, flicking his wand at the teacups, which lifted and danced a merry caravan into the kitchen. “Once called me — what was it, Moony? That one row in fifth year? Flat-arse inbred?”

“Cheese-eating inbred, I think.”

“Cheese-eating! And she called you a chav.”

“What?” Harry was stunned. “She didn’t.”

“In fairness, she was more a chav than I was,” said Remus.

“It was true enough, for me,” said Sirius, stretching. “The inbred part, anyway. I resent ‘cheese-eating.’ I think she meant I was being a coward, which, at the time… never stayed sore for long, though.”

“Then she is unlike Granger in at least one respect,” said Draco. His voice was steady. His heartbeat was tolling in his head, harsher than the muffled clash of voices from the kitchen. He was glad he couldn’t hear them.

He didn’t know why none of them could understand. There were things more important than guilt or innocence. It wasn’t like Snape had always had a *choice.*

One couldn’t choose one’s family. That was what Harry couldn’t understand, and what Hermione and Ron never seemed to have trouble with, because they had the good fortune of families who had never obligated them to any danger with their beliefs. And it wasn’t as if he *liked* what his family was, in fact he tended to abhor the things it might require — he had no desire to see himself in a bone mask with a black scar eating up his arm, it scared him like death, worse even — but if there wasn’t a choice, if it was that or a wand at his mother’s head—

He almost choked on the fury that he might not be offered a modicum of understanding for it. They didn’t have to agree with it, but he had earned, in his opinion, the right not to be thought a monster for having the audacity to love his mother.

That had been the soul of his father’s sacrifice. His father was dead for reasons that none of them would ever understand and frankly he didn’t either, not entirely, but if they couldn’t forgive Severus Snape — who had *turned coat,* who had done the only thing a man could

possibly do to redeem himself — then it took no particular exercise of the imagination to think how they would rate Lucius Malfoy's great gesture of devotion. In fact, most people in the room would have celebrated his death.

At least two of them probably *had.*

His gorge rose.

He stood up and walked out.

Harry called his name. This was ignored. Draco ripped open the door with a swish of his wand and swept it closed behind him, tumbling down into the stinging teeth of the rain.

Mud scattered under his boots. He made it four long strides into the coursing wet before the door clattered, and the voice that called after him, surprisingly, was not Harry's.

"Oi," hollered Sirius. "Hang on a minute."

He trotted down the stairs and caught up with Draco in moments. The rain flattened the great black carpet of his hair into a long curtain, and pressed his clothes to the slender ligatures of his frame. He swung around to stand in front of Draco and planted his feet in the dirt, his hands planted on his bony hips.

"Dunno where you think you're going by yourself, kid," he said.

"I don't know why you think it's any of your business."

"Firstly, I'm your uncle—"

"Second cousin, and technically neither, by the Laws, now get out—"

"Hang the Laws of Blood," said Sirius indifferently. "Dumb relics. Never liked them."

“Considering you’ve never suffered from an iota of filial duty in your life, I’m not surprised.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re excused. Move yourself, or I’ll do it for you.”

Sirius blinked. His eyebrows lifted in a great, slow arc of black shag. “Aye,” he said. “Wondered when this would come up. Held out on me, you did.”

“What? The fact that you’re a blood traitor? Yes, I’m rather surprised it hasn’t been an issue before. Believe me, I blame the lapse wholly on myself.”

“No,” said Sirius, with unnerving calm. “I mean, maybe it is, I’m sure your mum’s told you all sorts of resentful rubbish about me. But I don’t think you really care.”

“An exceptionally rare observation. Now that we’re in agreement, would you *please*— ”

“I was a blood traitor when you met me,” he said. “Didn’t bother you, did it?”

“I’ve made clear that I was in an exceptionally poor period of judgment, and that any errors in conduct, idiocy notwithstanding, are being corrected forthwith. It bothers me *now,* and so I’m giving you one more warning to get out of my way.”

“You’re a blood traitor, you know.”

He drew his wand.

“Take it back.” His head was washed clear with vitriol and the scalding impulse to level something. If that something was Sirius Black, so be it. He’d make peace with Harry later. “I’ll have your tongue out for that kind of insult, Black. Take it back.”

“No, you won’t,” said Sirius calmly. He didn’t even twitch in the direction of his wand; he just kept standing there, his hands on his hips, one knee cocked, as the storm-black sky knit and furled over their heads. A dull roar of rain lashed the treetops. “For one thing, I’d be shocked if you could land a curse in this state. That hand’s shaky as a doxy on —*oof!”*

The spell caught him in the gut and hurled him backwards. Sirius soared and landed in a tumble of rags and hair in the dirt, a small mushroom of mud, the hard wet sound of his body denting the earth.

He sat up and spat a thick mouthful of mud into the grass. “Fuck!” he said, clearly and powerfully, but without any particular vitriol.

Draco gripped his wand with red knuckles and took a few quick steps back when Sirius staggered upright, increasingly aware of the thirty-something *war veteran* he’d jinxed; cold fingers scrabbled up his spine, but he rooted himself to the spot, swallowed, readied himself for the counter. He could do it. He could. He’d practiced.

“Alright,” said Sirius, after a moment. “Wrong about that one. I see that now.” And he clambered upright, grimacing, rubbing his tailbone, muttering something inaudible: “...all to hell, James… sod Cissa… said I was never having kids.”

“Black, I hit you.”

“Yeah, don’t do that again,” said Sirius.

He cracked his neck and stepped forward; Draco stepped back. Sirius rolled his eyes.

“Put that away. I’m not going to duel you, you dull ponce, you’re fourteen.”

“I challenged you,” he said, fear crumbling against indignation. “You — you insulted my family, and I demand—”

“Satisfaction? Tough. Life’s a bitch,” said Sirius indifferently. “You’re not the first half-decent little inbred twat who’s figured out he’s going to have to let the side down. Find some other outlet for the disappointment. I, for one, got in a fistfight with Regulus.”

“...What?”

“You’re a blood traitor,” he repeated. Draco’s wand twitched up; Sirius calmly stepped forward and plucked it out of his hand.

He made a noise of fury and disgruntlement, but then Sirius cuffed him on the ear, and the shock startled him into silence. “Filthy worthless no-good disappointment of a blood traitor, that’s you, and if you had a brain and a spine you’d be proud of it, but you’ve decided to have a tantrum instead, which is awfully pedestrian of you, just saying.”

“I am not—”

“A blood traitor. You are.” Sirius pointed his own wand at him judiciously. “It’s what they’ll call you, your family, when they figure out you’re not a monster.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“Better,” said Sirius, almost pleased. “Getting somewhere, now. Go on.”

“Go fuck yourself,” he snarled, “with the rusted spoke of your own presumption, mutt. I am not a blood traitor. I’m the heir to the Houses of Malfoy and Black—”

“Deliciously ironic, but otherwise irrelevant.”

“—the son of Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy—”

“A misfortune from which you have recovered laudably,” said Sirius.

“—I am the greatest pureblood of the age. I am traitor to *nothing.* I have done nothing — I *will do* nothing to, to violate, to besmirch — you are nothing to me, your words are nothing to me—”

“Sure seems like it.”

“You don’t understand. I’m the last one. If not me — if I cannot—”

He struggled, failed, and his throat closed over. He was suddenly embalmed in radiant self-loathing, like bathing in scalding feces.

“You’re panicking, you poor twit,” said Sirius. “Sit down before you pass out, why don’t you.”

When his order was ignored, he reached out and gave Draco a firm shove on the chest. Draco’s heel slipped in the dirt. He fell hard on the hill, cold mud soaking his back, and when he struggled up, Sirius planted a boot on his chest.

“Stay.”

Draco curled his lip, awash in loathing; but he relaxed, and uncurled his fists.

The shoe removed itself. Draco stayed down.

Sirius neatly flicked out his coat and sat down next to him, leaning on his haunches, a rather canine position. He yawned and stabbed Draco’s wand into the mud, its handle jutting up like a spindly bald flower. Draco wrenched it out and began cleaning it furiously on his shirt.

His uncle yawned and began to whistle, drumming his fingers on his knees.

Draco despised him more than most things living or dead. He contemplated several means by which he could kill him, and then, upon realizing that it was actually making him feel better, fell once more to acute misery and distress.

With his wand cleaned and returned to its sheath, he steepled his fingers in front of his mouth and breathed as well as could be managed, under the circumstances.

“Wet as Merlin’s fucking twat out here,” said Sirius, by and by.

Draco made a sharp noncommittal noise. The two of them marinated in the loud silence of the rain, which was, verily, wet as Merlin’s fucking twat.

“Birds or blokes?”

“What.”

Sirius flicked his fingers in an off-the-cuff gesture of indifference. “You’re that age. Started to figure it out for myself, when I was around there. Birds, blokes, or both?”

Of course that was what Sirius Black wanted to talk about while Draco’s world collapsed. Smashing. Exceptional. His life was a perfect arc towards everlasting happiness.

“...Not blokes.”

“Well, nobody’s perfect.”

Draco stared at him. Then he returned his eyes to the sodden, rain-black earth.

“I have a question,” he muttered.

“Good for you.”

“Was Potter’s mother named Evans?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Sirius mildly. His nose wrinkled. “Why?”

“Dumbledore mentioned her when I asked him why Professor Snape hated Potter’s father.”

The wrinkle count doubled. “Dunno about that,” he said. “He hated James because he was a bully and a stinker, not because of anything to do with Lils. Originally, anyway. Changed later on, but that was after she ended the friendship.”

“With Potter?”

“No, Snape,” snorted Sirius. “Joined this snotty little gang in fourth year, went around playing jokes on muggle-borns. James loathed them. Everyone did, they were miserable.”

He fidgeted with his signet ring. “It was a different time.”

“Not for the rest of us,” said Sirius. “Anyway, James was a bit of a ponce, but he was handsome and clever and good at quidditch, and we all were ponces, back then. The other thing was, later on, Snape had a thing for Lily—”

“A *thing?”*

“Yeah, properly obsessed. She was the only one his little gang never went after. Not that she ever asked for it. She hated them all, except Severus, which — they had this weird kindred spirits bit, both ripping good at Potions, were real cozy. For a while, anyway. Then she got sick of him being a bigoted shit, and he wasn’t all too keen on self-improvement, so she ditched him and started palling around with us.”

Draco was silent for a long time. From where he sat he could hear the rain lashing the rooftops of Hogsmeade, leaving a soft thin film where it met the gutters, diffusing the cords of smoke that lifted from each chimney. His heart thumped dully against the cage of his chest, hard and decadently slow. It was an empty landscape, a cold one.

“You’re scared as hell,” said Sirius, like it was some sort of goddamn insight.

“What.”

“I shouldn’t have been so flippant, earlier. When I was your age, I already hated my family, and I had another one waiting for me. I had sisters, Mary and Marlene, and Dory, and Lily, they kept me straight… I had James, my brother, there aren’t even words for James and me… I even had Remus. But you’ve got a longer fall.” He clapped the side of Draco’s shoulder, retreating before Draco’s withering stare could force it to. “And you don’t trust them to catch you. Even though to look at them, they’re desperate to try.”

“I don’t need rescuing.”

Sirius ran a hand through his matted hair, through the wet flaps of black rope. “No? You happy, then?”

“Are you?”

“Sure am.”

“Well, so am I. I don’t have your problems. I would never run away from my family.”

“Even if they hurt you?”

“My mother would rather die.”

“Fine. Likelier case. What if she went after Harry?” Sirius cocked his head. “What about Hermione?”

He scowled and turned his face into the rain.

No one was permitted to hurt Hermione. She had to be alright for the rest of the world to make sense. She was a cornerstone of the comprehensible universe. But it was hard to say so without outright saying, *Hermione is the cornerstone of the comprehensible universe,* and sounding like a vapid useless prat.

“I wouldn’t allow it.”

“Yeah? And how’d you do that, tiny? You’re making all this noise about protecting people, but ten minutes ago you walked out on them, called me a blood traitor, and jinxed me — and all that after we’d had a nice chat over tea. Hermione’s a muggle-born. What happens when you remember how you’re supposed to feel about those?”

“Do not make the mistake of believing I have ever forgotten.” His tone was so clipped he almost bit his tongue. “There are things I cannot do.”

“Rubbish.”

“Black—”

“You can. I know,” said Sirius, “because I’ve done it.”

“I don’t know how many times I have to drill this through your thick skull, but *I’m not you.* I love my family.”

“Yeah?” said Sirius. “And who’s that, exactly? Two disgraces, a dead boy, a mad bloodthirsty bint, and the four dead old prats who raised the wretched crop? Or your dear old dad, rotten piece of work that he was?”

“My father was a great man.”

“He was a miserly old shit who hated muggles so much he lost the chance to watch his son grow up,” said Sirius flippantly. “And he might’ve disagreed with me, but that’s tough for him, because I’m the one still here. And he’s not. Come to think of it, it’s probably the best thing he could possibly have done for you.”

“You are asking me to desecrate the memory of my father.”

“Dead men can’t be proud of you,” said Sirius.

It lodged like glass in his throat.

“Fuck off.”

“Lucius Malfoy is never going to tell you he loves you, kid.” It was the brutal unkindness of a Healer cleaning a wound with salt. “Not never, not ever, not once. He can’t. Might be he wouldn’t, if he knew you, but that doesn’t matter. Because he’s dead. Worms know that man better than you do. And you’re going to go in there and fuck up the life you’ve got without him, and for what? A fistful of leprechaun gold?”

“Fuck off!”

“You’re butchering your own happiness over the opinions of a corpse,” said Sirius, ruthlessly cold. “You deserved to have someone tell you.”

Draco pushed off the hill and looked at the vast, endless braid of hills, crested with distant streaks of rain. The size of the moors and the mountains impressed itself on him as it never had, the whole empty world rolling out at his feet, making even the grand vaults of Hogwarts Castle seem small. He’d thought that coming to Hogwarts would make him feel closer to his father, as the place that made him the man he was, and that the same mold would have shaped him into an image of his like. Another turn of the wheel — another Lord Malfoy. Another white-haired boy with a ring and a sneer.

Which was a pissant child’s wishful dream, because he had never felt farther from his father in his life. He was wretched with the understanding that for all his best efforts, he only ever seemed to move farther away.

There were a hundred thousand things about himself that he couldn’t ask anyone to understand.

“Alright,” said Sirius carefully. “On consideration. Shouldn’t have said that. That was… that was a bit tough. But seriously—”

“If you say my father’s name again,” he said, “it will be the last thing you say.”

Sirius eyed him. Abruptly, he snorted.

“Shame you never met your Uncle Reg,” he said. “Would’ve got along like boggarts in a cupboard, you two.”

Draco made an irritated noise and turned his head away.

Sirius worked his mouth for a moment.

“I’ll say this, and then I’ll shut up,” he said, apropos of nothing. I never met a pureblood happy enough to justify what they’ll ask you to do. Maybe you have. Maybe you don’t care. That’s not my business. But you’d be the first in my time.”

“Look who’s preaching about happiness. You’re a penniless convict living on the run with a werewolf and a hippogriff.”

“Oh, I know,” he said. “Some days I can’t believe my own luck.”

And his smile was a terrible little heartbreak of a beam, so sincere, so utterly unadorned with irony in the least, that it burned to look at.

How dare he be happy with his miserable lot. How dare he look at Draco like he pitied him, like there was anything in Draco’s situation that Sirius Black had to fear.

Sirius shook something out of his pocket. It was a white box with a blue crest, and he had tapped out half of a cigarette before he lifted his head into the rain and frowned. “Bugger,” he said. “Forgot.”

Draco rooted in his pocket and withdrew a silver lighter, inlaid with ornate filigree. The flame sprang out and flickered brightly, despite the coursing rain.

“Bang-on,” said Sirius appreciatively. “That’s a neat trick. Where’d you pick it up?”

He could have laughed.

“It was my father’s,” he said. “In whose possession it was almost certainly never lowered to this purpose, so hurry, before I change my mind.”

A little chuckle. “If you believe that, then you definitely didn’t know your father like I did.”

“Right. Or I can put this away, and you can light that off the friction from the nice wank you seem to be having—”

Sirius laughed, free and heartily, and shuffled over to light his cigarette on the silver cradle. Then he offered Draco the box.

“Thought you said I was too young.”

He shrugged. “Eh. What’ll you do? Tell your mum?”

Draco snorted and took one. He lit it with his father’s lighter — the rain delayed success until the third or fourth attempt — and drew smoke in a thin stinging column down his throat. Warmth bloomed in his lungs like a blazing coal.

When he exhaled, the smoke diffused into the rain with a bloom of grey on silver.

Sirius smoked half of his, and then tossed it out in the brush. “I’m going in,” he said. “Give you a bit of peace. Come in when you can.”

Draco said nothing. He ignored, too, the soft little sigh that Sirius gave as he clapped Draco on the back, and then marched up the wet path to the house, his boots splashing in the dirt.

He smoked until the nubbin was stinging at his fingers, and then flicked it out. Then he put his hands in his pockets and walked back to the castle, alone, through a forested path that was silent save for the violent dirge of the rain.

-Never in history has there been a simple relationship between two sons of the House of Black.

-I'm interested by our capacity, as people, for self-persuasion. Not even delusion, just... the importance that labels have to human beings, and how we'll labor to avoid them even as we completely fulfill it by any standard, that's weird, right? Because so long as you don't have the label, it's fine, you're safe from the consequences. Maybe people won't notice, if you don't say the name.

-At a point, that becomes unsustainable, of course.

-Something something that point when the personal being political means you have to make personal choices. Tfw your boundless faith in the righteousness and goodness of another human being means you have to reckon with the possibility of your own damnation. Or something. Maybe.

-(tfw you are hermione granger and you make a rebel of a careless man's careful ~~daughter~~ son) jk jk

-Shoutout to softkombucha, who has so kindly made several pieces of art for this fic and also goes hard for the marauders; sorry about the angst! short king james potter for life.

-Shoutout also to mary_sue_apologist. you know what for. insanely good.

-can i be real, beloveds? can i be brutally honest? this arc right here is my favorite part of a love story. it's the point when the match hits the pilot light. it's my favorite to read and so far it has been my favorite to write.

-i really do love draco with my whole heart. and i am going to give him the absolute worst time. it’s going to be great. i swear.

-as may be clear, I'm back to having fun again. thank you so much for people who reached out on tumblr and on here to reassure me about The Process. you all deserve the world or at least an exceptionally nice box of swiss chocolates where all of them have the good fillings.

-the next chapter: prepare for more castle intrigue, amateur spycraft, and the largest action sequence since the First Task in "Secrets of the Undercroft."

Secrets of the Undercroft

Chapter 50: Secrets of the Undercroft

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

He swept into the Entrance Hall, swept excess rainwater from his sleeves with a rake of his wand, and then stood in the nearly empty atrium, struck momentarily by the absence of direction.

The faithful arm of the marble staircase reached down from one direction, feeding students up into the airy halls, where the Tower houses laid in wait; Hufflepuffs bobbed in and out of the cheery rain-shadowed corridors that branched off from the hall; and drifting from the antechamber beyond, warm, rich foodsmells emanated from the Great Hall. Gold light spilled from the slender V of the cracked doors, and the echoes of a chattering crowd drowned out the sound of the rain.

Draco turned and descended the stairs to the dungeons.

Light cooled and then dimmed to an artificial glimmer from the torches. The course downward wrapped around hairpin staircases with a haste that was perilous to ankles and necks. Long identical hallways spanned out in a dizzying landscape of orthogonal squares, flat lanes of black tile, corners that vanished into a darkness flat as night, when just two floors above, daylight still dappled the floors of the Entrance Hall. He cut through a passage hidden behind a tapestry of Barnabas Deverill and stepped into a wide hallway terminating in the Potions classroom, the locked door to which succumbed at a simple *Alohamora.*

In the cool, dark room, there was a soft silence, broken by the weeping beads of dew that formed from crevices in the roof, and the patter of candles sweating wax into their brass holsters. None of the burners crackled. Snape was gone, absent from his normal post at

the front brewing station, where he often fretted and scowled away the hours between classes and meals.

Disappointment tasted bitter, though that could have been the cigarette residue on his teeth.

He wandered around the table and peered into the empty cauldron. A leatherbound book lay prostrate on the desk, and he picked it up, flipped it open in the cradle of his arm: it was a recipe. *Veritaserum,* read the heading, in a nearly unintelligible scrawl, followed by two pages of instructions so brutally annotated that most lines read like an unbroken trawl of black ink.

In the margin above it, in ink old enough to flake, someone had scrawled: *Ulceratio.* There was a wand movement diagram beside it, sketched on a clumsy four-point cross, and beneath that, a concise summary: *Good. Messy.*

Interesting. He replaced the book on the table as it had been.

A voice crested through the door to the office, and then subdued again. Draco startled. He hadn't thought anyone was there; he'd assumed that Snape must have been at dinner.

Once it became clear that the voice was not in any hurry to emerge, his curiosity cornered his discretion, and he approached.

The thick wood muffled the sound, but that was his good fortune, because those inside must have trusted it enough not to mask their voices with spellwork. Leaning against the wall beside the door, the dull strains of a conversation among two clamoring men became audible.

"...powerful accusation you're making. If you're right, he belongs in prison."

"I am aware of that."

That was Snape, then. The disdain was unmistakable.

“If you are correct in your suspicions — and they are not so credible as to bar all doubt — then this is a man of such reckless narcissism it verges on sociopathy.” It was Barty Crouch. “I am merely raising a possibility.”

“A possibility that the evidence cannot sustain. Someone has forced Potter to compete, and they have continued to work on his behalf in the Tournament. They sedated the Horntail—”

“That was an accident. The dragonkeepers dosed them all beforehand to keep them manageable, and one of them miscalculated. We closed that investigation weeks ago.”

“An accident? Someone fed it an *industry-grade sedative* on accident? Never mind — does the Ministry seriously contend that its dragonkeepers, N.E.W.T.-holding wizards in magicopharmacology each to each, cannot perform the simple arithmetic that divides *one* dose from *fifty?”*

“Even if that were enough to convince me, which it isn’t,” said Crouch tiredly, “you’d have to persuade a jury, and the first question they’ll ask is how a man who, by every account, was nowhere near the dragon paddock for the duration of the First Task, somehow managed to sedate the Hungarian Horntail all by himself. Can you answer that question? Because if you can, please do, and we’ll set you up to testify.”

“Fine. What about my gillyweed?”

“I presume you are still unwilling to tolerate the possibility that Potter stole it himself,” said Crouch, “though why, I am not sure, since he did, in fact, use it.”

“Potter doesn’t know what gillyweed is.”

“Well, he obviously figured it out,” said Crouch impatiently. “Or someone else did, and told him, but that doesn’t mean some conspiracy—”

“I found him, Crouch.” Snape was triumphant; he seemed to think this was a trump card. “The night before the Second Task. He was creeping around the undercroft. He said that he was looking for something he’d lost, a bit of parchment, a billfold… obvious lies. My inventory was wholly untouched before I caught him; and the next, the gillyweed is gone.”

“That’s not proof! That’s inference! Strong inference, I admit, but you can’t possibly expect me to act—”

“He has been acting suspiciously all year—”

“He’s a dodgy man, and what do you expect, after the war—”

“—jumpier than I ever knew him—”

“What do you mean *knew* him—”

“I have an option,” said Crouch stiffly. “I can bring him in for questioning. Voluntarily.”

Snape scoffed, but Crouch spoke over him. “I don’t have a pretext for arrest, but if I tell him he’s been named in an investigation concerning Harry Potter, it’s possible he’ll go on the record to avoid the possibility of serious charges.”

“He’s not going to confess if he’s *guilty,* you punctilious fool. You’d leave him free to run for the hills—”

“I’m doing my job,” said Crouch.

“But it isn’t.” Snape’s voice was rich with the savor of malice. “Not anymore. There’s only one auror in this castle, and he isn’t in this room.”

Draco physically recoiled from the abrasive silence that followed it. There was a creak, closer to the door, and he hurriedly stepped away from the wall. The conversation shifted and slipped into indistinct murmurs, and satisfied that he'd heard as much as he could, he crept back through the silent Potions classroom, his mind turning so furiously that the world seemed slow and foggy by comparison.

The last remark threw the whole exchange into focus — it meant Mad-Eye. He had to infer the conversation had been about Moody. The suggestion that Crouch had 'gone soft' on him, that they'd worked together for years — not to mention that the gillyweed had been found in Mad-Eye's office — he'd never thought to question where Mad-Eye acquired it, but how else could he have come by it on short notice? Moody had even pointed them in the right direction for the egg, telling them about Fleur and the prefects' bathroom; had he offered other hints that they had missed?

Come to think of it, he didn't have any great reservation about endangering students, either. He'd seemed fairly nonchalant about throwing jinxes, and he'd barked orders at Hermione like he expected war to break out before lunch. Watch your corners, indeed.

Which was advice that Draco shortly thereafter wished he'd taken, because he rounded the corner coming out of the Potions hallway and almost slammed into a girl who was hurrying in the opposite direction.

His wand came out without thinking; she fumbled for hers, but a Disarming Spell twitched it out of her none-too-nimble fingers, and it skittered uselessly into the hallway. Only in the hackle-sinking aftermath did he identify the girl, a reedy Slytherin with a fox-like face and hair the color of dirtied wheat.

"Carrow?"

"Oi!" she snapped. She doubled over to snatch up her wand, and a streak of marbled blue bruising gaped from the lip of her collar. A

moment later, however, it was hidden again. “Watch where you’re going, gobshite.”

“You first. What’s on your neck?”

“What are you, a prefect?” she shrilled. “I could ask you the same question. Your common room’s not even around here!”

“Neither is yours,” he pointed out, which was true: the Slytherin common room lay in an entirely separate wing from the Potions classroom. He’d learned that the hard way, trying to find the blasted thing.

“Mind your own business!”

“Gladly,” he said sharply, “and eagerly. I haven’t the slightest—weren’t you a hostage in the Second Task.”

“Oh! Wow! Good for you!! You have a long-term memory!” She tried to brush past him. “I don’t have time for this — I don’t know you — goodbye!”

He ignored her shrill invitations, of increasing profanity, to extricate his proboscis from her affairs. He stepped into her way, and found, to his satisfaction, that she stumbled back. “Why didn’t you opt out?”

“Why didn’t you *bluh bluh bluh?* Get out of my way!”

She was shrill, and unusually urgent, considering he’d only disarmed her. That was interesting. He touched his wand when she tried to shove past him a second time, and she jerked back, eyeing him warily.

“They didn’t force any of the hostages. Davies declined. Granger could have, only she didn’t, because she’s mad. You’re nothing to Warrington,” he said, curiously, “or at least he claims you are, so why go to the trouble? Why didn’t you pass it off?”

“Not so I could stand here and have you yammer at me about it!” she shrilled. *“I* didn’t know what they were asking; *I* thought I’d only wake up once we were out of the lake.”

He tilted his head. It was a lie: the hostages hadn’t been told they were going into the lake. At least, Hermione hadn’t, which raised the question of why Flora Carrow was a different case. No one gained anything from telling her; she hadn’t helped Warrington, so far as he could tell, and none of the administrators had any interest in her. Dumbledore wouldn’t have given her special treatment, and he doubted Crouch or Bagman even knew her name.

He pocketed the information for later. “How did you know Warrington would win?”

“Are you serious? Cassius Warrington, up against a half-breed, a half-blood, and a mudshagging quidditch player—?”

“Careful, Carrow.”

“Warrington’s the best wizard at this school, and every real person here knows that.”

She spoke with the anguished pleasure of someone who had no real right to the pride they were feeling.

“Has he promised you anything?”

She made the face of a woman sipping bile. “...What are you *talking* about?”

“Because if he has, he’s lying.” He was impatient with her, and vaguely irritated at himself for taking the time to help, but it was necessary for someone to take her in confidence about her delusions, and he sincerely doubted that Theo or Pansy would shoulder the responsibility. “Warrington doesn’t think he’s obligated to you. He’s not going to offer you protection. He said—”

A sound skittered from the end of the hallway. Flora yipped shrilly; Draco started; and she took the chance to duck under his arm and run, vanishing around the corner before he could call her back.

Voices issued from the corner where the noise had come from. He weighed between investigating and following her, found he held not the slightest interest in submitting himself to any more of her company, and went in the opposite direction.

Something ran over his shoe. He grimaced and kicked away a small beetle, which buzzed off into the musty shadows, leaving him irate and ill at ease. All sorts of fauna nested in the castle — there were rats and beetles aplenty in Gryffindor Tower, and that was infinitely better kempt — but down in the dark everything felt more iniquitous and seedy, making him itch to cast *Inciendo* and scour the whole place as it had earned.

Voices bounced queerly from the narrow passages, warped by the shape of the high, vaulted walls. When he turned the corner he ran into an ancient stone clock set into the wall, its faces set in blue lapis lazuli, with gold arms that pointed at hours marked in constellations instead of numbers. The face of it hung slightly ajar from the wall, and when he prodded it with his wand, it creaked and swung out, suspended on an invisible hinge in the brickwork.

The passage beyond was a hole of shadows, lit only by a glimmer at the other end.

This being the beginning to any number of memorable stories where the subject ended up in a bloody tangle of limbs at the bottom of a mineshaft, Draco promptly pivoted on his heel to go do something else.

“...don’t hear… find him?”

“...most of it… message.”

Even these would not have been curiosities enough to tempt him into a Guaranteed Toll-Free Mauling, but he was too slow in his route of egress, and caught the tail end of a thin, reedy sound that made him wince and stop dead in his tracks.

It was a shriek. A child's shriek, to be more precise. A very young child, if one wanted Granger-esque levels of precision.

Which just roped him into a Gordian knot of moral culpability, damn the thing.

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, in the vain hopes of repelling an oncoming migraine.

"...shut him *up,* eedjit, he's gon…"

"...s'the bloody point…"

"No — no! No, no! *Please* don't!"

This was Hermione's fault, really. Somehow. He'd figure out how once he'd had some time to think about it.

He cast *Lumos,* stepped over the threshold of the clock, and crossed into the passage, muttering to himself.

What do you mean, you heard someone screaming, and you didn't do anything, Draco? What kind of a person doesn't do anything? I went lake-diving in February for a twelve-year-old I never even met, and you can't spare a moment to see if a child is dying?' Notwithstanding the last time we went poking around in odd corridors, we ended up squaring off with a three-headed dog and the embodied vessel of the Dark Lord, but no, we're Gryffindors, so let's just stick our necks out for anything that whimpers in our general direction —

The light coming through the grate was the color of bilgewater, strained through a large, vaulted stone space populated by columns

the side of oak trees, walled with barrels and braziers so old that rust smeared jade patinas on their chains, and the miscellaneous detritus of a basement clustered under the shrouds of dusty sheets. It was large enough to fit a quidditch pitch, and its size shattered every sound into echoes, which bounded in dizzy loops around the ceiling. This meant that it was hard to tell whether one child was shrieking, or three, though as he approached the mouth of the passage, he made out the three squabbling figures at the foot of one column.

There were three of them, two big and one small, two green ties and a red one, shouldering each other roughly against the marble. He felt a touch nauseous. It was Colin Creevey.

Goyle had a fistful of his hair, and was dangling him against the column like Sebastian on the cross.

“—leave anything on his face,” Goyle was saying, earnestly, “cuz Cass said he won’t help us if—”

“Bloody hark at you, Cassius’s bitch—”

“No, jus’ saying, it’s easier to tell…”

“...up and piss off, Greg, get this over with.”

Flint did something that made Colin give a ludicrously high scream. Draco took three quick steps into the light, cast up the grate with a flick of *Leviosa,* and stepped into the room as the shrieking metal played herald for him.

The Slytherins greeted his entrance with not one iota of the respect he was due. They dropped Colin in a crumple of robes and pain, correctly judging that he wouldn’t try to escape, and pivoted shoulder-to-shoulder, with a slightly ridiculous unison, like the world’s dumbest-looking pair of beefeaters.

“Well, if it isn’t Malfoy,” said Flint, grinning.

Draco rolled his eyes. In the hierarchy of ways to open a confrontation, *‘if it isn’t so-and-so’* ranked near dead last. It also made him feel a bit better, frankly, since it reminded him that he was dealing with dullards.

“Flint,” he said. “Goyle. Odd place for a threesome, but don’t let me interrupt.”

Colin hadn’t moved since Flint dropped him. That was concerning, but not immediately resolvable. Draco made a note of it without taking his eyes from the bigger boys.

“Doesn’t meet your standards, dozzit?” Flint’s grin was fleshy and a touch nervous. “Scouting places to suck off Potter? Would’ve thought by now you’d worn a hole in the Tower floor.”

“Would’ve done, but your mother says it hurts her knees. Anyway, what’s this?” He twitched his wand at Colin, who squirmed slightly, groaning.

“None of your business, is what it is,” grunted Goyle. “Go ’way.”

“Like a scalpel, your wit, Greg.”

“Don’t call me that,” he snapped. Draco and Flint both looked at him with surprise. “You can’t call me that. You’ve no right.”

“Fine, Gregory,” said Draco, disgruntled, but Goyle fished out his wand and stabbed it at him.

“It’s Goyle. You’re no friend of mine,” he snarled, “after what you did to Marcus.”

“Been whinging about that, has he? You might recall it wasn’t me who Transfigured him. This is a red tie, not a yellow one. Don’t fret, I know colors are hard.”

“You attacked him!”

Goyle's shout reverberated around the undercroft. Colin twitched and whined in pain.

Draco eyed him. It wasn't clear at all what Flint had done to him; he wasn't bleeding, and apart from some minor scrapes and bruising, he didn't seem badly hurt. That was more chilling, not less.

"After Granger saved him from turning into a pavement stain, sure."

"He wouldn't have *been* there if not for the fairy, and you still jinxed him afterwards — Merlin knows what the mudblood would've done if the teachers hadn't come—"

"So you're going after Creevey?" It was hard not to sound incredulous; the internal machinations of the profoundly stupid never failed to amaze. "Because he's in the same house as me? That's a thin pretext, even for you."

"Either way, he's not your lookout," said Flint. "Run away, Malfoy. I'm sure you remember how."

"If I don't, I'll know who to ask." He twirled his wand through his fingers. "I got a nice long look at your back the last time we saw each other, Flint."

"Wasn't a fair match, was it. You and the rest of bloody Gryffindor. Would've been different if it were just you and me."

Draco's mouth experienced one of those rare moments where it acted totally without clearance from any of the better parts of his head. He blamed Ron Weasley.

"It's just you and me now," he remarked, still twirling his wand. "Unless you count Goyle, although one can treat his tactical value as a rounding error."

Flint snorted. Goyle, who didn't seem to understand he'd been insulted, did too.

“Is that a challenge?”

“It’s an observation.” They were standing close to Colin. If he fired something at them, they’d likely dodge or try *Protego,* and the rebound could hit him. It would be more prudent to move the brat before they tried to duel, but he’d have to come up with a reason to do it.

He didn’t much fancy dueling Flint. In the best of all worlds, he’d have grabbed Colin with a *Levicorpus* and hauled him off, with nary so much as an *Expelliarmus* exchanged in either direction. That dream seemed increasingly hopeless, however.

On the other hand, if Flint dueled him, he wouldn’t have to worry about him and Goyle coming on at once.

Colin groaned, lurched up, and vomited a steady stream of something black onto the stone.

Flint and Goyle danced back, hooting with laughter. In contrast, Draco’s stomach and kidneys interlaced, and he stared hard at the black sludge foaming from Colin’s mouth before realizing what it was: it was mud. Thick, black, oily mud, veined with blood and bile.

“You know, I’m almost impressed,” he said, battling dizziness. “That’s not a simple spell.”

“Dunno what you mean,” said Flint. “Pretty sure mudbloods just do that on their own.”

Then he grinned, and Draco broke out of his reverie. The nausea vanished. He drew his wand and took a sidestep into Flint’s line of fire.

“Formal challenge,” he said, and tried to remember what all the book had said he was supposed to do next. “Wands and hands. Clavicle to sacrum. First to disarm.”

There was a stunned beat as everyone tried to figure out whether or not he was serious, himself included.

“You haven’t got a second,” said Flint.

Fuck. Well.

He jerked his head towards Colin. “Creevey. Indicate.”

Colin moaned and heaved another mouthful of sludge onto the stone. Goyle barked a high peal of glee.

“Sure,” said Flint, grinning beatifically. “Hell. Good enough, I reckon.” He drew his wand and shook out his arm, sending sparks twirling into the floor, like he was limbering to dance.

Draco turned to Goyle. “Call us,” he said.

“I’m not your second.”

“And I’d ask mine, but you’ve packed his gastric tract with silt, so he’s preoccupied,” Draco snapped. “Flint, tell your second to call, or it’s off.”

“Greg. Do it. This’ll only take a minute.”

He lifted his wand at Draco.

“To the wizard’s disarm,” called Goyle, with clear dislike for both of them. “Clavicle to sacrum. Wands, hands. Call.”

“Marcus Flint,” said Flint, shifting into an underhand grip. He held it with the tip arrowed down, leering from a great height.

“Draco Malfoy.”

With their names still skittering around the ceiling of the undercroft, they dueled.

Flint's echo was still fading when he realized that he had made a mistake. To his credit, he was a seventh year student at Hogwarts, with the very bare minimum of knowledge that credential entailed, and so he knew how to dodge a spell— probably having tempted more than one of his peers. He also knew how to cast one, and he was quicker than expected. His arm was fast and his aim was good, his posture flexible and limber, like a chaser's should be. He came barreling down the duelist's line with an avalanche of footsteps, hurling jinxes on every half-step. He moved well. He moved intimidatingly well.

Draco moved like fire on a fuse. He was up the line and under Flint's guard before the first spell shattered on the stone behind him, two jinxes tossed off like a courtesy greeting, parrying a Knockback and shattering it harmlessly against the column. He sliced a *Diffindo* up the front of Flint's shirt and swept down with an overhand *Langlock,* which hit belatedly as a red line bloomed over a bisected Slytherin tie, and Flint gagged himself trying to voice his pain with a mouth that couldn't move.

He made his first mistake when he paused for a quarter-second, looking for a quick way to disarm, instead of following up with another assault — because in the exhilaration of winning the first movement, he, the idiot, had forgotten that seventh years learned nonverbal magic.

The *Bombarda* lashed at him in a white blur, and he hurled himself back before it slammed into the ground where he'd been, cratering stone. He fumbled the footing and just barely got his feet under him before Flint unsealed his mouth and roared something that sent ice spikes soaring from his wand. Draco dropped and slid sideways, ruining the line, but sod the line, because a row of spikes erupted from the place where he'd been and melted harmlessly away.

Flint launched another three at him on the backhand sweep, and this time he had gathered enough of his wits to parry, exploding the spikes against a Shield Charm that saved his face from getting ribboned. Then Flint lunged, and with a fractional motion of his wrist,

Draco moved the shield, using Flint's own momentum to crack him in the skull.

Flint staggered upright, blood beading at a nick on his forehead, where one of his own ice shards must've rebounded at him. Draco's shield flickered out, and he lifted his wand again, hesitant.

Flint was strong and trained, but he was muscle, not brains — Oliver Wood had figured out how to beat him years ago, and the trick was bothering to think even a single move ahead. Draco rolled his wrist and feinted right with an *Expelliarmus,* then another to the left, slipping back inside his guard, so close that he could have reached out and shoved him, if he wanted to — and Flint, mistaking haste for desperation, brought his hand down in a bellowing *Flipendo* that would have shattered a slower man's ribcage.

Draco cast *Protego.*

His own Knockback Jinx exploded against the shield and hurled Flint half the length of the hall. He landed on his back and skidded, with a roar that thundered in the echoey hall like a full set of church bells. His wand flew from his hand.

Draco dropped his arm, warm, fervidly perspiring, and jittery with victory. "Disarmed," he said.

Flint shifted upright, clutching his arm, and gasping for breath. His eyes were shining and wild with a resentment that was shockingly near hatred. Draco took a step back.

"Alright, Flint?"

"Alright?" rasped Flint. *"Alright,* you pissant? Are you joking?"

"I'm asking if you need the Hospital Wing," said Draco, as calmly as he was able, which was not much. His body hadn't figured out it wasn't in a fight anymore; his stomach had transformed into a loose and watery medium, and his arms jittered whenever he stood still.

He shifted his weight onto his back foot, hoping to burn off some of the excess cortisol. “I’m taking Creevey. Gentleman’s honor; Madam Pomfrey won’t know a thing.”

“What honor?” Flint spat. It was pink and viscous. “If I slit you open, tits to bollocks, you’d bleed black as him.”

“Careful, Flint. That’s the second time I’ve beat you. The third time, I’ll be less patient.”

“You pestilent little shit,” croaked Flint. “You worthless muggle-loving fruit. No wonder you’re not in Slytherin, thank God, I’d have had to kill myself from shame—”

Draco’s wand moved. From deep within the fog of a furious daze, he was intrigued to know which spell would first reach his tongue — but he never found out, because something hard and powerful collided with the back of his head, and the world was a lightless slate of stars and pain.

When his mind reunited with his skull, he was kneeling, gasping for a breath that wouldn’t come, while jarring waves of nausea rolled ceaselessly over his head. In his periphery the blurry silhouette of Goyle drifted in and out of focus. The world kept slipping out of focus. Blinking failed to clarify it. He swiped at the back of his neck and found it reassuringly whole, no blood, no warmth, but his fingers felt oddly numb, and kept slipping away when he tried to apply force.

In his right hand, Goyle held a long lead pipe. In his other hand was his wand, but it wasn’t hard to see which weapon he’d elected.

“You — absolute — *arsehole,* Greg.” It was hard to concentrate. His tongue kept slipping around his teeth. “We’re not dueling.”

“Dunno why we have to be,” said Goyle, which was, hang his life and every object in it, not a bad point.

He swung.

Draco didn’t quite collapse, but he didn’t quite execute the smart duck-and-roll he’d wanted, either. In actuality he flopped over sideways and tumbled onto his back, dodging the whistling sweep of the pipe over his head. Goyle stepped over him and brought it down again, cracking it on the stone with a horrible shriek that jangled in his newly-throbbing head, and Draco threw himself aside. He got up on one knee, poised to stand, and then the pipe came sweeping around and connected with his kneecap.

He went down. There was nothing he could do to prevent that. Everything in his leg was an unbroken continuity of pain. He didn’t even strictly feel like he *had* a leg anymore, just a searing starburst of a raw nerve where his knee once was. He didn’t scream, but that wasn’t for lack of desire, or some manly impulse not to. The pain actually closed his throat, so all he could manage was a deep gasp of shock.

“Don’t kill him,” called Flint warily.

“Not gonna kill him,” Goyle grunted. “M’not stupid.”

The breadth of permissible harm contained under that ceiling would give any man good reason to panic.

Goyle hefted the pipe, but as he did, there was movement behind him. A shadow in the passageway that lead out to the dungeons — a light, someone’s wand-tip — and Draco could have cheered in relief.

Cassius Warrington’s square white face appeared in the passage, his wand clasped lightly in his outstretched hand.

“Evening, gentlemen,” he said, at length.

Goyle lowered the pipe. Draco sagged against the floor, blinking away dizziness, and thanked the ceiling in a silent reverie of relief.

“Cass,” said Flint. He wet his lips, and began to say something — but as if on cue, Colin rolled over and emptied his last bellyful of mud

onto the stone.

Cassius watched the boy unearth the sordid contents of his intestines with one acutely arched eyebrow. When he was finished, his lip curled.

“Marcus,” he sighed, as if he’d caught him with a hand in the biscuit jar. “This wasn’t what I meant.”

“The hell was I supposed to know that?”

“I don’t know. Discretion, perhaps?”

“We were being discreet.”

“I dread to think of the alternative. Greg, put that down, for God’s sake, you’re not a hired goon.”

“Warrington,” called Draco. “Creevey’s been cursed.”

“I can see that,” said Cassius calmly. To Flint, he added, “And what message is that supposed to send, exactly? Besides leaving something for the house-elves to clean up?”

“It’s not exactly pleasant, is it.”

“I know that, but I can’t give you license to hurt him,” said Cassius calmly. “Scaring him is one thing; this is quite another. I don’t actually get any pleasure from inflicting pain on first years, Marcus, it isn’t my cup of tea. In fact, it’s my job to protect them.”

“That’s not my fault,” he said sullenly.

“No, but that is,” agreed Cassius, indicating the unmoving Colin. “And having witnessed it, the rules of the Hogwarts School Handbook give me no choice.”

“Aw, c’mon—”

“Detentions,” he said crisply, pointing two fingers at Flint and Goyle. Goyle cried in betrayal. “Saturdays and Sundays, seven o’clock sharp, for the rest of the year. Scrubbing silver. No magic. And fifty points apiece, from Slytherin.”

“Mate!”

“You’re joking!”

“I am absolutely not,” said Cassius calmly. He folded his hands behind his back. “And if any professor asks me what you were doing in the undercroft, I intend to tell them the full and unvarnished truth: I found you brutalizing a pair of defenseless younger students, stopped it immediately, and issued punishments of a severity proportionate to the wrongdoing.”

Draco figured out what it was about Cassius that had bothered him: he was missing his tie. He’d never seen the Head Boy in anything less than uniform-to-code.

“Busybody,” muttered Goyle sullenly.

“That’ll be ten more points.”

“Oi!”

“Don’t you raise your voice at me. This is embarrassing and unconscionable. If this gets out to anyone, I’m taking it to Snape.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me, Marcus,” said Cassius. He gestured at Colin. “And if he’s not in the Hospital Wing by tomorrow morning, you’ll be in Dumbledore’s office by the next.”

He turned on his heel and walked away.

“Warrington?” demanded Draco. Flint was still holding his wand. “What—”

Cassius didn’t appear to hear him. He strode unhesitatingly out of the undercroft, his head high, his eyes fastened resolutely forward, like the whole sordid scene had ceased to exist when he finished talking. He was deaf to the calls of his name.

The Head Boy flourished his wand over his shoulder, and the grate shuddered down behind him.

Draco stared after him. Deep in his stomach, fear raised its head again, shaking free of its leash.

“He’s going to the Hospital Wing anyway,” muttered Flint.

Goyle was still holding the pipe. He and Draco realized this at the same time.

With a half-second of grace, a shield blazed to life and met the hard *crack* of the pipe. The impact sent white fissures arcing through it. The pipe swept around a second time for his ankles, but Draco found his footing and sprang away.

The movement ignited a minor supernova of pain in his leg, and his knee buckled under his weight. Flint cast something yellow and sinewy that lashed through the air over his head and he rolled, but his leg was bad, and the next one whipped him off his feet: he lashed out and shot a Furnunculus into Goyle’s eye, making him scream as welts erupted in a profusion that closed over the socket; he was not even slightly sorry for the pain in his voice.

He set his teeth and thought of Sirius sitting on the bank in the rain, and the anger wiped out the pain, let him stand up and fumble a clumsy duelist’s stance, as Flint came sprinting down the line with a Knockback Jinx. He parried, shot back with *Stupefy, Diffindo, Bombarda.*

Lights flickered over the undercroft like a pair of dancing birds.

It was bound to happen: Flint's backhand caught him in the arm. He was a half-step slow because of the knee and he only noticed when the right side of his sleeve erupted in red — hardly painful and far worse than it looked, it only just broke the skin, but that didn't stop his hindbrain's gorge of panic — and more importantly, the distraction stopped him from blocking *Petrificus* in the leg. He dropped to a knee, Goyle's pipe whistled, and then something in his ribs happened that really shouldn't have, structurally, which his body politely informed him by setting every nerve inside it summarily on fire.

He moved on instinct. With a voice thin from breathlessness — he wasn't actually sure he could inflate one of his lungs — he lashed his wand at Goyle and cast *Levicorpus.* The boy was hoisted into the air by his ankle, and snarling, Draco hauled him into the column. His head smacked against it like a ragdoll and went still. The pipe clattered to the ground. Draco dropped him, and he fell twenty feet with a dull *thump* .

"Greg?" Flint bellowed. "Greg! You alright?"

Draco had no idea how badly he'd hurt Goyle; he was approximately one-tenth anger and nine-tenths eye-watering pain, and in absolutely no temper to care. He swiveled his wand around at Flint and cast a clumsy *Stupefy,* scattering red against the wall behind him.

"Malfoy—"

Draco replied with an inarticulate snarl. His knee hurt worse than anything in recent memory and his chest pinched like a knife was going in every time he tried to breathe, and his head was still dizzy from the pain that ebbed in his wound, and when he cast the spell it was through a clean red slate of anger, at Flint, at Goyle, at Colin fucking Creevey for getting himself in the situation, and at himself, for being in the dungeons and leaving the castle in the first place, for going to Hogsmeade and talking to the brainless Sirius Black, for getting it wrong, for being on this side, the one that got bloodied and

beat-up on because they were weaker and he couldn't *stand* that, being weak.

"Bombarda maxima."

Everything happened slowly. Flint wheeled away as the spell came arrowing for his heart. It clipped his arm — started to detonate as he spun away — and flourished fully when it connected with the marble. Light blossomed; the pillar exploded like it was home to a newborn star. A full column of the undercroft erupted and sprayed shrapnel like a wave breaking on sand, and Draco threw himself sideways, slid between Colin and the explosion, and cast *Protego* as a wall of grey dust and white splinters descended like hail. The castle gave a great groan, like he'd wounded it, and he briefly feared that the whole undercroft was about to come down over them.

Out of the smoky rubble came Marcus Flint, cradling his arm, which — Draco's stomach turned — did not so much resemble a limb as a string-tied assortment of raw meats. His face loomed down through the fog like the snarl of a wild boar, deaf to reason, fed on rage.

He fumbled his wand into his off-hand and pointed it at Draco, who tried to stand and found his knee had finally given out, once and for all. Two spells missed him by a hair, but the momentum of dodging spilled him over onto one side, where he caught himself on his hands, trembling with the effort of bracing himself.

Another Blasting Curse detonated inches from his face. He rolled away, but Flint stepped into his path and kicked him in the gut, driving him into a fetal shell.

Draco snapped his teeth shut around a groan. He couldn't stand. If he couldn't stand, he couldn't duel. Flint was playing with his food.

"Cru—"

"Draco!"

Another voice skittered from the tunnel. There was someone at the grate. Flint whirled around, his wand aloft.

With a groan and a screech and what sounded like an enormous effort, it ratcheted up a few feet, its black teeth sinking into the wall above it.

Hermione ducked into the room. She pocketed a white piece of parchment; a scuttle of moving ink vanished from its face. The Marauder’s Map.

She straightened up and dusted off her robes, which were wind-tousled and embroidered with dirt. Rain soaked the crown of her head and darkened her hair, drawing a sharp contrast to the pale rictus of her face. She was, in a word, furious: she clenched her wand like it was a murder indictment.

It was probably the head injury, but he had never been so glad to see anyone, bar none, in his life.

At the same time, he wondered why it couldn’t have been anyone else in the castle at all — literally anyone, except the single person that his animal hindbrain found it singularly intolerable for Flint to lay hands on, as he was assuredly about to do. Because now, on top of everything else, there was a fear so poignant it was like sickness, and the intense urge to order her *out.*

Flint twitched at her, and she startled back. The boy grinned.

Her eyes flit over the undercroft. They lingered on Draco, fretful, and she mouthed something to him, but he was too far, and too dizzy, to make it out.

Flint kicked Draco again, which was frankly just unsporting.

“Don’t touch him.”

It was hard to say who seemed more surprised at her: Flint, Draco, or Hermione herself, whose demand reiterated itself in defiant echoes as Flint turned away from Draco and began a leisurely stroll across the smoking undercroft.

“Is that an order, mudblood?”

“No, it’s a threat,” she said. Slightly tremulous: “Just so we’re clear.”

“It’s a *threat,* is it?” Flint was delighted. “Well, that’s just pure provocation, innit?”

He lifted his wand at Hermione, which was — no, that was worse, come to think of it — and Draco struggled upright, but his head immediately vetoed the act, because all the colors of the room swapped places.

Hermione squared her jaw. “For the record, I never liked you,” she said. “But if you’re going to attack me, it’s worth pointing out that I *did* save your life, or at least spared you quite a bit of suffering, and if you were a better man, that would matter to you.”

“I don’t owe you nothing, mudblood,” he said. “S’not your magic in the first place.”

Her eyes flickered to Draco.

“Come and take it back, then,” she said, a bit breathlessly. And she ran.

Flint shot after her, lashing his wand in a sloppy overhand. She slid behind a column and vanished as a glittering *Bombarda* sailed through the place where she’d stood, detonating a stack of crates. Novae of shrapnel erupted, sawdust blooming. Flint hurtled around after her and ran into a Stinging Jinx, roared, and then whipped back around the column, following her on a mad race over and through the shattered remains of the crate piles — she threw a Shield now and then over her shoulder, ducking the bright darts of curses as

they peppered her shoulders — but she wasn't fast, and she wasn't agile, and she was half his size if she was an ounce, and it felt like everything in Draco's body was a hollow vehicle for sickness and dread.

With a roar of laughter, Flint snagged her arm and wrenched her back. Hermione jerked so hard her shoulder almost popped out of its socket. She stumbled back, and Flint's wand bit into her neck. With one arm, he pinned her.

"Do you know what they used to do to thieves?" he crooned. "They'd cut off their hands. Hard to use a stolen wand if you don't have hands, ay, mudblood?"

Her chest rose and fell in quick breaths. She closed her eyes.

And then Hermione, who had never dueled in her life — who sometimes gave Draco palpitations because of how quickly she forgot her head under the slightest touch of pressure — thrust her wand over her shoulder, into Flint's face — Merlin's *blood* — and *set him on fire.*

Bluebell flames erupted over his head like a candlewick igniting, like an eruption of hungry fast-blooming freesia. Flint screamed in a way Draco had only heard someone scream once before, at the Quidditch World Cup — a scream not so much of pain as it was of shock and fear, a child's scream, high and thick with the utter strangeness of hurting. He leapt away and rolled onto the floor, flinging his body this way and that, while smoke guttered from his clothes in thick rancid-smelling clouds.

Hermione walked forward briskly through the steam and pointed her wand at his head. Draining out his fear, through the pain, came a narcotic wave of pride: for here was his girl, a lovely, clever, brutal girl, with a steady hand and a cold clear eye, and if she wasn't the most magnificent thing to walk the halls of that castle since Godric Gryffindor, then nothing good ever had.

Red light zipped into Flint’s temple, and he was still. She drew her wand over his body, and the flames guttered out, like she was sealing them back into a pocket in the air.

In the lingering quiet, there was only the creaking whinge of the undercroft; the smell of burned cotton; smoke, dust, shrapnel, and Hermione Granger, standing in a wreath of all three.

She visibly gave a little intake of breath. Then she spun on her heel and sprinted across the room, dropping to her knees, and scrambling to him in a clumsy landing of limbs that was very much at odds with the image she’d been a moment ago: much more juvenile, more like a girl who’d only been twice on a broomstick and almost fallen off both times.

“You came,” he made out, before she came down like a thunderstorm of elbows.

“And you’re an *idiot!”* She was breathless with rage. “Of course I came, you vacuous skrewt-brained pigheaded *git* of a boy, you ran off in the rain and made me cry thinking I’d scared you away, and then you went and did this, I *hate* you, oh my God, I could cry—”

“But you — were angry at me.”

“I’m a lot angrier now!”

“That’s — apparent — scared me off?”

“What was I supposed to think? Sirius said it was something to do with your dad and I thought, oh, good job, Hermione, really nice, because everyone really loves when you shout at them — and I was actually ready to *apologize,* even though I was right and you know it — but then you were gone. I was so mad I almost didn’t even come looking for you, so you’re really lucky I was so angry, if you think about it—”

He gave a delirious laugh.

“This isn’t funny. You left, and I thought you hated me. And have I mentioned, by the way, I hate you *so much—”*

“I’d never *hate* you—”

“You could’ve! You ran off in the middle of the visit, what was I supposed to think?”

“I needed a moment!”

“Then ask!”

“That’s beside the point! But good to know if I don’t announce my intention to leave a social occasion, you’ll take it as a declaration of everlasting loathing, thank you for telling me—”

“You arse,” she spat. She shoved him. “Stop it. How would you have felt? If I vanished and showed up like this.”

He veered away from that thought, which felt like several buildings collapsing on top of each other at once. It was easy to ignore; breathing felt like putting his ribs through a woodchipper.

“Ribs — broken—”

“Shit!” She scrambled back, scrubbing at her eyes, which had a bright wet affect that made him feel like death. “Sorry! Sorry!”

“Alright,” he said, and her hands flexed clumsily on his shoulders. He put his head back on the tile and closed his eyes and the cool kiss of stone bore like an edge through waves of hot headache. “Not your— not… ow.”

“What’s wrong? Where are you hurt? Are you alright? Obviously you’re not alright, that’s stupid — I’m stupid, this isn’t the time, I’m sorry — oh God, your *knee.”*

“Don’t tell me, whatever it is,” he said, his eyes screwed shut against the light. “I haven’t looked.”

“What *happened?”*

He flopped a hand ineffectually at Colin. Hermione made a sound of panic, like she hadn’t actually noticed him before.

“What happened to *him?”*

“Flint… and Greg… having a bit of fun.”

“And you intervened?”

He flourished his fingers: *Evidently.*

“But that was stupid,” she said, and his irritation was so poignant he actually cracked an eyelid.

“And you would’ve done different, would you?”

“Yes! Or — maybe! You could’ve gotten a teacher! Or a prefect! Instead of dueling them yourself!”

“You try doing that when someone’s screaming in your ear, and by the way, I’ve a head injury the size of Wales, just now, so if you could keep your voice down—”

“Sorry! Sorry. Sorry.”

She drew her hands down his chest and patted softly down his side, hitching her breath where he flinched, then did the other. Her fingers were light and shuddery. He realized she was terrified, and the irritation in his chest folded up and Disapparated, leaving a soft velvety ball of something helpless and warm.

Sucking in a breath, she pressed her wand to his arm and cast *Episkey,* and it felt like running water was coursing over his skin, sealing it up, leaving only a soaked red sleeve and a slightly itchy patch of skin over the new scar. He rolled his arm and flexed it.

“We’ll get Madame Pomfrey to fix that,” she said, lightly touching his ribs. She did something on his thigh that made a cool numbing sensation drip down his leg, easing the pain, and he let go of a long breath; he hadn’t realized how much of his pain was coming from the leg. “I’d try, but it’s bones and tendons, and those are the hardest to fix if you get them wrong... I can try to numb it up a bit, though.”

The anesthetic in his leg had improved his situation so dramatically that he might have been riding a dopamine high. “Sure,” he said, closing his eyes, and rolling his head back against the pavement. He luxuriated in the newfound pleasures of not having one million knives in his leg. “Whatever you want.”

“Draco? Draco. Dra-co.”

A sharp smack landed on his cheek, and he popped his head up, glaring.

“What?”

“Don’t go to sleep!”

“I wasn’t, damn you,” he said irritably, bracing himself up on his elbows. “I’m not going to nod off with a head injury, I’m not entirely thick.”

“Evidence notwithstanding,” she muttered, poking her wand intrusively under his collar to inspect for bruising. He lifted his chin up and away and allowed it, glaring, because he frankly shared her concern. She picked around to the back of his head and saw something that made her flinch, but then her wand probed the sore spot, and more cool pinpricks washed over his head, bringing a euphoria of relief. He rolled his head back into her hand from instinct, luxuriating in it. The tension seeped from his body like a poison.

“That’s excellent,” he said. His tongue felt large and cumbersome. “Did you learn that from Molly?”

“Yes, but it’s not advisable to do it twice,” she said, shaking out her wrist. “I thought I could make an exception, under the circumstances. You’ll have to walk, I can’t levitate you and Colin at once.”

“Bet you could,” he mumbled. The world was blurry through his small, spinning window of it, and he lolled his head back at the stone-carved ceiling. “If you tried.”

“You’re nice when you’re concussed.”

“I’m always nice to you.”

She snorted, a little bit more loudly than he strictly deserved.

“Did you really set him on fire?” he inquired, watching her through one slitted eyelid. “Or was that a pleasant hallucination?”

“Technically, I set his clothes on fire,” she said coolly, tucking her hair behind her ear. She was faintly embarrassed. Adorable. “The bluebell flames are synthetic. They’re much easier to control, and they don’t leave deep burns.”

“Deep burns, or any burns?”

“...Deep.”

He closed his eyes and smiled absently. “Good.”

“I didn’t… I wasn’t quite thinking.”

“Do you hear me complaining?”

“I didn’t mean to hurt him. Badly. I really didn’t.”

“We’ll work on it.”

“Draco,” she said, a touch sharp, and jabbed an *Episkey* into a scrape on his palm.

“What?”

She withdrew and folded her hands neatly over her wand, like someone completing an examination. It was woefully endearing.

He was concussed. That was the sort of thing he was allowed to think, when he was concussed. He had just decided, on the grounds that it made him feel better, and everything hurt, so he deserved it.

“Can I—”

She fingered her wand. She said, in a brusque, stony sort of way: “Carefully, I mean, but—” and jerked her head at him, which took him about three full seconds to understand, because he was, see above, concussed.

“Oh. Carefully, yes,” he said, “if you must.”

Hermione hugged him. It was not a comfortable hug, being, like all of Hermione’s hugs, absurdly warm and full of hair, and she was driving her knee into his one intact rib, and the floor of the Hogwarts undercroft was an inhospitable locale for any sort of intimacy. Her arms were around his shoulders in a tight vise and her head locked into the spot on his collarbone where it went under the Invisibility Cloak, a place that she seemed to have elected on despite it being not even slightly comfortable for him, and like all hugs it was uncomfortable and too much contact and his emaciated sense of propriety was announcing to all parts of his brain in audience that this was highly inappropriate.

He wrapped an arm around her back. Fuck appropriate.

“I thought you were hurt.”

“Well spotted.”

“I mean *really,* irreparably hurt. I thought— it was my fault, at the Shack, I’d yelled and you ran away—”

“Holster your apologies before they hurt someone. And stop acting like I’m some consumptive waif, it’s emasculating. I’m not going to die in a duel with Marcus bloody Flint.”

“—and I was thinking, well, that’s what I get, isn’t it, for being awful to you and Lupin. That’s my fault, he’s practically dead and it’s because of me.”

“You’re never awful,” he said, which was probably a lie, but he was still concussed, so he was allowed to say it.

She gave a little twitch, and he could feel her heartbeat change, under his fingers on her back. “I shouted.”

“Oh, yes. There’s a special place in hell, you know, for shouters. They call it Gryffindor Tower.”

“I threw Daphne in Lupin’s face.”

“He’s had worse in it.”

“I shouldn’t have implied that he was dangerous.”

“It’s not an insult to call someone dangerous,” he said, which they both knew very well was besides the point; she snorted and shook her head. He shifted her leg slightly, so it didn’t rest so heavily on the tender bone of his hip. “Dangerous people are helpful to know. You’re dangerous, and thank Merlin you are, frankly.” He nearly said *Thank Merlin for you,* but his tongue slipped in a fortunate place, and the head injury compensated for the rest by slurring it, so he didn’t think she necessarily heard.

Then he said: “You were right.”

“What?” she said, distracted by his injuries. “I mean, yes. But on which thing?”

“Muggle-borns.”

She frowned.

“Head injury,” she decided. “That’s not good.”

“It’s not — okay, funny, but also irrelevant. I meant.” It was hard to remember what he meant. His thoughts were a kaleidoscope that rearranged every few seconds. “I meant. I didn’t like… you were right about what’s going on. It’s dangerous for you, and it isn’t for me. You think I don’t see it, but obviously I do, I just don’t like it. So I said it wasn’t true. I do that. Have you noticed?”

“I think danger finds you just fine,” she murmured, but there was a touch of satisfaction in it. She smiled at him, quickly, and he relaxed. She understood. She always did.

“I don’t like thinking about it,” he said, idly, mostly to the undercroft ceiling. “You. Danger. It isn’t fun.”

“I don’t like you *being* in danger, so let’s start there,” she said mildly, feeling around the back of his head. Her fingers carded through his hair, and he leaned back, sighing.

“I’m good at not thinking about things, you know. I’m very good at it. Some would say I’m one of the best.”

“I’ll say.”

“Or I used to be good at it, anyway.”

“Hm.”

“What, ‘hm’?”

“You have dilated pupils,” she said. “Are you sure you’re lucid?” At some point she had shifted her leg over his other hip, settling herself gingerly on his stomach. She didn’t seem to realize she’d straddled him. She was holding his shoulders and peering quite closely in his face. Her expression was clinical and curious and not sentimental in the least, which was exceptionally lucky, because the rest of him had

absolutely no sense of decorum whatsoever, and the whole front of his chest was burning.

She smelled like flowers and rainwater. Earth, but not dirt, just the fresh scent that sighed off the ground when it rained. There was a tiny drop on the fringe of her lashes, maybe sweat, maybe a tear. His hand still cradled her knee where he'd moved it. Her mouth was a soft pink thing very close to his face and she wasn't moving or speaking anymore and he wanted to touch it, with the fervid, simplistic want of the entirely illucid.

She breathed deep. He could feel the motion all down her body, from the rise of her chest to the infinitesimal movement of her hips. He moved his thumb absently over the swell of her knee.

Then he did the very best thing he could have done, or the worst, and looked into her eyes. They were as wide as telescope lenses, dark and shining.

Everything in the whole world, especially her, was warm.

There were things he wanted, and the things had names. He couldn't do them, but he could think about them.

She hauled herself off him like she'd remembered an urgent appointment with any other place in the universe, and he elicited a groan as his organs rearranged themselves.

He was stiff as a fossil and every joint in his body was filing a lawsuit against his cerebellum. The painkilling spells were pulling their weight, but the rest of his body had taken the absence of mind-ending injury as an invitation to submit its own complaints.

"Can you walk?" she said, in a high crisp tone that strongly evoked McGonagall.

He wasn't going to let her levitate him, not after *that.* He was considering a restraining order to ensure that he never had to deal

with what happened to his body when she touched him, ever again. He gritted out some affirmative and struggled to his feet, one arm braced on the pillar. “Fine,” he snapped. “Great, even. Get Creevey.”

Her hands hovered like a pair of fretful birds. “You’re not really suited to walk. You’ll have to lean on me—”

“I won’t be doing that, thank you.”

“But you can’t—”

“You’ll find, as so many have before you, that I can do exactly as I please. Now get out of my way.”

She stiffened. “I was only trying to help.”

“I — I do know that,” he said, and tried to be less curt. “But certain persons with us have a greater need. I’m being selfless, really, you ought to be proud of me.”

His tone failed to convince her, but it was effective at waving her off. She sniffed and went to poke over Colin, who was whining through an unpleasant return to consciousness. Draco didn’t envy him.

With her attention diverted, he sagged against the column and dragged his hand over his eyes. He was in horrendous shape. He was in pain and irritated and he didn’t even have good cause to be in a snit with her, only he was, and she knew it, and never being less than game, she was gearing up to be in a snit of her own.

And on the floor were two boys who, in another universe not very far from this one, would have been his childhood friend and his quidditch captain, and he had very nearly torn both of them apart without any remorse.

And he still didn’t feel remorseful. He waited for it to happen, but it didn’t; when he reached for the place where the feeling should be, there was a picture of Flint holding Hermione up by the arm, her

features twisted in a grimace of discomfort, prefiguring pain. The image followed his mind's eye no matter how he tried to divert it, as if nothing else could occupy his attention, as if nothing else mattered. And perhaps it didn't. But that didn't make him feel a hell of a lot better, either. If anything, the opposite. Knowing what mattered didn't help him like it at all.

"We should leave," said Hermione. She was coated in dust and rainwater and tiredness in the extreme. "Go to the Hospital Wing. I want to get you looked at, and poor Colin… selfishly, I'd like a nap, but I don't think I'll get one." She levitated Colin, who gave a moan and a twitch. "And someday, ultimately," she said, wistfully, looking down at the film of dust and ash on her clothes, "I'd really fancy a wash."

His life was fundamentally and unalterably bent in the wrong direction, and he had no idea how to iron it out, or even what the right direction would be, if he could unbend it.

"A wash," he said tiredly, "would be lovely."

-NEW ART posted on Tumblr: @coolmanchocomilk drew this breathtaking illustration of Draco and Lucius; and my dear recurring collaborator softkombucha offered a lovely rendition of this scene from Chapter 48! and certainly one of these days I will figure out how to stop thinking about either one, but it hasn't worked yet.

-you are all so very wonderful I do not know how to handle it even slightly. the analysis the power the energy the eloquence. harold bloom wants what my comments section has.

-flora carrow is one of those girls who is just unrepentantly awful about everything. i have a lot of affection for her. not wise or reasonable affection. but still.

-shoutout to that person on tumblr who asked if Hermione still set Snape on fire in this AU. She didn't, but fear not; she is still very

much That kind of girl, obviously. this one's for you.

-very bold of taylor swift to drop content on the same day as i do. only one week after i make a taylor swift reference also. crossover event of the century perhaps.

-you already know when the next chapter drops! it will take place on the eve of the Third Task, and it will have the conversation that a lot of you guessed would be in the last chapter, actually. It's long as hell and half of it is a single interaction. in my outline, the margin says "this is the most drama the owlery's seen in decades." also known as Hermione Granger Officially Loses Her Shit. and she's earned it.

-it's called "The Insider."

-I owe you everything. I hope the rest of your day has low humidity and a cool breeze.

The Insider

Chapter 51: The Insider

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“In my fifty-seven years of service to this school,” said Madame Pomfrey, “I assure you, Mr. Malfoy, I have heard all sorts of unlikely accusations leveled at the Hogwarts staircases; and yet oddly, in fifty-seven years of traversing said staircases, never have I once witnessed the kind of violence that students would have me believe them capable of.”

It had to be said: she had a sense of humor, did Madame Pomfrey.

Draco sprawled extravagantly over the hospital bed, taking up as much real estate as he could. His knee wore a rosebud of bandages, its range of motion fully restored, though he refused to admit as much to any of the people who were fussing over him. If he groaned and touched it often enough, the nurses would fetch him hot cocoas from pity.

Hermione, perched at his bedside with an archival copy of the *Hogwarts Enquirer,* gave a discreet, high, *“Hmph,”* and he replied with the laziest, slimiest smirk that he could summon while in not-insignificant pain.

“I’m glad to hear it,” he said seriously to Madame Pomfrey. “They’re an existential risk. I’m lucky to have survived.”

Madame Pomfrey did not dignify this by voicing her doubts. She planted her hands on her hips and directed the full force of her instructor’s disapproval at Hermione, who was the weaker target, admittedly. “And you, Miss Granger, you witnessed this… exceptionally dynamic fall?”

Fortunately, the sting of disapproval seemed considerably easier for her to bear when it wasn't a professor asking. "I didn't say that," said Hermione crisply, turning a page. "He was like that when I found him, Madame Pomfrey." This was true. "I wish I could help you, but I really can't."

Less true, but delivered flawlessly. He rewarded her by generously electing to share his third hot chocolate in an hour. She sipped it, idly, while perusing the classifieds.

Madame Pomfrey threw up her hands, as if to vault her own deniability into the rafters, and stalked off to pry apart the Creevey brothers, who had been bundled together in an inseparable knot in one of the other cots ever since they brought Colin back to the Hospital Wing.

Hermione followed her with her eyes. When she was gone, she snapped the newspaper shut and dropped her voice to hiss in his ear. "I hate this."

"Merlin, fine, give it back."

She placed it on his bedside table, mere inches out of his reach; Hermione could be downright mean when she wanted to be.

"No — the lying. Anyone with eyes can tell you didn't fall down a staircase, even Neville never looks *this* bad, and you spend half your time skating down those banisters like they're a monorail. Your reflexes aren't slow enough."

"You think I've good reflexes?"

"Flint and Goyle deserve to be expelled."

"What they *deserve* was outlawed by international convention. However, I don't fancy dancing that particular number again, so I'll be keeping my lovely undamaged mouth shut about it, and you'll do

the same, and when Colin recovers his inclination to speak, he'll have our examples to learn from."

"It's not fair. You're hurt. Something should happen to them," she muttered. "Something. I don't care what it is. But they shouldn't get to walk away."

"Keep your voice down," he said, though dizzily charmed. Her face was bright with anger, and full of pink blooms like a striated tea rose, and he was still concussed, technically, so none of this counted as admiring. "The walls have ears. And habits of violence."

Flint and Goyle had been brought in an hour after Draco by a Slytherin prefect, who claimed that an anonymous tip-off had floated up to them and gave them each a paper cut in the nostril.

He liked a bit of fun, did Harry.

Hermione took her lip between her teeth, worrying it. He watched her, his head lolling on the pillow. It wasn't a crime.

"They can't be allowed to go on," she said, after a moment. She didn't sound happy about it; she sounded like she'd found the solution to an Arithmancy problem floating an order of magnitude off her preferred estimate. "They can't think they can attack people without consequences. And the prefects won't… if they can't do anything about it, they don't have a reason to stop."

"A healthy respect for being set on fire might do it."

"Dennis doesn't know how to do that," she said. "Most people can't do that."

She said it absently, like it didn't even occur to her to be smug, which was how he knew she was really lost in thought.

A commotion of hinges and footsteps broke the solemn respite of the Hospital Wing. Robes and voices fluttered at the doors, and a

nurse’s complaints failed to deter the two visitors, who swept down the aisle and snapped back the curtain to Draco’s cot with a haste that made both him and Hermione spring back as if they’d been doing something more indecent than plotting vengeance.

Dumbledore and Professor Snape were framed in the curtain. Both were harried. Haste rumpled their robes. There was a bloodless affect to Snape’s face, mirrored in the stiff bar of Dumbledore’s mouth. It looked as though they’d received news of an impending comet angled directly at their heads.

“Merlin. Who died?” said Draco, who never saw a moment he was unwilling to step on.

“Draco,” said Snape, with a thin issuance of breath. “What happened?”

“Took a fall. Why, Professor? What did you hear?”

They had come together, which suggested they’d heard at the same time, and hadn’t parted ways since he’d heard them conferring in the dungeons. He noticed that Crouch wasn’t among them, and he wondered if Mad-Eye had already been arraigned.

“Pomfrey makes a note to inform me,” said Snape, with a curl of his lip that meant he was mounting a sermon, “whenever my godson enters her care; she takes special pains to inform me when he does something especially gormless.”

Draco shifted his leg sourly. “It wasn’t gormless.”

“You fell down the *stairs?”*

“I — there were extenuating circumstances.”

“Such as gravity, perhaps?” Snape folded his arms and leveled ten volts of straight malice into Draco’s undeserving face. “Momentum? Shocking developments, each to each.”

“Like you’ve never tripped anywhere!” He was outraged. In his opinion, this was a powerfully motivated persecution, and it wasn’t fair.

“Never to the effect of shattering three ribs and a patella. Those of us with the vanishingly little intellect it requires to refrain—”

“Oi, aren’t you supposed to be worried about me? I’m lucky I didn’t break my neck!”

“You are indeed *very* lucky to have so little to regret, and you will be doubly lucky if you remain so after your mother finishes with you.”

“You’re not going to tell her!”

“Your powers of prediction are uninspiring. Professor Vector must be sorely dismayed in you.”

“Uncle Severus.” He ignored Hermione’s wide-eyed stare of warning. He wrestled himself upright. “Don’t be a ponce. I tripped! I’m fine! Don’t ruin her day over nothing—”

“You are profoundly arrogant to assume the frustrations of raising a witless child are enough to ruin your mother’s day,” snarled Snape, with such venom that Draco flinched back, honestly wounded.

He wouldn’t have said so under torture, but his godfather’s anger was a melee weapon, and he had never received the force of it so directly before. It made something small and selfish in his chest throw its tail between its legs and want to cry.

“Well, that’s—” He found his throat stiff, cleared it, and tried again. “That’s not — that’s just — it’s rude, is what it is, Professor.”

Dumbledore, who had been leaning heavily on a chair by Draco’s foot, at last raised his head. “I concur,” he said quietly. “Severus, please leave your godson to his recovery. You may notify Lady Malfoy as you wish.”

Snape’s parting glance swept over Draco like a sheet of stinging hail, imparting a last impression of the Potion Master’s frankly ludicrous levels of anger and fear; and then he stalked out of the room, sweeping his cloak after him like the dramatic old git he was.

The headmaster relaxed when Snape was gone, though this still left so much tension in his body it was like undoing one knot of a vast, ancient rigging. “I apologize for your godfather, Draco,” he said. “He is a man under enormous pressure. The likes of which do not often make men kinder.”

Draco was tempted to say, *I know,* with some snide comment about Ministry investigations, but he held his tongue.

Dumbledore adjusted his spectacles and gazed sympathetically at Draco’s injured knee. “How do you feel?” he said softly.

“Fine.”

Hermione made some sort of obnoxious naysaying cough. He huffed.

“I’m fine. Once they let me out of this blasted hospital, I’ll be cartwheeling to class. Happy?”

“Never less so than when in this room,” said Dumbledore. He cast a look over the wing, with its four occupied beds, one still holding the entwined lump of the Creeveys, and shook his head. “For a teacher, to see any student housed here is a notice of profound and exceptional failure.”

Draco frankly could imagine a few more profound and exceptional failures before this one, a lot of them rhyming with *Lournament,* but held his tongue once more.

“Can I ask why you came, professor?” said Hermione, politely. She had folded her legs and held her back straight, as if she were asking a question in class, bless her. “Aside from an interest in Draco’s

wellbeing.” Her tone made it courteously obvious that neither she nor anyone reasonable considered this an appropriate reason for the headmaster to make a personal visit.

“The grievous injury of a student notwithstanding?”

“If that’s the reason, you must spend quite a lot of time in the Hospital Wing, Professor.”

Now it was Draco’s turn to shoot her a wide-eyed look.

Dumbledore’s wry expression only grew wryer. “You may not believe me,” he said, “as is your right, but Mr. Malfoy’s wellbeing is the sole occasion of my visit.”

“Respectfully, professor,” she said primly, “I think I’m going to exercise that right.”

Dumbledore tilted his head, an open smile now gracing his weathered face. “Gracefully done,” he said. “I enjoin you wholeheartedly to continue, if you like. How fare our fellow friends of Buckbeak?”

“—Oh! Moony and Padfoot? They’re quite well. They’re… accessible, at present, if you’d like to go… see a hippogriff. They’re… in an old bolthole.”

“How positively delightful to hear,” said Dumbledore. “I may do just that. These days, one can never spend too much time with old friends.” His eyes slipped into the middle distance, as if he could hear a conversation happening on the other side of the castle, and it was far more interesting to him than their own. Then he patted Draco’s leg, made an excuse, and tottered out of the Hospital Wing.

When the creaking of the doors subsided, Hermione said, “That was dodgy.”

He snorted.

“It was! He spent five minutes talking to you, glanced at the Creeveys, didn’t so much as mention Flint or Goyle—”

“Can hardly blame him, I wouldn’t, either, after what they pulled.”

“He doesn’t know that,” she said, and then frowned. “Or does he?”

“At the risk of sounding like an apologist for the various inadequacies of Albus Dumbledore, headmaster and all-around fop,” he said, “which, for posterity, I am not: even he can’t know what’s going on in all parts of the castle, all the time.”

“No, I suppose not,” she said. “If it hadn’t been for the Map, even I wouldn’t have…”

She trailed off and grasped the railing of his cot, firmly, as if he were about to slide off somewhere. He ignored the implication and turned his head away from her searching glance; they weren’t going to talk about it. There lay madness. There lay the fact that he’d looked at her in that chamber for three whole seconds and wondered if Merlin himself hadn’t deployed her for his benefit.

Increasingly he got the feeling that if he so much as tapped the dyke of feeling that he’d walled up in the back of his mind, if he cracked the seal an inch, the whole of it would burst forth in flood, and shatter him.

Blood traitor. Blood traitor. Blood traitor blood traitor blood traitor.

It meant death. It meant *no more Malfoys.* It meant *dead men can’t love you,* and Draco didn’t need his father’s love, never had done, he’d lived just fine without it for frankly long enough as to make a lesser man resentful, but that didn’t mean he wanted the other thing.

If he didn’t look at her, the voice wasn’t so loud. So he didn’t.

Problem being that he liked looking at her. That was how everything had gone wrong for him in the first place. He liked looking at her too

much, and he'd made a habit of it, and now whenever he didn't, it felt just as bad, only in a different part of his brain.

Other times he thought that part of his mind was a histrionic twat, so there was really no winning, being him.

They kept him in the Hospital Wing for several days. A caravan of visitors made his visit enjoyable, and the myths that arose from his injuries made it even more so. Fred and George started a rumor that he had taken his licks by kickboxing a centaur, a story that the first-year friends of Dennis Creevey carried on fleet feet far and wide over the castle, and made him the subject of much reverence. A healthy crop of flowers and cards sprouted from his bedside, some from Gryffindor, and some, pleasantly, from various anonymous persons with an affection for glitter and pink script; these were flattering up until Ron and Harry got hold of them, at which point the dramatic recitations immediately spoiled any sincere pleasure, and made Hermione scoff so hard she might soon disgorge her uvula.

By the end of the week, Pomfrey discharged him with some Numbing Potion and a crutch, which he used only because it made everyone get out of his way when he came scraping down the halls, and gave him a great excuse to hit people's ankles. On the way back to Gryffindor Tower, taking the first opportunity to converse without the threat of Pomfrey or her fleet of wide-eared nurses overhearing them, he told the others what he had overheard.

"What a slimy old git," announced Ron, visibly annoyed. "Just can't stand to see Harry winning, can he? Soon as anything starts going well, he's got to stick his greasy nose in."

"He's not wrong. Someone *did* put Potter's name in the Goblet," said Draco.

Harry was conferring with Hermione about an old newspaper clipping from a Triwizard Tournament in 1814, barely glanced up at the sound of his name. In Draco's opinion, the pair of them were wasting their time, as they had not one ice chip's chance in Tenerife of blind

guessing the Third Task before it happened; but as the month of April dwindled to a close, it eased the crawling dread for them to try.

“Better him than Warrington,” said Ron. “Anyway, I bet Snape’s just sore at Mad-Eye. They’re always at each other’s throats, you said so yourself.”

“Not the point where he’d send him to prison.”

“What,” said Ron flatly, “like he did last year, you mean?”

There was a beat while Draco regained his footing. “He never said anything that wasn’t true.”

“Yeah, except that Lupin was a danger to kids. Knowing full well he was on Wolfsbane. Or do you believe that, too?”

“Of course not, but if one attempts to sympathize—”

“Maybe I don’t want to sympathize with him,” he interrupted briskly. “Ever think of that? Maybe I’d rather not sympathize with the old Death Eater over my pals, and Harry’s godfather.”

“Snape is *my* godfather.”

He must have spoken louder than he meant to; Harry and Hermione broke off, and Hermione’s voice drifted down from the stairs over them. “What’s this about?”

“Nothing,” said Ron tautly. “Finishing off some business from the Shrieking Shack.”

Blood traitor.

Draco’s fingers flexed on his wandsheath. He wanted to run back and jinx Sirius again, for leaving words like that in his head, where it could float around knocking into things and leaving bruises.

“Speaking of which,” he said shortly. “Have they left?”

“Oh, yeah, you wouldn’t know,” said Ron, not quite airily, “seeing as you took off without us. No, they’re staying. Gonna try to watch Harry in the Third Task, if they can find a way to do it. Harry loaned them the Invisibility Cloak, we’re hoping Moony can use it to sneak in.”

“You *what?”*

“They need it more,” said Harry stubbornly. “It’s just until they leave again. I’m not giving it away.”

“What if *you* need it?”

“Why would I?” he said. “I’m not gonna be sneaking around much before the Third Task. According to Hermione’s drilling schedule, I’ll barely have time to sleep.”

“They’re adults. They’re more than capable of a Disillusionment Charm. Or a Concealment Charm. Or any other one of a dozen spells that Remus Lupin should know—”

“Oi!”

“Careful, mate!”

“Moony,” insisted Hermione, “it’s Moony, remember, we’re in the castle.”

“Sod it, it’s a stupid name,” he snapped, stalking around the last stairwell.

They had ruined his day. He had been in decent spirits, leaving the Hospital Wing, and prepared to overlook the rather grievous insults against his dignity that transpired at the Shrieking Shack, but Ronald Weasley had punctured that slender balloon of contentment like he was practicing marksmanship. He took the last four stairs in two jumps, ignoring the questionable flicker in his knee, and let his stomps echo in claves of displeasure. They could herald him from the Astronomy Tower. Good. Let them take precautions.

When he reached the Pink Lady, he barked, “Ariadne,” but then was too distracted to hear the Pink Lady’s murmur of, “Oh, no, not anymore,” for he almost tripped over someone on the floor.

Daphne Greengrass was curled in a ball against the Pink Lady’s foot. She had gathered her knees to her chest and took a percussion of little breaths as though her throat was struggling to stay open. She was ruddy and wet as a freshly watered rose, her shirt wrinkled, one sock slumping in undignified asymmetry with its twin, and her CASSIUS WARRINGTON badge winked sadly ajar on her jumper.

She peeled her face up and blinked at him.

“Hello, chaps,” she said. “I’m quite sorry. I didn’t know where else to go.”

“What happened?”

She opened her mouth, closed her eyes, and burst into tears.

“Oh, God,” said Hermione, hurrying up the stairs. Ron and Harry followed, hastened by the sound of her warbling. “Are you hurt? Did the Slytherins do something to you? Who was it? Harry, go get Professor McGonagall—”

“No! Don’t! It’s nothing — I’m not, I’m, no, nothing, nothing’s wrong —”

“Pish,” said Ron, quite angrily. He crouched beside her, doing a none-too-subtle sweep for injuries. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not, no, it’s not, really, I’m not hurt, don’t make a fuss. Please don’t get Professor McGonagall.”

“Fine, but Daph—”

“Oh, don’t everyone look at me like I’ve been expelled from the church,” she said hoarsely. “I only… I just didn’t… nobody was speaking to me, and the common room was empty, and everyone

was gone, and I was so lonely, I don't know why I did it, but I went to a meeting — I'm sorry, Hermione, don't be disappointed — and it was awful, just so incredibly awful, they're not like they were last year, it wasn't a fun party at *all!"*

"What meeting?" said Hermione, bewildered. "Disappointed? Daphne, what are you talking about?"

"The League of Promising Youth," said Draco. He prickled with discomfort.

Daphne bobbed her head. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, Hermione, I don't believe in it! I don't even care about politics! You know me, I don't give a fig for what they do at the Ministry, it's all the same to me! It's all the same, both sides, it's just hogwash! I was just so sad, and everyone said it was fun, so I wanted to see if — but it was *horrible!"*

"What happened?" said Ron, fishing a mangy handkerchief from his pocket. She snatched it up and offloaded a full sinus. "What'd they do?"

"It was this dark small room and all these grownups and Sibelius Nott and Theo was there but he was stuck in a conversation with his dad and Cassius, and everyone else had their own little cliques and I didn't know where to go, and I look around and I see Odin Davis was there — Tracey's father, you know? The auror? And he wasn't doing much talking so I thought, well, Daph, just be a sport and introduce yourself, so I went over and gave him the full smile and 'hullo, I'm Daphne Greengrass, I go to school with your daughter,' and everything, and he looked at me and I sort of felt he thought I was odd but he gave me a hello and shook my hand and everything, and then rightaway he asked about my scars and I thought well, that's very rude, we've only just met, but I can be a good sport, you know? But then when I told him he started asking me all these questions and it was *obvious* what he meant and he thought I was some sort of — oh, God — *half-breed,"* when she breathed it sounded like sand

rasping through a pipe, “and I told him I’m pureblood as they come and he said — he said — he said—” She burst into a volley of sobs.

“We don’t have to do this now,” said Ron hurriedly. “Into the common room, yeah? There’s chairs in there. For sitting on. Much better than a floor, you won’t believe it. It’s plush. Here, away from the door—?”

“He said *what a waste!”* cried Daphne, and buried her head in her knees.

“He did what?” Ron was furious. “He said that to you?”

“Y-y-yes, and then he said something else, and it would’ve been alright if nobody heard but Millie and Tracey had come over and they started laughing, and I, I was so mad I don’t remember what I said even, but I made a scene and I *slapped* him — right in the face! I slapped an auror! Oh, God, I’m going to be sick — and there was a horrible scene and Theo was yelling and Mr. Davis had his wand out and Mr. Nott looked like he was going to kill me, and so I ran away and hid in a broom closet for a few hours because I didn’t want anyone to find me, you know? And then I only went home when it was late and no one would see me come in but I went to my room and the door,” she was breathing in greedy gulps, “the door was *jinxed,* it nearly broke my nose, and when I opened it someone got into my room and D-D-D-Duchess — oh, *Duchess—”*

“Sorry,” said Ron, looking wildly from Daphne to Draco. “What? Duchess? Who’s Duchess?”

“Her cat,” said Draco stiffly.

“She was gone,” she sobbed. “And there was cat fur *everywhere.”*

Harry drew his wand and turned down the stairs. Draco grabbed him by the collar and hauled him back.

“Oh,” whispered Hermione. “Daphne, I’m so sorry.”

Daphne scrubbed her cheeks, but her hands were so wet with tears she only succeeded in smearing them around. “I’m sorry,” she said wetly. “I shouldn’t have gone. I know the things they say about muggle-borns, but I was so lonely I didn’t care. And I didn’t — I didn’t realize that I was — that they wouldn’t—”

“You didn’t realize they were saying it about you, too,” said Hermione. She was strangely calm.

Daphne’s reply was a sob.

Hermione said, “Well, that was a bit of an oversight, wasn’t it?”

“I know,” she wailed, “I know, I know I’m *stupid,* everyone says I’m stupid, Teddy and Pansy and Mummy and Daddy all tell me so and I don’t listen, I’m just a dumb dummy who never learns—”

“Come off it,” said Hermione, with a trademark briskness that made Ron shoot her a displeased look. “There’s no need for self-pity. You’re not stupid, you were just scared and sad, and besides that you knew full well what you were doing — but I’m not angry at you, Daphne.”

“...You’re not?”

“No,” she said stiffly. She grasped Daphne’s hands and pulled her up with a jerk, and Daphne was so surprised that she went, sailing to her feet like a porcelain poppet. “Anyway, it wasn’t my cat they went after. After all, you won’t soon go back, will you?”

“No! Never — I can’t ever — I won’t ever—”

“Well, there you go,” said Hermione, awkwardly. “Honestly, Daphne, just try to — buck up a little, have some perspective. It’s not the end of the world, you know, and — I suppose you’re an alright sort of girl, deep down and everything. When it matters.”

She extended her hand and patted her shoulder stiffly.

This, from Hermione Granger — whose chief qualifications as a friend included a ruthlessness with homework reminders and a willingness to set one's enemies on fire — was a gesture of extraordinary emotional sensitivity and nurturing.

Daphne burst into tears and threw her arms around Hermione, who reacted as though someone tried to shank her. She attempted a series of scrambling evasive maneuvers that ultimately failed, and left her floundering in Daphne's grip.

"Never mind — never mind — that wasn't an invitation!"

"Oh, just let her, go on," whispered Harry, "be nice—"

"I can't *breathe,* Harry!"

"—good for the immune system, too—"

"Harry Potter, *help* me!"

"—talking about having female friends—"

"I'm going to jinx your hair blue!"

"Do it, I'll match Cho."

They hauled Daphne into the common room, a multi-step process that left Hermione haggard and Ron rather more wet than he'd been on arrival, where she sank into a leather armchair with the airs of an aged queen. A first year game of draughts was scattered to make space, and a small coterie of gawkers came to loiter, including the girls from upstairs.

After a few hours of crying, Daphne calmed. She didn't say as much, but she grew fidgety and prone to giggles, and resisted attempts by Harry or Hermione to redirect the conversation to serious matters by launching charm offensives against the nearest creature in sight. Four people offered to take her to the headmaster's office, each rejected; the question of where she would go after she left the

Gryffindor common room was flagged twice by Hermione, but only when Ron brought it up did Daphne finally quail and fold into herself with the dignity of a surrender.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I can’t… I won’t sleep there, I just know it.”

“Because they’ll go after you?”

“Because they *hate* me,” she whined. “And I can’t get up in the morning and walk around and say hello to them. Either they’ll say something, and it’ll be horrible, or they won’t, and it’ll be worse, and either way I don’t know how much longer I can take being the outsider without going mad.”

“...But you have to sleep somewhere,” said Hermione.

Daphne fidgeted.

“I don’t suppose… I mean, it’s not so very long until the end of the school year,” she said, in suggestive tones.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m very neat, you know, and I’m sure I wouldn’t bother a *soul* if I just tucked myself in here on the couch—”

“But you can’t just sleep in our common room, Daphne.”

“Course she can,” said Ron jovially. “Lee does it every other night anyway, there’s someone napping all the time.”

“That’s different! It isn’t a dorm!”

“I’ll be quiet,” Daphne assured her, which Draco thought was an impressively gutsy lie. “You haven’t even seen how quiet I can be. You’d be astonished. I’m like a mouse! You won’t know I’m here.”

“That’s well and good, but you haven’t got a bed,” said Hermione, with patience warmed by earnesty, “and we can try to transfigure one for you, but I really think you should think this through first, because it’s not an easy place to sleep, and you’d essentially be camping — we’d like to help, we really would, but you have to think practically.”

Harry and Ron were both at a loss for what to do. Draco, being no richer in ideas, consulted the ceiling for inspiration.

A crowd of fourth years had gathered around in the common room to chat, and unexpectedly, from amongst the whispering many, Lavender Brown heaved a titanic sigh — stepped forward — and rose to the occasion like the morning sun.

“We can squeeze her,” she said, without any particular eagerness. She massaged the bridge of her nose. “It’s a pinch, but I’ve done worse at sleepovers. I’ll share with Parvati tonight, and we’ll like, do a rotation, or whatever.”

Daphne gave a small gasp. Hermione stared at Lavender like she’d announced her intention to join the Red Army.

“You’re serious,” said Hermione.

Lavender shrugged. She looked at Parvati, who nodded. Lavender turned back to Daphne.

“Snore once and you’re out,” she said. “I’m not kidding. I need nine hours or I will kill.”

Daphne put a finger in the air and silently began to weep.

“Stop,” said Lavender, alarmed. “Jesus. Your mascara.”

She ushered a kerchief into Daphne’s hand.

“Thank you,” said Daphne, tearfully moved. “Thank you. Oh, thank you,” and he couldn’t tell if it was for the tissue or the other thing.

Lavender, with a dictatorial style befitting a fifteen-year-old girl, directed the efforts to move Daphne's bag and things up to the girls' dorm. Daphne herself bobbed somewhat uselessly in the midst of the crowd, fielding sorrowful looks and sympathetic touches. Katie put an arm around her shoulders, and Daphne fastened herself to the other girl's side with a quick frightful sound, like a current of air might carry her away.

Hermione drifted over to Lavender and spoke in a low voice.

"That was a very nice gesture," she said, with a tad too much surprise to not be altogether insulting.

"Yeah, I know," sighed Lavender. "I'm like, a saint, probably."

"They're not big beds."

"Yeah? And you got straight O's in Transfig for like, what, exactly? 'They're not big beds.' Jesus. Brightest witch of fuck all, tell you that."

"Can you even *do* an Engorgement Charm? Or did you assume I'd do it for you?"

"Can we go back to the part where you were talking about how totally sweet I was, and not being literally parked directly on top of my arse?"

"Can you — never mind. I just wanted to check that you're sure," said Hermione, and then, with a gentleness never before directed at Lavender: "Because — you know, no one would think less of you if you weren't. You don't have to… prove anything. You know that, don't you?"

Lavender popped her gum thoughtfully. She tilted her head at Hermione, and then smirked.

"No," she agreed. "I don't. But she let me borrow her Maybelline's Magical No-Mess Mascara wand for the Ball, and honestly,

Hermione, there's such a thing as priorities."

In the last days of May, as the Third Task slipped into the anxiety event horizon, time moved like someone had cut it with paint thinner. Harry drilled jinxes with Hermione during lunches, coming back to the table with singed fingers and quivering legs. At night, in his four-poster, Draco heard him muttering the incantations to himself before he went to sleep.

In the library, Hermione ripped through old newspapers for clues about the Third Task. Draco told her that it didn't matter, and she agreed with him, but it didn't stop her. She needed something to do while Harry was sleeping. Ron took an unusual interest in these preparations, too, coming to join her in the library, though he would be the first to call these efforts a waste of time.

The event horizon spanned past the ranks of students. Mad-Eye Moody — who had appeared to retain his place on the faculty, immune to whatever Crouch had said or done to him — had made a habit of keeping Harry after class. When Harry caught up with them, he usually had a new list of hexes or counter-jinxes to research, often ones that didn't appear on the curriculum.

"Starting to think Snape might've had the right idea," Ron remarked, when a bark of his name sent Harry hurrying off into the Defense professor's office. "Love the old goat for trying, but he's kind of showing his hand, isn't he? Teachers aren't supposed to help."

"If you believe that, you must suspect McGonagall, too," said Hermione, fighting to wedge her textbook in between old volumes of spell compendiums. Giving up, she stabbed her wand in and Shrank them, wedging them in beside three inkwells and enough parchment to handprint a volume of Dumas. "She let us use the Transfiguration classroom to practice."

"Because she got sick of Potter knocking down tapestries," muttered Draco.

“Yeah, probably,” admitted Ron.

The Monday before the Task brought with it the last double Potions block with the Slytherins, and Hermione was late. Or her equivalent to lateness, which was bustling in a good five minutes before the bell; whereupon she sat down, ignored the (beautifully and single-handedly arrayed) potion kit in front of her, and bit down on her knuckle, so deeply lost in a warzone of thought that he feared for the integrity of her phalange.

“Idle hands are the boggart’s plaything, Granger.”

The countershot about his own hypocritical idleness was so obvious that she could have probably knocked it off in her sleep. She didn’t.

He set down the stirring wand and looked at her.

Her knuckle was starting to blanch from pressure. She was very pale, a mien that he took for fear.

A claw of unease traced down his vertebrae. He leaned between their chairs, lowering his voice.

“Granger?”

She drew a copy of the *Prophet,* and smoothed it with uneven hands over the potions table. Furtively, he ascertained that Professor Snape was entangled in Neville’s hash of a Phthisis Solution, and then jerked it in his direction to read it.

The first article was a new release from Rita Skeeter, entitled *POTTER VS. WARRINGTON: CLASH OF THE CHAMPIONS.* The article above it was much darker: *HOUSE-ELF ARRAIGNED IN WORLD CUP DARK MARK INVESTIGATION: “JUSTICE DONE,” SAYS NEW SECRETARY.*

The elf, which formerly belonged to Lord Sibelius Nott (Chief of Staff for the Minister of Magic), was arrested and faces four charges...

“I see Potter’s no longer the favorite.” He slid it back to her and reached for the stirring wand, keeping his tone level. There were places to discuss that, but Potions wasn't one of them.

Several rows behind them, Theo and Pansy were quietly doing knife work, with swift strokes that fell in almost eerie unison, and conferring in cool low whispers that reverberated with the susurrus of burbling pots. The Potions classroom was a dark, musted, steamy cave of a room, and he blamed it for the sweat that filmed his neck. Daphne was carefully mincing scallions at a table to their right with Parvati, who every so often would peer at her work and wince.

Draco checked again for Snape’s attention and found it diverted. He folded the newspaper in half, leaving Skeeter’s headline intact, and leaned across the aisle.

“Oi. Potter.”

“Hm?” Harry was engrossed in his scallions.

The paper smacked him in the back of the head.

“Ow!”

“Have you seen this?”

“No, see, the problem is, Draco, the back of my head is the one place I *can’t* see. Confuses me, too—”

“Shut up. Ronald, I’m delegating. Give ‘Seeker’s Reflexes’ over there his news.”

“Sure.” Ron caught the paper before it fell and held it under the desk, scanning it. He whistled. “That old cow,” he marveled. “A week before the Task, too.”

Harry shrugged. “I *did* tell her to get stuffed.”

“Should’ve used a stronger word, if she was gonna write this anyway,” said Ron. “In for a knut, you know? Let’s see what she says on page seven… oh, good, she’s got a hundred words on Warrington’s pecs. Pass me the scissors, I’m saving this for when I need a laugh.”

“When I need to puke, more like,” muttered Harry. “Draco should offer to introduce her, that’d put her off my case.”

“I can think of no two who deserve each other more,” said Draco, but he was distracted. The line about Cassius’s father bothered him: *Warrington (son of Rufus Warrington, the renowned pewter cauldron magnate and senior advisor to the Minister of Magic...*

Why was that interesting? Most people in Slytherin had fathers who were either rich, political, or both.

Hermione was silently dicing scallions. She picked up the board and swept them into the pot with a stroke like she was bisecting a jugular.

He drummed his fingers on the table. Warrington had a father at the Ministry. High-ranking. Enough to have Runcorn on a private Floo network, probably. Which would put him in the limited circle of people with knowledge of the Triwizard Tournament. It was a small number. There couldn’t be that many men with seventeen-year-old children at Hogwarts. Nor any as prominent as Cassius. Head Boy, Slytherin Prefect, admitted magical talent.

What went wrong with the Goblet of Fire had never been explained. The Ministry hadn’t told anyone how it worked, had they? They had just hauled it in and said it would spit out a name for every school. There were no established standards of virtue, or even of merit. Well. Dumbledore had *suggested* them, but that was Dumbledore. Nobody from the Ministry had claimed as such. No one had even said the Goblet necessarily made the decision for itself.

Flora Carrow had known the Second Task was happening in the lake before she was taken hostage. The only person who remotely cared

about her enough to say so was Cassius.

Who, of course, could have figured it out himself. All the other champions had done it. He was a Head Boy; he could have taken the egg to the prefects' bathroom any time he liked.

His fingers slowed to a three-four step.

"How did Warrington know about the dragons?"

"Hah?" said Harry, scrutinizing an advert for a new Comet model.

Draco twitched in irritation and snatched the newspaper back. "Pay attention. I'm talking about the First Task. When we went out with Hagrid, Charles said that Warrington had been there 'earlier that week.'"

"...Who the hell is Charles?"

"Ronald's brother? The dragonkeeper? I know your memory's not what mine is, but please try—"

Ron spluttered. *"Charlie?* "

"—to keep up. Warrington was there before Maxime, before you, and obviously before Krum, by extent. That means he knew about it *long* before you did. Who told him? It wasn't Hagrid."

"Might've heard about it some other way," suggested Harry, while Ron kept up a stream of muttering.

"'Charles' Weasley, sodding ridiculous, sounds like a pimply old git with sideburns. 'Aye, forsooth, 'tis my oon brother Charles, and yon eldest, William, of the Weasel Clan—'"

"Merlin, do you ever shut up? I'm working to something."

Ron snickered and slumped in his chair, gesturing to continue.

“How did he know? Besides poking around in the forest, which, incidentally, few people outside of you lot are inclined to do unless they have to.”

“D’you mean he had a tip-off? Because Charlie didn’t tell him, I promise you that.”

“I’m saying that he knew *somehow.* His father’s aide to the Minister. How far up do you think the Tasks were planned?”

Hermione spoke, though she was acting much unlike herself in that she had pulled nothing near her weight in the conversation, let alone the usual two-thirds of everyone else’s. “You think there’s a leak, then.”

“Put it this way: if my father were senior advisor to the Minister of Magic, and I were a Triwizard champion, I wouldn’t let him have a moment’s peace until he’d told me something.”

“Fascinating. Well, that’s a mystery that didn’t need solving,” she said coolly, “but thanks for that.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah, hang on,” objected Ron, “if Warrington cheated—”

“Then he’s only done the same thing as Harry, and made use of his resources in an otherwise utterly unfair and barbaric game of blood sport. I don’t know what any of you expect to do about it, besides wish him well.”

“Barbaric!”

“I don’t know about that, ‘barbaric’—”

“No? No?” She threw down her knife. “You think that holding four children for an hour under a lake and daring them not to drown doesn’t count as ‘barbaric’? How about locking them in a cage with a fire-breathing monster?”

“I agree with you,” said Ron tentatively, “but Mione — to be fair — everyone else was seventeen.”

“In the muggle world,” she said, with a hard edge in her voice, “adulthood begins at eighteen.”

“We’re not in—”

“I know where we are.”

They completed their potion in silence.

Hermione’s ability to communicate with Draco in shorthand, previously a pleasant convenience and sign of mutual understanding, now seemed a rather mean-spirited and purposeful way to avoid discourse on any subject, because she declined to answer anything with more than a hand gesture or a certain tilt of her head for the rest of the class.

The walls of Hogwarts always had ears, but they never had so many eyes as when one walked beside Harry Potter. Least of all in the immediate aftermath of the Skeeter article, which provoked an entourage of whispers to accompany him to the Great Hall. Perhaps part of it was the unusual addition of a green tie to their melange, because Daphne had tagged along behind them, talking forcefully and constantly about something to do with Paris and hats.

Her strategy failed, not from any shortcoming of her own, but because in the Entrance Hall someone had planted themselves in the center of the room, redirecting foot traffic around them like a current. The person was Theo. Daphne gave a thin groan.

“Right. I’ve had enough of this bloke,” announced Ron. “I think it’s far past time I saw less of him, to be honest.”

“Don’t, don’t scrap with him, please,” whispered Daphne. “Let’s just sneak past. Can I duck behind you?”

“Yeah, sure. Hunker down. Want my hood?”

“Oh, could I?”

“Daph!”

Theo had seen them. He crossed the hall quickly, sparing a jerk of his head for Draco, with a brisk: “Heard you took a bad fall, chap.”

Draco folded his arms and tilted his head.

Theo paused, his eyes flickering up and down. “What?” he said, a touch doubtful. “Didn’t you?”

Draco narrowed his eyes.

Theo checked over his shoulder and lowered his voice. “Listen. I had words with Goyle—”

“Oh, you had *words.* When’s your Order of Merlin coming?”

“I — alright, not undeserved, but I straightened them out. I mean, it’s not going to happen again.”

“It’s not going to happen again because they’ll need tweezers for what’s left of him if he tries.”

“Noted. Will you forgive me if I push the quaking and weeping for later? I’ve a tight schedule,” he said. “Daphne. Do you have a moment?”

“No,” said Ron.

“Nope,” said Daphne, gazing at the ceiling.

“A moment, Daphne. Really.”

“No, not one, I’m afraid, my dear.”

“I’m not trying to unburden myself here. It’s a logistical meeting. Twenty seconds.”

Hermione’s patience, none too great on good days, was reaching negative readings. When she stepped forward, he bore very little hope that cooler tempers would prevail.

At the same time, there was a part of him — the same part that had seen her drop Flint with one spell, and often returned to that image in idle moments — that was just as happy to let her at him.

“If she’d wanted to negotiate, she would’ve said so,” said Hermione coolly.

Theo’s hand swept at her, palm-out, as if to try and silo her from the conversation. “Thank you, Granger, for that ever-so-helpful translation of a two-letter word, but I don’t have time to discuss—”

“Good,” she snapped. “Neither do I.”

She drew her wand. Draco moved his hand to his own, and Theo stepped back twice.

“What are you going to do,” he said slowly, “set me on fire?”

“Nott, stop.”

“Teddy, come on.”

“Let him,” said Ron, suddenly, and Draco looked at him sharply. Ron hadn’t touched his wand, but his arms were folded.

Hermione lifted her chin at Theo.

“Maybe,” she said. “Depends how quick you are, doesn’t it?”

She stepped forward. Theo stepped back.

“Being a generous man, I’m going to interpret that as a bit of banter, and not a formal challenge.” He smiled thinly. “Though not for my own sake. In fact, if you put me in the Hospital Wing, you’d be doing me a favor. Most rest I’d have in a year.”

“You’d be very welcome,” said Hermione.

She was angrier than he’d realized. In the lines of her body there was a tension so old it had frayed to web-thin cords, and he wasn’t sure that the person she saw at the end of her wand was Theo at all. If she cursed him, it would be magnificent. It would also be horrible. He ought to have stopped her, but he liked being behind her, not between whatever she was pointing her wand at. He felt the chilled wonder of someone watching a shipwreck at a distance.

But if Theo cursed her, he’d put him on the floor.

Maybe Theo knew it, too, because he put his palms to his head and turned around and took three short steps and then flung his hands at the high atrium. “Fine! Fine! No, that’s perfect! Never mind — listen, if one of you happens to get a word in with Daphne in the next forty-eight hours, would you tell her I called? I don’t have time for this juvenile haggling.”

“That’s a new one,” said Daphne shortly. Theo stilled.

“Daph?”

“I don’t have time, he says? I don’t have time! Wow, are you *busy,* Theodore? Too busy for me? I hadn’t noticed! You’d only told me once a day for the past *always!”*

“Shut up,” he said, with a sincere and breathy hurt. “Don’t be simple.”

Daphne shoved through Harry and Ron and stomped in front of Hermione, who slipped her wand away, blinking in surprise. “Go away!” she snapped. “Just go away! Leave me alone, if you won’t have me, can’t you pick one thing or the other? I’m so sodding *sick*

of you and Pansy and the blessed Mission I could just *puke* at the sight of you most days, you slimy, callous, weaselly, pompous twat!”

“It’s not my fault!”

“Another new one!” she shrieked. “‘Not my fault’? God! I’ve never heard *that* from Theodore Nott!”

“Greengrass,” muttered Draco, as the crowd began to form a wide hemisphere, offering an arena for what at least some clearly expected to be a fight. He didn’t know if they were wrong.

Reflected in Theo’s wide dark eyes was Daphne’s glower. He held one hand out, and it was unclear what he was trying to do, to touch her or shake her or stop her or just make a universal gesture of *don’t hurt anybody,* but it was unsuccessful on every score. “It isn’t,” he said. “It isn’t. You said so, too. You agreed.”

“Go piss on a gas fire, honestly! What the hell did you expect me to say?”

“ You still can’t possibly anything is my fault.”

“What?” said Hermione sharply. “What’s his fault? Did Theodore have something to do with Tracey and Millicent?”

“No!”

“Take your nose out, muggle-born,” snapped Theo.

Draco touched his wand. Theo’s eyes flickered at him, and narrowed.

“Shocker,” he said quietly, like an accusation. It was. There was heat on Draco’s neck. There was heat everywhere. Panic licked up the inside of his throat.

Daphne spat. It landed on the floor.

“I hope Harry wins,” she said loudly. “I hope he *thrashes* Cassius. I hope they put him on the podium and make your sorry father take a lot of pictures with a half-blood. I hope he invites all of his muggle-borns and half-breeds up with him, the veela and the giant and *me,* Theo, and the Minister has to shake our filthy hands, and I hope he flays the skin off his fingers trying to wash them afterwards.”

She shoved past. He stumbled, and it didn’t look feigned. The crowd parted around her like she had cast *Bombarda.*

Theo reached out and snatched her wrist. She hissed and tugged.

“Let me *go—”*

“Don’t do this,” said Theo softly. “Daphne, you’ll kill yourself if you do this.”

Ron lunged forward and punched him.

Shouts, shrieks, an explosion of movement on all sides, and when the struggle cleared the cloud had cleaved around the wriggling nucleus of Ron — writhing to break out of Harry’s clutches — and Theo, who was hunched over in a crouch, trying to hold the blood into his nose.

All this time Hermione had been getting closer until she was standing in front of Draco. When Theo’s head snapped up, there was a red ring on his eyes, and Draco edged his shoulder in front. If he lunged, he could move between them—

What was he thinking? It was *Theodore.* They’d flown seeker drills on the sands of the Riviera. He’d kissed Narcissa’s hand, and slept on a beach beneath a starry sky.

There was a film on the world, a bad lens, refracting everything funny. This fear, this deep alien horror in the midst of the familiar, it wasn’t school. This wasn’t how it felt to be here. It was Hogwarts, but it wasn’t. It was his friend, but it wasn’t. His fingers were cold as the

nitrogen shackles they clasped on Azkaban inmates and he could feel his wand-handle folding his palm in half.

“Alright, touché,” said Theo, in a voice so brittle you could crack it with a fingernail. “You really did get me. Going for Daphne? Low blow, I wouldn’t have seen it coming. I’ll give you that one for free.”

“Nott.”

“Actually — never mind. Give my best to your mother. If you can find her.”

“What?”

But Theo sidestepped them and vanished down the stairs to the dungeons.

Draco nearly went after him. It took Hermione grabbing his wrist to stop him from tripping down the stairs, his brain hazed with dread.

“Let me go.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Did you hear what he said?”

“It was a taunt. It doesn’t matter. He only said it to be cruel.”

“How do you know?” he demanded, but she shook her head, obviously reluctant to say what they both knew: she didn’t.

Daphne’s breath shuddered. Draco glanced at her, but she was staring intensely and nakedly at Ron, who was quietly wiping a bit of blood off his knuckles.

“Ronald,” she began, faintly.

Harry bellowed. He clapped his hand to his forehead and screwed his eyes shut.

“What’s wrong?”

“Harry?”

“Potter, what’s the matter?”

“Scar. It’s… it’s a bad one.”

Daphne perked up. “Do you need some ointment?” she said, rummaging in her bag. “I always carry some. My scars act up when it rains.”

“Not like that.” He cringed with his whole body. “It’s like… it’s a headache. It doesn’t hurt like normal.”

She paused, ointment pot in hand. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” He shook it out, blinking, and then flinched away from a group of Hufflepuffs who were gawking. Draco gave them a black look, and they scattered.

Lunch had been well-scoured from the tables by the time they found their plates, and the last quart of a tureen of spiced seafood soup was meagerly split amongst them. Draco ate nothing and scraped his spoon in loud fractals along his dish until Hermione tired of it and Summoned the instrument across the table. The food was bad. The mood was worse.

When the dishes vanished there was a collective breath of relief, though it shriveled up and died a sad death when Dumbledore stood up and clapped for attention.

“Good afternoon! Tarry, please, before your next classes; I have an announcement.”

“Merlin,” muttered Ron. “What now?”

“There has been a minor adjustment in personnel,” he cried. “Mr. Ludo Bagman has been called away on urgent business, and he will

not be able to join us for the third and final installment of the Triwizard Tournament. He sends his regrets and the very best of luck to all four champions."

There was a small detonation of porcelain down the Gryffindor table. Fred had dropped his teacup.

"Being that Mr. Bagman served not just as commentator but adjudicator for the Tournament," said Dumbledore calmly, "his role must be fulfilled with a neutral ombudsman to ensure that the balance of judges remains fair. Should it be necessary, Mr. Odin Davis will fill his place as a judge if Mr. Bagman's business prevents him from returning to Hogwarts before the Third Task."

"Oh, Christ," said Hermione, with a venom that surprised everyone.

"Quiet, please," said Dumbledore calmly. "Thank you! Mr. Davis will arrive on Friday morning. We appreciate his service very much. In the meantime, I will let the champions continue their preparations. Good afternoon."

He released the podium, and retreated to the high table. Daphne threw down her spoon.

"Who the hell is Odin Davis?" said Harry, with the resignation of someone lifting a rock he expected to house many worms.

"He's an auror," muttered Draco. "And a lapdog of Sibelius Nott, lest you nurse any hopes of fair adjudication."

"Put those to bed in September, mate."

"What I don't understand," said Hermione, slowly and tautly, "is how Nott can possibly have that level of influence on the Tournament."

"Political corruption? Well, Granger, it's quite simple if you want to get into it, it starts and ends with having cartoonish amounts of money—"

“No. Listen. Crouch is the head of International Magical Cooperation, which is jointly running the tournament with Games and Sports. That’s two people he could pay off, and Padfoot says Crouch wouldn’t take a bribe, so I believe him. That leaves Bagman, who just left—”

“Hermione, Lord Nott is the Minister’s Chief of Staff,” said Daphne, not unkindly. “I don’t know who Mr. Padfoot is, but perhaps he’s not wholly in possession of the facts. It may not be like this for muggles, but here, the power system’s quite hierarchical. It’s very easy for him to have a say.”

“I *know* that, thanks. What I want to know is why Nott would care enough to throw his weight around for the Tournament. I mean, yes, yes, the optics of it all, the politics, and so forth, but they just replaced the Secretary of Law Enforcement and concluded a major investigation, so you’d think they had bigger fish — and Draco, I agree with you, I think Warrington probably *is* cheating, which raises the question of who at the Ministry is helping—”

“Oh, of course he is,” said Daphne. It was followed by a silence like a rimshot.

Draco raised his eyebrow at her. “Something to share with the class?”

“Theo’s been helping him all year,” she said. “That’s what half of those League events are, is strategy meetings for Cassius. They bring in Ministry blokes and talk about it. Takes a village.”

Four stares leveled her with enough joint force to raze a building.

“That slimy shit,” whispered Ron.

“Huh,” said Harry thoughtfully. “No wonder he was ripping mad when I tied him for first.”

“Are we surprised?” said Draco, intrigued. “I’m not. I inferred that was happening, anyway—”

“I inferred,” said Hermione, “that the Slytherins were helping him, not that the whole *Ministry* was involved.” She seemed to be trying to fuse her jawbones together by pressure.

“I thought you knew,” Daphne said apologetically, mostly to Ron. “Sibelius Nott has simply oodles of money, that’s how he and Rufus Warrington know each other. I happen to know the Ministry has a backdoor shipping arrangement for the Warrington Company, which is why they killed that bill last September.”

“So Davis is going to pull for Cassius, and that’s that,” said Ron. “Harry hasn’t got a chance. Essentially.”

“Unless someone puts Davis under Imperius,” she agreed. “Mr. Warrington owes Lord Nott enough money to mortgage Gringotts, twice. Not an uncommon situation, I hear, for most people at the Ministry! Nott is loose with principals and tight with interest. My father said he’s an absolute goblin when it comes to gold.”

“Pejorative,” said Hermione, quietly, staring at the table.

“Yes,” said Daphne, “he tends to be.”

“That’s how Runcorn took office, isn’t it,” said Ron, in a stroke of cogence. “Nott bought it for him. Basically.”

“Or funded his campaign, rather, yes. Called in a frightening number of debts to do it, too,” she said, reaching for the tea. “I’m sure *that* little Floo call had a lot of family accountants walking out of high windows. If he’d had to do another radio advert, I think the national economy would’ve tanked.”

Hermione put down her fork and knife. She stood up and picked up her bag and calmly, without complaint or explanation, walked out of the Great Hall.

There were three seconds where four seats remained at the table.

Daphne fretted. “Did I say—”

Draco threw down his silver and stood up. He turned to the table and opened his mouth, temper short, for the shortest excuse he could muster, but—

“Go on,” said Harry quietly. Behind the screen of his glasses, his eyes were cool and startlingly clear. Ron inhaled, and Harry cut him off with a jerk of his chin. Something passed between them. Ron cleared his throat and went back to his soup.

It occurred to him that while Ron might not understand anything — nothing, truly, not one fiber of one *thread* of it — that lay between Draco and Hermione, there was a great deal he didn’t know about Ron and Harry, either.

Draco made quick work of the distance to the doors, spotted the tail of Hermione’s cloak vanishing up the grand stairwell, and followed it. This course took them up a course of increasingly cramped staircases, which he followed until the sixth, seventh, eighth floors of the castle were spinning away below him in fractals under the bannister, and up the last rickety spiral to the Owlery.

The Owlery was a round stone cask of a room, riddled like a honeycomb with owl berths, from whence a panopticon of great dark eyes peered cooly and judiciously at whatever stirred the door. Straw papered the floor in patches striated with brown, redolent with the acidic reek of all animal keeps, and through the rough-hewn slots in the stone, the queer and changing light of a spring afternoon in the highlands rolled in errant waves over the hills.

Crouching in front of the window was Hermione, a sheet of parchment on her knees, a quill in hand, and some volume of ink already starting to bleed from her haste in writing. She was struggling with it, too, and made soft little noises of frustration whenever the materials failed her, like an agitated cat.

He shut the door. The lock clicked at the touch of *Colloportus.*

“Oh,” she said, without turning. “You.”

He didn’t know how she had known. His footsteps were dampened by the straw.

“Rather.”

That earned him a cursory glance. “What are you doing?”

“Girding myself to ask you the same question.”

“I’m writing a letter.” She dotted an I, viciously. “To Madam Portia Magnussen.”

“Of the Allegiance for Muggle-Born Wizards.”

“The same.” She swirled something ugly and blotted that might have been a signature. “To see if she can do something about this.”

“...Namely?”

“Mimsy. The house-elf.”

The straw floor was mobile, and it perambulated around the room unobtrusively, rustling in a stray whip of wind.

Hermione shook her head. Her quill was going to crack any minute.

“Listen—”

“They framed her,” she said quietly.

“Yes, and everyone intelligent knows that. No one thinks that a house-elf could summon a Dark Mark, it’s absurd.”

Finally she put down the quill and turned her face up at him. It was small and writ in anguish, and with her kneeling, the distance

between them seemed long.

“That’s worse,” she said faintly. “Surely you see how that’s worse.”

“How?”

“Because it means nobody cares.” She was shaking in the hands, but not in the voice. That was steady. It almost always was. “She didn’t do anything wrong, but they’re going to send her to Azkaban anyway, because it’s easier than trying to go after someone really dangerous. And nobody gives a damn.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes,” she said, louder, “it *is.”*

“It isn’t.”

“Don’t be dense, I can’t stand it right now.” Her voice cut through his. “I’ll have a row with you, if you like, I’m serious, I’m so far beyond caring you don’t even — because they don’t care. I know they don’t! Because I’ve lived in this world for years, and I know how it works, and *they don’t care!* They don’t!”

Owls cast off from the parapets, racing the echoes of her voice into the long shadows of the afternoon.

“Fine,” he said shortly. “Have it your way. For the record, I’m not unsympathetic. But this isn’t the time—”

“You’re going to tell me I need to keep my composure?” Her serenity was like a faceful of cold water. “You really needn’t worry. I’ve a lot of practice by now.”

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is. Here’s another one: ‘Granger, don’t be ridiculous.’ ‘Granger, don’t be *extreme.* ’ Well, I’m not. I’m stating the facts. Mimsy is going to Azkaban for a crime she didn’t commit, and the Ministry is going to say it’s a problem of beasts and wizards, instead of muggle-borns and purebloods, and the person who did it is never, ever going to be caught.” Her hands were white knots. “Never. And then it’s going to happen again.”

“Granger.”

“And then, after that, it’ll happen again. And again, until someone dies, and they’ll say, ‘this was a tragedy! This was a shock!’ But it won’t be. And then it’s going to happen again, and it won’t be as shocking. Because these things happen. And so on, and so on, and then, one day, it won’t be a tragedy anymore. And maybe, that time, it’ll be me.” She shrugged, a jerky little movement. “And they still won’t care.”

He set his jaw and turned his head to stare out the window. He was beginning to feel sincerely angry in ways that made it difficult to look at her.

“If you tell me to keep my composure,” she said, very even and calm, “I’ll never speak to you again. You’re my best friend, and you’ve saved my life, and I’ve saved yours, but if you don’t believe me, I have nothing else to say to you.”

He had a terrible sense that he could say something just then that would hurt her, and that it could break whatever was between them, and it was one of the rare moments when she was angry enough to let him. If he did that then there would be nothing afterward.

No: not nothing. In fact, he could see the path very clearly. He would leave her there and walk down the stairs from the Owlery to the dungeons, and he would go knock on the door and ask for Theo, who would come out, maybe with Pansy, and they would shake hands and he would understand everything without needing to be told and Draco could stay there as long as he wanted without ever

saying what it was that had happened. He could spend the rest of his life doing that, if he wanted to. And Theo and Pansy would never ask questions and they would always be kind, because they liked him, and they understood parts of him that he hoped to God Hermione never understood, even though it was part of the reason that she was angry at him.

The idea frightened him badly enough to make him clamp his jaw shut. As if it might come out without him meaning to. His hands were shaking.

Maybe he wanted to do it. Part of him did want to do it, in fact. But thinking about it made him feel dizzy and outside his own body, like watching some other creature use his own hand to pick up a knife and drive it very slowly and gently into his own heart.

“What?” she demanded. “Say something.”

Breathing was the only thing he could do without shaking, so he focused on it.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know… what?”

“I don’t *know.* What do you want me to say? I don’t know what I don’t know. Would you give me a minute?”

She turned toward him, took in his face, and whatever she saw in it made her take a slow step in his direction. “Draco, tell me what’s wrong.”

Anger to concern in three seconds or less. That was Hermione, for you. Textbook case. First chapter, first page. He could have laughed.

“Nothing.”

“No, not nothing, it’s obviously not nothing. Talk to me. You always do this, you lock down and you don’t tell me anything, and it makes

me feel like I'm outside of my own friendship, so just *say*—"

"What's wrong is you keep buzzing in my ear."

Fuck. He closed his eyes and sucked his cheek between his teeth and bit down, hard, until he could taste blood instead of acid, and at least that pain was predictable.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing. It's nothing. I didn't mean it."

She didn't say anything.

"Granger."

"Do you know," she said suddenly, like pond-ice cracking, "I had a row with Ron about you, after the Second Task."

He tipped his head back and let the feelings happen to him. Maybe if he didn't try to fight the discomfort it would leave him alone. Like playing dead.

"Another one?"

"Yes. He came to apologize to me, and he was pretty nice about it. He'd made a whole list of the things he'd done wrong. A list! Ron! 'Because I know you like lists.' That's what he said. And he said he wasn't going to fight with you any more, because he knew it made me unhappy, and he didn't want to do that. Even though, he said, he didn't like the way you spoke about his family, or mine. And I said: 'Neither do I.'" She shook her head a little, as if marveling at it.

"Merlin's sake," he said lowly. "Now? Really, now?"

"And he said—" she lifted her voice— "he said, 'I don't blame you, but why don't you say something about it, then?' And I asked him what he meant. And he said, 'well, you let him get away with it, and

you don’t let me.’ And then I got angry. ‘Because it’s not fair,’ I said. ‘He tries.’ And he said, does he? Does he *really* try?”

“I would prefer to leave Ronald out of this conversation, if we’re going to have it.”

“And I said yes. And anyway, it’s not all his fault, I said, when he’s never been around muggles, it’s hard to understand.” She wet her lips, the tiniest of hesitations. “And he said, ‘Neither have I.’”

Well. There it was.

“Fine.” It was clipped. “Perfectly fair. Good observation. Shall we make a list of the qualities *I* have that Ronald lacks? For parity?”

“Stop it.”

“Start with how I can hold a conversation with you for more than ten minutes on a subject of *your* choosing, instead of mine—”

“You’re dodging.”

“Or try how you *like* me because I’m worse than him, how about that? You like it. You like that I’m meaner than you are, too, because it makes you feel better, because you can’t *stand* the idea that you might not be the best person in any given room, and I’m your one friend who’ll never fight you for it, aren’t I — Malfoy, he’s the ”

“Stop trying to pick other fights,” she said steadily. “We can have that one, but that’s not what we’re doing now. And stop making this about Ron. It isn’t about him.”

“Though perhaps you’d like it to be.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“It means what it means. You have a bad habit of comparing us. I notice that Potter never gets a column in these sorts of tables. Why’s that, I wonder? Never made it in the running, did he? Poor kid.”

There was a beat.

“That’s a remarkably nasty thing to imply,” she snapped. “That’s — remarkably nasty, even for you.”

“Yes, well.”

“I compared you to Ron because — because he pointed it out! Because *he* brought it up! But frankly, you know, if you’d like to go there—”

“Be my guest,” said his mouth, for some reason, while the rest of him violently disagreed.

“—then it’s not the worst comparison in the world! Because unlike you, Ronald has made *every* effort to make me feel welcome. Outside of Hogwarts, I mean, in the real world. In his *home.* And it’s funny, because I can name every member of his family, and I didn’t even know how you and *Sirius* were related until Remus told me.”

“Hang on,” he said, with a very unkind edge of laughter. “That’s lovely. That’s just perfect. So when I don’t know about your family, it’s my fault, but when you don’t know about mine—”

“I’ve *told* you about my family! Draco! You know their names! You know what they do! You know my cousins, and my aunts and uncles, and you know that I’ve got two cousins and family in Leeds, and my grandfather’s deaf, and my grandmother thinks I go to a special ed school because when I come back over the summers I don’t know basic muggle curriculum, and my mum’s heartbroken because she can’t tell her the truth, and last July we got in a fight and I called her a *muggle* and she hasn’t looked at me the same way since!”

The owls were screeching at them, agitated by the sound of yelling, and the flutter overhead silenced them both momentarily.

“You didn’t tell me that,” he said. Hermione sucked in breath like she was dying for it.

“Maybe not!” she said tightly. “Maybe not. But I don’t even know what your father did for a living. Besides ‘be rich.’”

That rankled.

“That’s not equivalent.”

“Uh huh.”

“What he ‘did for a living’ was being Lord Malfoy. Anything else was a courtesy position at best, and the title certainly didn’t matter. I don’t think I even knew it.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Frankly, yes.”

“Oh? That’s all? When my parents ask where you live, the best I can do is a radius of two thousand kilometers.”

He couldn’t help but scoff. “What, like they were going to visit?”

She barked in laughter and stormed over to the window, her hands knit in her hair. “No! They couldn’t! As you’ve made *perfectly* clear! No one from my family has ever been invited to your house — even though your mother said she’d invite me, which I was *thrilled* about, by the way, and I waited all summer for the chance, but that’s not really your fault, because even I can admit I was being a daft idiot with delusions of — delusions of I don’t *know* what — but that’s alright, I thought, at least I *have* met his mother, that’s something, though Theodore Nott still apparently knows more about her than I do! So there’s that!”

“You’re not entitled to know my mother.”

She whirled on him. “I’m not entitled to know Molly Weasley, either,” she spat. “But I do. *Very* well, in fact.”

He turned his head like she'd struck it and breathed and focused on that, the breathing. And the biting down. His cheek was numb so he bit the other one, until that was numb too, and his mouth was full of copper.

Hermione took a sharp breath and swept her hand over her cheek, subtly, like she didn't want him to notice.

In his head he was standing in the Slytherin common room, and Theo was there, and they were shaking hands — and Cassius had an arm around his shoulders, and Flint and Crabbe and Goyle and Millicent Bulstrode were laughing and smiling at him, with him, and there was no part of Draco that didn't feel dead.

"There are parts of this world that are dangerous to you."

She dropped her hands and waited. By and by, she frowned.

"I'm sorry," she said acidly, "is that supposed to tell me something?"

"There are parts of my life that are dangerous. To you. My family isn't like the Weasleys. And," he said unevenly, "the reason you are not acquainted with my mother is not — it has nothing, you understand, *nothing* to do — with what she thinks of *me."*

Hermione paused.

"Is that why?" she said. "She hates muggle-borns?"

There was a hard silence.

"Well, I knew that," she exclaimed.

"Granger—"

"Is that all? You were scared she'd be *mean* to me? That's your answer, honestly? After four years at this school, you think I'm afraid of your mother?"

“Let me f—”

“I mean, *maybe,”* she said, belligerently, “maybe, yes, I am, but I’m sorry, and your mother seems like an imposing woman and all, but if she’s not going to actually, literally curse me — unless she is, in which case, you might have said—”

“Maybe it’s not about you,” he said sharply, pivoting from the window. “Did you think of that? Did that occur to you? Maybe there are some things that do not, in fact, come down to how Hermione Granger feels about them. Do I astound you?”

“Really! That’s *rich!”*

“Yeah? Touch a nerve, did I?”

“You’re a real hypocrite!”

“Am I.”

“And you have some nerve suggesting *I’m* selfish, when everyone in Gryffindor if not the *castle* knows you’re a greedy, caustic, overbearing narcissist!”

He ground the heels of his hands into his temples.

“But you know what? Fine! I trust you,” she said, and though it was scathingly acidic, it was still sincere. It was a little helpless, in fact, with how sincere it was, and it made him feel odd and nauseous and weak in the legs, which was horrible. “Tell me, then. Enlighten me as to what it is about the way you treat me that supposedly has *nothing* to do with who I am.”

“My mother is mad.”

He wondered whether it was possible to perform a Tongue-Severing Curse on oneself.

Hermione was staring at him. He didn't dare look at her, but he could feel it, just the same.

"She has — episodes. She thinks she's in the past. She forgets the past decade, at least, sometimes more. She calls me 'Lucius.' Sometimes," he said, "it takes hours for her to remember where she is."

Hermione wet her lips.

"Snape doesn't know how to cure it," he said. He braced himself on the window, suddenly exhausted from the strain of simply existing in the world as it was. "His professional opinion is that it's impossible. To cure her. Even if we knew what she has, which we don't. There's no other symptom; it's not a curse, it's not a spell, it's not a haunting, it's not any disease known to healers. But sometimes she doesn't know who I am." He slipped his hands in his pockets. "That's why you haven't met." He jerked his head at her. "And the fact that she hates muggle-borns."

Hermione pressed her lips shut, and covered them with one hand.

"I'm very sorry."

"Don't be. She hates you," he said swiftly. "Not even you, personally, Granger, but you as a category. As a concept."

"She's your mother whether or not she's a good person, and that's still awful. It's allowed to be awful for you and awful for me at the same time."

He probed the cut in his mouth, and the pain was a solid thing, unimpeachably real.

"In the muggle world," she said, carefully, "there are doctors who focus on treating mental illness. There are things you can do. Therapies and medications."

“Yes?”

“Many of them are quite effective.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“No?”

“Not if it’s muggles.”

She folded her arms. “That’s absurd.”

“Yes.”

“She’d refuse help—”

“Yes.”

“Hurting herself, hurting *you,* rather—”

“Yes.”

“What if it was you?” she demanded. “What if you were sick, and the only cure came from muggles? What would she do?”

He had to think about it.

He had to think for a long time.

Hermione scoffed in disgust. “You’re not serious.”

“Am I dying?”

“You’re *not* serious.”

“It’s germane. Am I dying, or could I survive?”

“It doesn’t matter!”

“To you.”

“You’re her son!”

“Which is why it matters.”

“You want me to believe that your own mother would let you suffer to make a point about blood purity. That’s how important it is, to her. More important than her own son’s happiness.”

“Than *my* happiness? Fathomlessly.”

“Well, that’s incredibly stupid,” she snapped.

He recoiled.

She was fucking impossible sometimes, actually impossible, she couldn’t wrap her head around *anything* that didn’t already fit in there. He wanted to grab her and shake her until she saw stars and sense. His head was a hot dark room full of creatures with teeth.

“It’s not *stupid.* It’s how my family’s stayed alive—”

“Which has really worked out for them, hasn’t it,” she shot back, and then froze.

But he wasn’t angry at her. What he felt instead was a startling prick of relief.

Because she was impossible. Impossible and ferocious and a lot meaner than anyone gave her credit for. But that was what he would’ve said, too.

Because she was impossible, but it was nice to know that he wasn’t insane. That it wasn’t a ludicrous idea, that thought, and though it stung like salt on a scrape, it was real, and it was honest.

They fought in the same way, dirty, heel to cranium, wands and hands. When it didn’t feel awful, it felt nearly clean. It felt good, in the same way that it felt good to get your thumb on a bruise and push.

He started to laugh. He put his hand over his eyes, and laughed, and it felt good.

“I didn’t mean that, Draco.”

He rolled off the wall. “You did, but it doesn’t matter,” he rasped. “You’re right, anyway. My father’s dead. Fifteen generations of pureblood lineage, the greatest fortune in wizarding Britain, and they knocked him off like they were putting down a dog. Which gives you just a preliminary fucking suggestion,” he said, his voice low and dark and cold on purpose, “of what they’ll do to you, if you let them.”

Her throat moved; he watched it. It was the worst possible time to want to touch her.

“Your position being, essentially,” she said, “that I should run far away, and stick my head in the sand, and let the purebloods sort these matters out for themselves. Like you’re all so good at doing.”

“My position being that you should be frightened.”

“Done,” she said briskly. “Anything else?”

He ground his teeth.

“My position being, more specifically, that you should act like it.”

“Not on your life.”

“Granger.”

“I chose to be here. You don’t seem to understand that,” she said, with a dreadful false calm. “I could stop coming to Hogwarts, you know. I could go to school anywhere. My mum would *love* me to. But every year, I come back, even though I know it means danger and nightmares and Hospital Wing visits and possibly dying, *probably* dying, one of these days, and that’s fine, because at least I get to choose how and when I face the people who want to kill me, and I choose *now,* and *always,* and *with my eyes open,* thank you!”

“The wrong choice, in other words.”

“Wrong?” Her voice vaulted into nonexistence. “Wrong!”

He snarled at her. “Yes, *wrong,* and if you want to stake your life on every sorry creature you find, and run headfirst into every Killing Curse, I can’t very well stop you, but I don’t want it on my hands when it comes back to you.”

“On *your* hands. On yours. So it’s about you, is it? What you can live with?”

“That’s right!”

“Once again, everything’s about Draco Malfoy, the only victim, the only one with anything to lose—”

“Yes, actually, Granger, the decisions I make *do* tend to be about me. I apologize if that offends your sensibilities.”

“It’s all about you?”

“Yes!”

“ *All* about you.”

“Yes.”

“Alright! Alright, fine! Explain that, then. What’s so awful,” she snapped, “what’s so very bad for Draco Malfoy? Hm? I don’t think anyone’s lining up to kill you because of who your parents are. What about this is scary to you?”

They were standing very close together. The warmth coming from her body seeped through the front of her shirt. It was the worst of all possible times to remember what her hair smelled like.

“You need to back off.”

She didn’t. “Are you scared you’ll get shunned by your Slytherin pals? That you’ll end up like Sirius? Pretty frightening, isn’t it, not having a mansion to run home to?”

“Stop it.”

“Make me. Tell me. Go on, do it. What can’t you live with? Say it.”

“Stop it.”

“Tell me! What’s so worrisome to you? What, if I’m dead? Make it easier for you, wouldn’t it?”

There was a thin, feeble string of something, somewhere in him, of name and nature unknown, but whatever it had been, it was gone now. He moved and she was moving and then he wasn’t and he had pinned her against the wall.

She made a noise. With one arm he crossed her collarbones; she couldn’t very well move, though she didn’t try. Her eyes were wide but her heart wasn’t fast, merely stubborn, drumming gently on his skin. If he’d startled her she swallowed it and any fear with the same platinum bravado she’d shown a Hungarian Horntail, five feet even of hair and glower, and if she’d ever been scared a day in her life it would shock anyone looking at her.

He hadn’t meant to hurt her, only to make her stop *talking.*

“Don’t you ever—” He was floating somewhere in the hot white brainspace where coherent sentences collapsed from gravity.

She swallowed.

“Don’t,” he said, finally, which was, after all, a complete sentence. “Fucking— don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Hermione.”

His tongue made a curse of it. It was a snarl with a bilabial. She went still with a stillness to match the stone at her back, like he'd struck a tuning fork.

Her eyes were so large that the stars in them had orders and constellations. Rhythms and relationships. Her freckles migrated during the winter, but one always stayed on the swell of her cheek. He thought about that, sometimes. He thought about its range of motion, which was great, because she had an inordinately expressive face, and the long course from rage to happiness could take that freckle almost everywhere, right up to the corner of her great smiling eyes. All of her was in there, really, right in the stupidly large deer eyes, where once every so often he — not anyone else — not as well as him, anyway — could peer in and see whatever her mind was doing, for a moment, like glancing through a series of telescopic lenses at the perfect moment to watch a star bloom.

What her mind was doing now, namely, was getting well and truly angry. Once or twice he'd wondered if he was ever so transparent to her, but he didn't think so. His face didn't have the same open affect. The idea was queasy and indecent, like walking around offering a handful of marrow to whoever came by.

Reading her was not an intellectual thing any longer, not really. It was more of a muscle, or a retained sense, like riding a broom. If he lived to one hundred and ten years old, he would remember these things from Hogwarts: the western underhand, and the full Windsor, and what Hermione Granger's face did when she laughed. Even if they never spoke again and she went off to live fast and die stupid in her glorious justly wars and he went to live a very long, relaxing, comfortable life full of people who were nice to him, that was something he'd have to walk around with, all those little expressions — what her fingers did when she was worried, how she touched her mouth in thought. He would die knowing that, probably. One way or another.

She worked her mouth. That was another one.

“I’m sorry,” she said, after a while, though none too happily.

“Yeah?”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“Yeah.”

“I get— you know how I get.”

“Yes,” he said, “rather.”

She touched his wrist, and he eased off.

Owls crooned a mournful harmony. The wind came into the reopened space between them and hollowed it of warmth.

“If it’s ever up to me,” she said, “I’m taking you to a muggle doctor. I’m sorry if that upsets you. But I don’t give a damn about your family’s legacy. You’re too important to me, and I’m not going to let you be hurt by anybody, even if you love them. Your mother can deal with me if that upsets her.”

I’m not going to let you be hurt by anybody. He couldn’t think of the last person to make him that kind of stupid, dangling, big-hearted promise. Certainly none that he’d been capable of believing, and he *did* believe her. That was the stupidest thing of all. It was a silly, impossible promise, and he seized it and locked it up in his heart, preening over it, like it was a piece of solid gold.

But one couldn’t just say that kind of thing without perishing of embarrassment afterwards — that was a ‘deathbed confession’ sort of item, a ‘letter from the deceased,’ sort of item, if anything — so he said, “If I’m ever mortally injured, I would consider it a sign of esteem if you did not assail my mother while I lie bedridden.”

“Noted,” she said, which was not a promise and he did not fail to notice. “If I’m ever mortally injured, by the way, you should feel free to take me to the nearest doctor, magic or no.”

He shrugged, which was also not a promise. If she were mortally injured, he would be gunning down the doors of St. Mungo's, and her parents could take it up with the unfriendly end of his wand.

"I don't care," he said, with great effort, "that your parents are m— aren't magical."

She lifted her head and fixed him with an owl's stare.

"It isn't—" He paused, working his jaw. "You — a certain sort of person — it isn't like — at a certain point, it becomes impossible—"

"Draco?"

"You are," he said, measuring each word carefully on his tongue, "the finest magical talent of this or any generation." He paused again. "The world that produced you is beyond reproach."

Hermione made a stifled, horrible sound. She spun to her right, abruptly, shoving her hands into her eyes.

"What," he said, alarmed. "Granger?"

"Nothing! Nothing! Shut up! I'm fine!"

"Merlin. Would you give a man credit for trying? I'm doing my best here — I know it wasn't Keats—"

"I hate you," she said into her hands. "Oh, God. I'm going to bawl my eyes out, and it's going to be so damn embarrassing, and it's your fault. Why did you have to say it like *that,* I'm going to cry, oh God—"

"Fine. As you like, I'll say it the stupid way. 'Rah, rah, muggle rights,' et cetera, and listen, I'm frankly not behind you on all of it, you're still going to have to hard sell me on autobomiles."

"Automobiles," she said wetly, "you absolute idiot, it's *automobiles."*

"That's what I said."

“It is not what you said.”

“It is precisely and exactly what I said.”

“Never mind, you’re annoying again,” she said, but she wasn’t near crying anymore, so he could stop pretending he didn’t know the word.

“I shouldn’t have said that, about dying,” she said, after another pause.

“No.”

“I don’t think,” she began, and frowned. “I don’t think that of you. I never would. I know that if—”

“Let’s not.”

“Yes,” she said, somewhat relieved, “alright, sure.” She tilted her head at him, and then smiled, a little, a crooked expression that probably could have made him jump out the window if directed. “In any case, I’d want to spare you ‘the disastrous inconvenience of finding a new potions partner.’”

She did her imitation of him. It was, as usual, hilarious.

He did not, as a philosophical matter, take life in its concept as a series of irreversible moments; he preferred to think that his options remained generally open, and his course changeable, like a ship given to adjustment by its rudder, rather than a carriage down a series of one-way lanes. But there were some moments in a voyage, inevitably, when one occasioned to look back, and he saw how far the shore now lay — and realized, more or less concurrently, that to row back, to change course, now, would mean wrestling the brute arm of the wind.

‘Traitor’ was a word with a classical pedigree. He happened to know it was the same in French. *Traitre.* As in *traître de sang.* As in *mort*

aux traitres. In fact, the root was so old it came from the Anglo-French, who had only nicked it from Latin, anyway: from *traditor,* from *tradere* — to hand over. To submit. Surrender.

There were always worse ways to ruin one's life.

"Are you offended? That was a joke, Draco. I didn't actually mean it. And honestly, I thought it was pretty good, mys— *what are you doing."*

The last bit was muffled by a squeak. He stepped into her and put his hands on either side of her head and held her that way, uncertain of what else to do; he had slashed fuel lines to the part of his brain that governed that sort of intellectual decision-making. Her hair was never unsurprising in its softness, more like chiffon than anything else.

"Hello?" she said, bewildered.

Her hair moved when he exhaled. It stirred back and forth in the tide of their shared breath.

Daphne had made it look much goddamn easier than it was.

So he looked her in the eye and said, "If you die before we get our N.E.W.T., Granger, I'm going to learn necromancy just to make you watch me do it without you."

"You should be so lucky," she said, and he had to credit her nerve, because she hadn't pulled away, not a little bit, not even flinched. Which meant that either she wasn't bothered, or her stubbornness didn't permit her to show it, either of which was equally credible, unfortunately. "I'd still get top first as a ghost, and we both know it."

It was really outrageous, now that he was allowed to think about it, how bad the temptation was to kiss her.

The sides of her face were warm in his hands, and turning warmer. The Owlery had a chill.

Someone pounded on the door.

They were on opposite sides of the Owlery in record time. They might actually have broken some sort of land record, or Apparated; certainly lightspeed had been approached.

“OI! LET ME IN! ARE YOU IN THERE?”

“Alohamora,” he snapped, and the door whipped around on the next blow from the intruder’s boot, hammering the wall with a gong that lifted a small parliament from the rafters, hooting in distress.

Pansy stalked into the Owlery, radiating triumph from her battle with the door. “There you are,” she exclaimed. “My God, wear a bell, would you? I’ve been giving myself a stitch.”

“Parkinson, what the hell are you doing?”

“Great question! I’ve had plenty of time to rehearse my answer, in the several years it’s been since I left the Slytherin dorms!”

Hermione began rubbing a small circle on her temple, discreetly.

“I’ve been *trying* to find a Gryffindor with a brain cell and enough patience not to jinx me for the tie I’m wearing,” she snapped, “which, unfortunately, limits my options to two, and they both decided to distance themselves from me with literally *the* largest *possible* number of stairs! And yet! And yet! Selflessly, I persisted. Why, you ask, I do not know; certainly it was not in my interest, nor the interest of my thighs, which will have to be sectioned and auctioned for *meat,* so little use to me will they offer after this miserable trial—”

“Not to be rude,” said Hermione rudely, “but do you have a point?”

Pansy sniffed and thrust out her hand. In its clutches rested one more-than-slightly crumpled fold of paper.

Draco took it. It was a page torn from a book, complete with a page number and a title partly obscured by an inkstain. One paragraph had been circled, thrice, in black ink.

“‘...the use of Portkeys can circumvent normal magical permission thresholds, such as Anti-Apparation fields or Floo wards. Because the Portkey creates as a temporary extradimensional thoroughfare between two locations, it does not activate traditional magical defenses against ingress or egress, since the enchantments do not perceive that the wizard has traveled: merely disappeared. Evidence of Portkey enchantments can be detected through a routine magical diagnostic—’ Sod this. Parkinson, see Granger: is there a point?”

“Search me,” she snorted. “Theo said it was important. He was ripping mad, too, and late for a meeting with his father, so you should be flattered he took the time to write a note.”

“He didn’t.”

“Did too, you dunce, turn it over.”

He did. On the back of the page — scrawled in the white box under the end of a previous chapter — there was one word, underlined, in the blotted scrawl of a man with time for no other.

CUP

Thank you, thank you, thank you. Next chapter, going up next Friday: "Into the Labyrinth."

Into the Labyrinth

Chapter 52: Into the Labyrinth

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Hm,” said Daphne. “Not very helpful.”

“A fitting epitaph for Theodore Nott, in general,” said Draco. “If I outlive him, I shall take pains to inscribe it on his grave. Granger?”

Daphne passed the artifact to Hermione, who tucked it into her journal. “Thank you for that verdict,” she said dryly.

“I’m sorry, my dear, I don’t know what you want me to say.” She folded her hands in contrition. “There’s just not a great deal to work with.”

They were clustered in a corner of Gryffindor Tower that was as close to hidden as you ever truly be, in Gryffindor. May’s loveliest day drenched the alcove in sunlight so thick it was almost viscous, turning white on the varnished tabletop, warming the stone floors. Discarded robes and jumpers adorned the back of each chair. Harry and Ron lolled in the window seat, passing a pocket snitch back and forth, the tiny glint of gold like a darting firefly in the sunshine. Hermione had rolled her sleeves up and thrown her hair into one of those tiny metal claws, her wand notched behind her ear.

“Could he be asking us to set up a Portkey?” She drummed her fingers in thought.

Draco was rolling his wand around his fingers, making an intricate figure-eight. He’d figured out how to do the knuckle thing, and the effect was desirably impressive. “Where?” he said. “For whom? And why would he ask us?”

“I don’t know. He clearly wants you to know about it, so it must be important to you somehow.”

“Are you sure that he meant it for you?” Daphne pillowed her chin in her hand, curious. “It’s not addressed.”

“Parkinson almost broke a door down to deliver it, so I’d say so.”

“No, but she’s right,” said Hermione thoughtfully. “Pansy said ‘a Gryffindor.’ She went looking for you because she knew you, not because Theo told her to.”

“Hey, A-Team,” said Ron, yawning. He pitched the snitch sidelong at Harry. “Glad you’re all having fun, but this bloke does actually go here, yeah? He lives downstairs. Just go ask him.”

“Oh, thank you, Ron, why didn’t we think of that?”

“I dunno, but hey, you’re w— ow!”

She retracted the newspaper and arched her eyebrow at him.

“Nott’s gone,” said Draco. He intercepted Harry’s toss and vaulted it overhand at Ron, who nearly keeled out of the seat for it. “Hasn’t been in for three days.”

Harry frowned. “Is he sick?”

“Well, he’s not on a field trip.”

“Pansy says he hasn’t come back to the dorms,” said Daphne worriedly. “I suppose he’s gone home, but I wouldn’t have expected it. He’s never been sick before, and he refuses to see Pomfrey for anything.”

“And he was obviously in a hurry when he wrote this.” Hermione’s fingers drilled on the desk. “Which makes me think he knew he’d be gone for a while. And wouldn’t have a chance to tell us whatever he meant in person, at least before it mattered.”

“A good point,” said Draco, “which ferries us no closer to understanding what he actually meant.”

“I don’t know that that’s even possible, based on what he’s given us. One word and a page of a book on Portkeys isn’t exactly Agatha Christie. We don’t even know that ‘cup’ is the right word — it could be an abbreviation or an acronym.”

Ron caught the snitch and then leaned on his cocked knee. “Hang on,” he said, gesturing at them with the ball. “This is Theodore Nott, yeah? Rich prick? Daddy’s boy?”

“Only by default,” said Draco.

“He’s nice, sometimes,” muttered Daphne.

“Right, yeah. That one? He hasn’t done bugger-all for you or me or Harry, *ever.* Why are you so keen on what he’s got to say?” Ron was disbelieving. “This is the bloke who’s been helping Warrington cheat, remember. I’ll bet anything he’s just trying to distract Harry before the Third Task. Mind games, mate.” He tapped his forehead. “S’what I’d do.”

Draco wrinkled his nose. “Because Potter famously attributes his success to his diligent work ethic.”

“Nah, but he knows you and Hermione are probably helping him, right? Gotta be. And he knows you two like a good puzzle, which the Third Task isn’t, so all he’s got to do is offer one.” He snapped his fingers. “Distracted. The both of you. And if I’m him, and I want Warrington to win, that’s my first priority. Getting you two out of the way.” He shrugged, and then leaned back into the window. “But I’m not a genius, so what do I know.”

“I’m flattered, Ron, but I sincerely doubt Theodore Nott thinks about me at all,” said Hermione, with an edge of amusement.

Daphne, meanwhile, blinked at him.

“That’s a very good idea,” she said. “Ronald, why weren’t you in Slytherin?”

“Told the hat I’d off myself,” said Ron grandly, casting the ball high over Harry’s head.

“A shame,” said Daphne, presently. “You’d have been lovely.”

“I think Ron’s right,” announced Harry.

Draco caught Hermione’s eye and touched his chest, feigning shock. She smirked.

He tilted his head at her. As usual, a warm sensation happened in his chest and unfurled in billows under his ribs — but he was coming to know quite well how far it could progress before it tempted him to do anything about it, i.e., at which point it became a nuisance. So he could enjoy it until then. Then, when the temptation to smile became considerable, he averted his face.

He could manage this. All things could be tolerated, one way or another. It was a question of dosage.

“We know which side of this thing he’s on, and it’s not ours,” Harry added. “I’m not talking about the Tournament.”

Daphne made a fretful sound, but she didn’t disagree. Draco tipped his chair back, balancing on its hind feet, and carefully held his tongue.

With a sweep of her arm, Hermione cleared the table of her notes and the conversation. “Alright,” she said briskly. “Fair enough. We’ll sidebar the Portkey question until after the Third Task, or until Theodore comes back for us to ask him. In the meantime, Harry, you should’ve been drilling the Impediment Curse an hour ago.”

“Aw, Hermione, I didn’t mean now—”

“On your feet,” said Draco, throwing back his chair. Unlike Harry, he quite liked drilling sessions; it was rare that he got the chance to shoot jinxes at someone without Hermione shrilling at him, and even rarer for her to stand there and holler at the other person while he did. It was a highlight in an otherwise dreary and confusing week. “You, too, Weasley, there’s no reason you shouldn’t know it. And we’re drilling Patronuses, after that, so you can give pointers.”

“Speaking of which,” called Harry, jogging her chair, “would you show us that jinx from last week? The wobbly one?”

“The Jelly-Legs Jinx? It’s fairly simple. The aim is the trickiest part, because you’ve got to hit a joint, or the effects won’t be as strong.”

“You know, that makes ever so much sense, and I’m glad you said so,” said Daphne, idly putting her arm through Hermione’s, and steering her out. “Because I’ve struggled for ages with mine, and I always went right for the shins.”

“No, that’s where you’re wrong. It’s a common mistake, though, so you shouldn’t feel badly about it. Flitwick explained it all to me in office hours, it’s best if you go for the knees, because that’s the major joint, although the ankles aren’t terrible, either. In fact, the anatomical component is fascinating—”

It wasn’t. All the same, her explanation of the Jelly-Legs Jinx, rich in detail and useless context, lasted them to the Transfiguration classroom, where Harry became intimately acquainted with the anatomical component of quite a few other curses, including a sensational number concerning distal phalanges that Draco had discovered that morning over tea.

For all the rest of that week they were harried and sleepless, soldiers in arms marked by the dark circles under their eyes — even Draco’s, to his horror, for any tarnish on his complexion was rather as ink on parchment — driven up late by efforts to prepare Harry for the un-preparable. In the back of classrooms, they read spellbooks instead

of the day's lessons, leaving Hermione to throw up a hand and cover whenever someone was called on; during meals, Harry scarfed bites of sandwich while dancing through jinxes from Draco's wand; at night, when Hermione and Daphne retired to the girls', Harry stayed up with Ron, their fretful murmurs moving through the parted curtains on Harry's bed, and sometimes Draco woke to hear twin sets of snores from the four-poster.

Hermione didn't help; the night before the Third Task, she ordered everyone to bed at nine o'clock, which meant, naturally, that Harry lay awake muttering to himself for three heinously unrestful hours, instead of doing anything useful, like letting Draco jinx him. Not that Draco didn't try; a quarter after midnight, he executed the most productive *Langlock* of his young life.

He must have slept, but it felt like no sleep he'd ever known. Instead, he rolled over, closed his eyes, and opened them to thin fingers of sunlight walking their way through the latticed window of Gryffindor Tower.

A cohort of Ministry wizards roved up the lawns like a pack of migrating bluebells. The dew reflecting on the pale sun-washed lawns was so bright it made the black of their shadows seem violet. He watched them congregate around the quidditch pitch, talking amongst themselves, until the grass had sweated out its crown of frost, and the sunrise ended with a cataclysmic blossom of pink in the east.

It was the day of the Third Task, and it was beautiful. It was odd how the mornings of his worst days always seemed so lovely, like the world was trying to convince him of something.

An hour later, a host of the same purple robes appeared in the Entrance Hall, milling around and generally obscuring foot traffic through an intently traveled region of the castle, which caused in Draco the strongest political leanings he'd felt all week.

“Couldn’t have done this sooner,” Hermione muttered, shoving her way between a pair of gossiping bureaucrats, “would’ve killed them to set up on a Saturday, I suppose?”

“Remember this, when you’re Minister,” he said.

“Remember what, exactly? ‘Don’t stand in doorways’? I had that locked down in primary school.”

“That,” he said, “and anything that gets between the masses and their daily bread will tend to be unpopular.”

Ron exclaimed: “Oi! Perce? Is that you?”

A redhead in a rich purple Ministry robe, suit acceptable, haircut atrocious, turned away from a passel of scowling administrators and peered over his spectacles. “Ronald,” he said, with chill dignity. “It’s good to see you.”

Ron ambled over to his brother. “Didn’t know you’d be here, you git! Why didn’t you write?” He slung an arm around Percy’s shoulder.

Percy made a noise like parchment shredding and disengaged himself. “Please contain yourself,” he snapped. “I’m at work.”

“Merlin. Fine. Didn’t realize I had to file a permit to hug you, prat. Anyway, what’s with the robes? Where’s Crouch?”

“I no longer work for Mr. Crouch,” he sniffed. “I’m a legislative advisor to the Wizengamot.”

“You’re what? *You?* Why? When?”

Percy’s eye-roll ought to have strained a nerve.

“I suppose you mightn’t have read the papers,” he said, “but Lord Runcorn has seen fit to remove Mr. Crouch from his position.”

“Crouch was fired?” said Draco sharply.

“Yes. And quite rightly, too! His management of the tournament has been an utter disgrace — allowing a second champion to compete, let alone a fourteen-year-old — Lord Runcorn was furious, especially for your sake, Harry,” Percy added. “It was outrageous to make you compete. A clear sign of senility and judgment compromised by pressure — honestly, I was shocked Lord Runcorn didn’t remove him earlier—”

“What are you talking about?” Ron was incredulous. “You were all up Crouch’s arse last year.”

“I worked for him, Ron,” said Percy, in the tones of someone so exhausted by another’s stupidity that even condescension was too much effort. “I did my job. Let’s not exaggerate.”

“You bit Fred’s head off for calling his mustache funny!”

“I never did more than my due. Lord Runcorn agreed, and he put me in contact with Lord Selwyn, who found a position in the Wizengamot — he said that a bit of legislative experience would round out my profile, and I quite agreed—”

“Selwyn?”

“Selwyn!”

It was rare that Draco and Ron were aligned on any subject; it prompted Harry and Hermione to stare.

Hermione said, “Who?”

“Lord Selwyn is a member of the Wizengamot,” said Percy, impatiently. “A senior ranking member, at that—”

“He’s a Cavalier!” Ron stepped into his brother’s face. “He’s the enemy, Perce, what the hell?”

“Oh, please. He’s a public servant.”

“That’s Runcorn’s party, Hermione,” Daphne whispered. “Very traditional. My family’s Cavs, if that tells you anything, and so’s Draco’s—”

“I know who they are,” she said shortly, “thanks.”

“—barmy puffed-up ponce! At least Crouch was a Pop! Have you told Dad?”

“If Father has any sense, he’ll be pleased that one of his sons is making something of himself,” said Percy, purpling unpleasantly. “And he never liked Crouch, anyway.”

“At least Crouch wasn’t trying to *fire him!* They just sacked Bones, how can you help them?”

Percy threw a panicked look over his shoulder and seized Ron’s collar, hauling him away from the other Ministry workers in a startling show of strength.

“Listen to me,” he snapped. “Keep your voice down. Those people are important men, back there, and I’m making great headway into a position that would let me do real work at the Ministry. If you ruin this, I swear you’ll regret it.”

“Make me *regret* it? You’re threatening me?”

“You are in no position to speak loudly of such matters. That is all I am saying.”

He still had Ron tight by the collar, leaving a pink line on his throat. Draco decided he had had enough of that. If too many people fancied they could run around yelling at Ronald, it wouldn’t feel fun when he did it.

“Off.”

Percy stumbled back when he was pushed. Draco shook out his hand and planted it on his hip, above his wandsheath.

“Gentlemen don’t roughhouse in public,” he said coolly. “Congratulations on your new position. Give my best to Lord Selwyn, and tell him my mother appreciated his Christmas card.”

Then he steered Ron into the Great Hall, which Harry followed expeditiously. Hermione bobbed at his side, muttering to herself.

“—Crouch only *days* before the Third Task, what are they playing at? No wonder nothing happened with Moody! I expect he didn’t get the chance!”

“Voice down, if you please. I’m fairly certain Percival is still watching us.”

“Oh, bet he is,” whispered Ron, with faint jubilation. “Bet you just ruined his week. But also: seriously, mate, you get Christmas cards from members of the Wizengamot?”

“No, and if I did I’d bin them, Selwyn’s got no class and less sense. He hasn’t had a committee assignment in seven years. It’s a shame your brother doesn’t realize he’s being stuck on a shelf for safekeeping.” Between the breakfast rush with the exchange students about, finding seats at Gryffindor was next to impossible. Instead of complaining, however, he elected to take what Hermione called a ‘solutions-oriented’ approach, and dealt a hard kick to the bench, scattering a gaggle of first years from their seats.

“Stuck on a shelf?”

“To keep him quiet about Crouch,” said Hermione slowly, sinking into her seat. She was too lost in thought to scold him. “Percy knew what Crouch was doing better than anyone. If Runcorn fired him for a suspect reason — like going after Moody—”

“Or anything, really. It’s probably the same sweep that got Bones and Diggory,” said Draco, reaching for the teapot. “Runcorn’s cleaning house. Which reminds me — Ronald, I’d advise your father to mind his P’s and Q’s in the next few months, and keep his head

down, if possible; they won't fire a pureblood if they can help it, but all they need is a whisper of a legally viable pretext."

Ron swallowed. "Right. I'll tell him."

"I don't think it was a sweep," said Hermione.

He filled his cup and dosed it with cream and lemon. "Of course it is. Bones has been a Populare for years."

"But they're not random firings. Diggory's came out a few months after his son started seeing a half-blood—"

"Speculation, but continue."

"—and Bones was cut a week before they closed the Dark Mark investigation. That's bizarre, isn't it? If you think about it? She would have overseen the whole case, start to finish, all the evidence, all the testimony, and for months there wasn't a *word* about it, nothing! Not even a suspect! But then she leaves, and a week later, they've finished it? Not even 'breaking developments,' just: 'look! We've arrested someone!'" She stabbed the table for emphasis. Silver rattled. "That's not how an investigation works. Not in the muggle world, anyway."

"You think she wouldn't have closed it?"

Hermione's finger almost assassinated a jam jar. "Better. I think she had a lead they didn't like," she said intently. "I mean, a house-elf? Really? You yourself said it wasn't believable even to people who hate house-elves, and you'd know—"

"I resent that, thank you!"

"—so why bother? Unless you needed a reason to tell everyone involved to *stop looking?"* She sat back, faintly glowing from satisfaction, and then, nodding to herself as if she'd just solved a puzzle, she reached for the tea. "Anyway, if Crouch was poking his

nose into maladministration with the Tournament, it's not farfetched to think he would have stumbled into the cheating scheme for Cassius."

He swatted her hand away and poured her a cup. "So, to be clear," he said, "you're taking the firing of two political operatives in entirely different branches of the government to be evidence of an illegal conspiracy to commit miscarriage of justice and conceal the identity of a domestic terrorist, a charge that you levy against persons no less significant than the Minister of Magic himself."

"Yes."

He shrugged and passed her the sugar bowl. "Alright."

"Alright?"

"Yes, alright. It doesn't make a difference," he said, "because you've got no proof, and if you're right, having proof would only put you in danger, so I'd rather we didn't pursue the possibility. But theoretically, you could be correct."

"I don't even know how I'd prove it," she said, frowning.

"Did you hear the part where I said it was a bad idea to try?"

"I suppose I could write to someone in the Department of Law Enforcement. Or ask Percy for a look at Crouch's daybook."

"Of course, I understand how you could have misheard me, I was only looking straight at you when I said it."

"Actually, I should just write to the Minister's office, shouldn't I? Why not be direct? Do wizards have citizen's arrest?"

"Granger," he said, appalled, but then she gave him a flat look. He scowled and broke into muttering about mean-spiritedness.

Daphne and Ron were snickering; Hermione snorted a laugh of her own. “Really,” she said. “I mean, really. ‘Citizen’s arrest’? You thought—?”

“Before you proceed, recall that you have nowhere near the track record to mock me for taking that suggestion seriously.”

“Oh, please. Name once—”

“Horntail,” he said, cutting her a sidelong look. She flushed.

Then — very maturely, with the dignity befitting a young woman at the top of her class — she stuck out her tongue at him. He made a face and kicked her ankle and presently his kidney was reacquainted with a long-lost friend, her elbow, which made him hiss and glower at her over his tea for a good while, sulking. But a bit later — Harry was recounting the story of how they’d solved the egg to Daphne and Ron, apparently because Daphne had asked — Hermione gave a little smirk when they reached the part about the prefects’ bathroom, just a quirk of her mouth into her tea, and her ankle connected with his.

He twitched like she’d slapped him. Daphne cut him a curious glance, and he gestured to ignore it. Her eyes flit to Hermione, and then back to Harry with suspicious speed.

Draco cleared his throat, and she moved her foot away.

He still fancied her when she was being annoying. It was horrible news. A dismal forecast for his dignity. He’d expected to come out of this ordeal with some version of his self-respect intact, which was increasingly looking like a pipe dream.

“Potter!”

Harry popped his head up brightly.

Professor McGonagall strode down from the faculty table. “The champions are congregating in the antechamber after breakfast,” she said. “The champions’ families are invited to watch the final task. This is a chance for you to greet them.”

“Oh,” said Harry.

He didn’t move. McGonagall cleared her throat. He fiddled with his napkin.

“I apologize for my ambiguity,” she announced. “I will rephrase. Potter: get up, and go greet your family.”

“B— okay.” He slowly peeled himself out of the bench, moving sluggishly, as if with enough time she might forget about him, and go bother someone else.

Abruptly, Ron gripped his robe and hauled him back down. “He’s not talking to the Dursleys,” he said loudly. “If they want to talk to him, they can come in here, and do it through me.”

Harry cast him a look of blinding gratitude.

“An admirable sentiment,” said McGonagall crisply, “but I told Mr. Potter to come greet his family, and I will not tolerate rudeness in the members of my House.”

“But professor—”

“Mama!”

It was the unmistakable croon of Fleur. She dispatched from a flock of Beauxbatons students and went flying down the aisle, bowling over unfortunate underclassmen with every step, and vaulted herself into the arms of a tall and staggeringly well-shaped older woman in the entrance.

And there — shoulder to shoulder with a pair of tall, slender blondes whose sneers savored of the Bordeaux region, and a scruffy, short

family of dark-haired people with familiar glowers — stood a nervous Arthur and Molly Weasley, dressed in their least shabby set of clothes. Bill leaned on his father’s shoulder, sporting an earring and a ponytail and whatever you called the opposite of a Sunday best, grinning.

Harry did not so much stand up as erupt from his seat, trip over his shoes, pinwheel into Professor McGonagall, and then clear off down the aisle at such a speed that it appeared his own legs were struggling to keep up with him.

The resulting embrace was vast, sappy, and overwhelmingly ginger. Ron loped after him, and whatever transpired after that was mercifully inaudible, though there were tears and exclamations and intense hair-ruffling, and in the wake of it all, Professor McGonagall strolled over to chat, smiling a terribly decorous little smile.

“Oh, how darling,” said Daphne, leaning on her fist. “I didn’t know he was adopted.”

“Neither did he,” said Draco.

Hermione gave a tender sigh, and he rolled his eyes.

McGonagall ushered them out, making to clear the entrance. In his last glimpse of the Weasleys, Molly had found some fault with Harry’s tie knot, and was fussing at it while issuing a scolding; Harry was beaming.

Breakfast finished shortly thereafter, plates shimmering out of existence at the order of the hour-bell. When they departed for History of Magic, the champions and guests still lingered in the Entrance Hall, shepherded by a small coalition of faculty including McGonagall, Dumbledore, and Snape. Beside Cassius, there stood a man with a mustache and sideburns that threatened doorframes everywhere, and this man was saying something to Snape that made the Potions Master balefully contemplate the middle distance.

As the three of them passed, Viktor Krum glanced over his shoulder and noticed them at the foot of the staircase. Abruptly, he broke off a sentence in Bulgarian, stepped away, and waved, calling: “Zdraveĭ, *Her* -mione!”

Hermione stopped, pinked, and waved back. *“Zdrasti,* Viktor,” she called. “Good to see you.”

He took another step toward them. Draco eyed the distance between them and irritably wondered how close he needed to be to make himself heard. He had lungs the size of church bells, it wasn’t near.

“Her -mione, you vill be coming, yes? To the Third Task?”

“I think everyone is,” she said, “but yes.”

He shuffled his feet, nodding stiffly. “This is good,” he said, “this is very good. I vill see you, then — later.”

“I’m sure you will,” she said, dramatically flustered, and just then the dark-haired boy beside Viktor’s parents burst into a chitter of annoying, pubescent laughter.

“Боже, Ти си такава девствена. Виждал съм прасета с повече чар—”

Viktor turned sharply. “Млъкни, идиот.”

“О? О? Слушам: Her-mione! Her-mione! Nyeh! Така звучиш— *ai!”*

The boy ducked the urgent sweep of his brother’s arm, then rocketed off across the Entrance Hall, while the Bulgarian national seeker gave chase. The two eventually tumbled into a flurry of limbs at the foot of the grand staircase, which resolved in the younger boy squalling and shrieking with glee as his older brother, cheeks aflame, hauled him into a firm and well-earned headlock.

“My goodness,” said Daphne, peering over Hermione’s shoulder. “I hadn’t seen him up close. He *is* handsome, isn’t he?”

The stares she received were withering on both counts.

“Goodness *gracious.* Can’t a woman can’t have eyes around here?”

“No,” snapped Draco, and she went off to Charms in a snit, which made two of them.

The day passed as the night before had: quickly and involuntarily. The distance between classrooms had never been so great. Partly because anxiety was infectious, and people kept interjecting to offer Harry their opinions on the Task, or the Skeeter article, or whatever else crossed their head; celebrity seemed to mark him, inexplicably, as a subject for testimonial. Two seventh year Gryffindors asked to shake his hand. A group of Ravenclaws came to express their earnest hope that no matter what happened, he would take second place.

At dinner, Harry and Ron were once more escorted away by McGonagall to sit at a special table for the champions and their families, adjacent to the faculty. Ron appeared to enjoy this very much, and struck up a vigorous conversation with Viktor Krum’s father, to his right, while Bill chatted easily with Harry on the end of the table, apparently blind to the intrigued looks that Fleur sent him throughout the meal.

After three courses of cream-of-parsnip soup and braised beef and trifle, Dumbledore announced the schools would be departing to the quidditch pitch for the Third Task, and the resulting surge of movement was vast.

It was all quite surreal, Draco thought, perhaps because there were so many people, but also because the evening itself did not quite admit of the possibilities that were approaching: it was cool and temperate, the sky a lavender bowl scattered with silver, and the fresh warm wind carried the scent of wild jasmine and heather down from the empty, gorgeous moors. The lawns thronged with people like a school of fish, moving with one mind of such intensity that it

barred dissent; the few who tried to swim against, and turn back for any reason, were swept aside and buffeted far off course, before they had any chance; and yet the crowd's one babbling voice was breathy and light from anticipation, anticipating the entertainment that would ensue. It was like they were going to see a play. The stage was there; the audience in high spirits; the weather compliant. The production had been executed flawlessly. It remained only incumbent on the actors to deliver.

In his stomach there was a small cold node of worry, but he set these feelings aside. They had done all they could. There was nothing more inside their power; if he had failed, then anyone would have. It was this comfort, and Hermione's circulation-killing grip on his arm, that kept his step light and his expression indifferent on the way down to the pitch.

"Draco," called Hermione, hopping up on her toes, "where's Harry? Can you see him?"

"Coming down last, I expect, with the other champions. Why?"

"I didn't say good luck, earlier," she said anxiously. "I didn't think that it would be the last time — I thought I'd get to — and then at dinner — but I didn't think of it. I thought there'd be time for it."

"I'm sure he knows."

"Yes, but I didn't say so! And — and! I found an easier version of the Trip Jinx this morning, and I thought I'd told him the incantation, but I don't remember. I want to make sure — I want to tell him."

"Because that'll really even the odds, won't it, a Trip Jinx."

"You don't know what's in there! Neither do I! It could! And even if not, I don't — I'd still want to — I mean, you know, if he doesn't…"

Her lips pursed in a fretful knot. She stared at him, plaintively, with eyes so wide and entreating that one would think she was asking

him for a kidney.

Apparently, he'd have given it to her.

"Merlin," he said wearily, "fine. The champions enter from the lockers, we'll go wait for him."

"Oh. That would be — yes. Perfect. But how are we going to… I mean, it'll be locked, isn't it?"

"Do you remember your first exposure to tandem flying?"

Her lip twitched. "With Gryffindor's only Reserve Seeker?"

Never mind. Find her own damn kidney, she could.

"Third chaser, thank you," he said crossly, and shoved through the crowd.

The east and south turnstiles into the locker rooms had been sealed up to direct traffic into the stands. Slipping through the padlocked gate was much harder than it had been when he was eleven, especially since it was warded from the outside against *Alohamora* — but it was also much easier to scale than it had been then, besides which, he had benefited from watching an eleven-year-old Harry Potter do it first, after which failure could not be tolerated. He dropped neatly down on the other side and charmed the lock open from the inside, holding the gate for Hermione to hurry in.

The turnstiles were frozen, so he vaulted on neatly and turned back. Behind him, Hermione feinted at it twice with a grim expression, palms pinning her skirt to her thighs, like it would soon try to bite her.

"Up you get, go on."

"I can't."

"I've seen you clear more than that with a werewolf at your back and ill-fitting robes."

“Yes, but back then I wasn’t — I wasn’t dressed. I’m in a skirt.”

“Is that all? Merlin’s sake. I’ve already seen your pants.”

Her cheeks could get brilliantly red.

“You *looked?”*

“No, I didn’t — that’s some mind of yours, you know, that would assume — but the *point* of it was —never mind. Sod this. Come here.”

“What? What are you doing?”

“Helping,” he said shortly, and held out his hands. She raised her arms and he hoisted her up by her waist, depositing her on the turnstile. Her legs swept up and he hooked his arm under her knees, lifting her altogether.

She yelped and grabbed him. One of her hands got his shirt, and the other got his hair. He winced.

It was a warm day. She wasn’t wearing tights. The skin on the back of her knees was softer than skin had any right to be. She was easy to carry, too, and he could swing her around in a way that made her yelp and grab his shirt like she meant to use it as a ladder, her hair everywhere, flush everywhere, and this was, actually, maybe the worst idea he’d ever had, dragons and werewolves and all.

He turned her around and tilted her on her feet. Her skirt rode up as she slid down. That was fine. She had faint tan lines on her legs, actually, right above the ruffled hem on her thigh, and that, also, was strictly her business, and certainly not the kind of thing a gentleman would remember, or think about when he was supposed to be doing other relevant things, like walking in a straight line.

“You might,” she said, “have given notice.”

She forcefully tucked in her shirt where it had slipped out of her waistband. Militantly professional, was Hermione. Especially about appearances. If she knew that one of her socks had ridden down, lapsing just under the knee, then she would've attended to it immediately, instead of allowing the discrepancy to distract her peers.

"I do beg your pardon," he said, sidestepping her. "I thought we were short on time. Next time, jump."

"Prat."

"Prat who's doing what, now?"

"Helping," she muttered, none too gratefully, and they headed to the champions' tent.

Floodlights filtered through the stands, peppering white keyholes over carpets of sawdust. It smelled of wood and peat smoke and cigarette butts, and thunder pounded from the footsteps of hundreds filing into their seats, as well as the trumpet of fanfare. It reminded him of the World Cup, but with none of the same easy thrill; this was anxiety, not entertainment, not sport.

In the champions' tent, there was a much larger crowd. It appeared that some sort of reception was being held, because there were at least a dozen Ministry officials, plus half of the faculty, and the champions' families, and — of all people — Ludo Bagman, in the worst shape of his life.

He had dropped at least a stone and the loose flesh sat low on his jowls. He direly needed a haircut and a night's rest, if not a Calming Draught: he kept jumping whenever someone spoke to him, and flinched away at the sound of his name.

"What happened to *him?"* Hermione whispered. "And why's he here? I thought Dumbledore said Mr. Davis would be replacing him—"

“He might be. He’s here.” Draco nodded at a dark-haired man in an Auror uniform. “Bagman must have finished his business.”

“But what happened—”

“Draco? Hermione!” Ron pressed through the crowd, holding a flute of something blue and fizzling. He beamed and gave them both a one-armed hug, which Draco permitted only to honor the solemnity of the occasion. “There you are! Look at this! Cracking, isn’t it? They’re going to let us watch the Task from in here, they’ve got another Spell-O-Vision thing — d’you want to see? I know Mum and Dad would have you if you want to stay.”

“We just came to say goodbye to Harry,” said Hermione. “Speaking of which— where—?”

“Harry? Oh, I dunno, he’s probably hiding somewhere. Been dodging Skeeter all night. When he wasn’t dodging Bagman, that is. I think we’re right about the gambling, you know, Mione, I don’t care what Padfoot says; he’s been on Harry like white on rice ever since we got in, trying to get him alone.”

“Skeeter’s here?” demanded Hermione. “Who let her in?”

“Dunno, since Dumbledore said he revoked her pass. Anyway, she can’t do much harm from here; Mum’s got her locked in a conversation about Celestina Warbeck.”

A drumroll broke out over the stands, and the Bulgarian national anthem blared. “Oh, reckon they’re headed out soon,” said Ron, pointing at the Spell-O-Vision. “They’re starting the anthems. Better find Harry soon, if you want to — let me get Bill, he’s got good lungs, he can holler—”

“Don’t bother.” Harry popped out of thin air, wearing his red Hogwarts competition uniform, thoroughly disheveled. Ron yelped and upset his drink.

“Sorry,” Harry breathed, shucking his Invisibility Cloak. “Been hiding ever since Skeeter showed up. Between her and Bagman, I mean, really— oh, hello, Hermione! Draco! What are you doing here?”

“Saying goodbye,” said Hermione anxiously, “and — and good luck, and everything, and — by any chance, do you remember the jinx I taught you this morning?”

“The Trip Jinx?”

“Yes!”

“No,” he said confidently. “That’s alright, though. I’ll do fine, I reckon.”

“Oh, God — listen, take out your wand, we’ve got time for practice—”

Another horn blared.

“We really don’t,” said Harry apologetically. Then he squeezed her. “S’okay. Show me afterwards, alright?”

“No — I mean, yes, of course, but Harry, I mean, please—”

“Be careful?”

“Don’t die,” she said, wringing her hands.

“I understand this is a high standard,” added Draco, “but you have excellent tutors.”

Harry snickered. “Arse.”

“Pissant.”

“Pedant!”

“Peon.”

“That’s not even an insult,” said Harry, wisely, “that’s a kind of poem. You’re not the only one who knows posh things.”

Draco sighed.

He held out his hand. Harry shook it.

Then Hermione, possibly feeling left out, gave him another hug. She was interrupted by a throat clearing.

“Oh, give us a moment, for the love of Pete,” she snapped, “we didn’t get the chance to say goodbye!”

“No,” agreed Viktor Krum, “ve did not.”

He swelled out of the crowd like a mountain attempting a stealth attack. With his arms folded, he nearly doubled Draco in size. Draco still liked his chances.

Hermione choked back an undignified squeak, and sprang away from Harry.

“Hello,” said Viktor, after an awkward pause, directed vaguely in the three boys’ direction. Ron scoffed.

Draco folded his arms and shifted his weight onto one hip.

“I do not suppose,” Viktor began, eyeing Hermione.

“And you shouldn’t,” said Draco.

Viktor’s fingers drummed on his bicep. At length, he turned to Hermione. “Speak privately? Yes?”

“Erm — no. No! I mean — I’d like to, but — but can’t we do it after? It’s going to start in a moment, and I really came to say goodbye to Harry.”

He nodded and then, surprisingly, gave a little smile. “You are not being distracted,” he said. “Loyal. Hearty girl.”

“I — well, that’s very sweet, thank you, but it’s really—”

“I am thinking of this, in advance,” he informed her, and he offered her an envelope. She took it tentatively, like she was inspecting it for anthrax. “I am speaking to Karkaroff, and he is making exception for me. To the rules.”

Hermione’s head snapped up. “You’re joking.”

“I am not good at that,” he said comfortably.

“What about the International Statute of Secrecy? They’re muggles!”

“Then they vill like it very much, I think. You vill come now, yes? To Durmstrang? Bring your parents?”

“They’d — *love* to,” she said breathlessly.

“And you vill, also?”

“Yes,” she said, stunned, and Viktor smiled, then, for real: full and truly, like a seventeen-year-old boy catching the first real stroke of good luck in his life.

Draco reached for his patience, summed up every ounce that remained to him, and did nothing to Viktor Krum but sneer.

“CHAMPIONS!”

Bagman’s voice ripped through the tent. Viktor and Harry both winced.

“TO YOUR MARKS!”

“Right,” said Harry. “Okay. Well! Goodbye. See you on the other side.”

He and Viktor headed to the front of the tent, where they stood shoulder to shoulder with Cassius and Fleur. Then trumpets shrieked, the flaps wrenched back, and they strode forth as one into the floodlights.

Hermione took a sharp breath and grabbed his wrist. He turned to look at her, and the flush had drained from her cheeks, now turned grey and lusterless as chalk.

He looked down at the place where her fingers braceleted his arm. He carefully twisted his arm — she slackened her grip, drawing away — and he caught her hand before it went, sliding their fingers together. Her pulse careened against his wrist, and he pressed their arms together, curtaining their hands with their robes.

Then he turned back to the Spell-O-Vision screen before he could see her reaction.

The floodlights cleared, and there was a smattering of yells and applause as the four champions swelled to life, echoed by the thunder of greeting from the stands above.

The Third Task was a maze. Twenty feet of hedge so densely packed that it resembled an ornate green wall more than any plant nature ever touched, crowned with a sheer silver film of Anti-Sensory Charms that floated like fog over the dark lattice. Before the four champions stood four gates, each wrought from a different metal, and each marking a different entrance to the maze.

Madame Maxime led Fleur to stand in front of the iron gate, where they stood with their noses at identical lofty angles to the air. Krum and Karkaroff stopped in front of the copper, Krum surly and silent, Karkaroff whispering hurriedly in his ear. Dumbledore hung back with Bagman and Davis while Professor Snape stalked alongside Cassius to the golden gate, and McGonagall — with one hand clamped firmly on his shoulder, for whose benefit it was hard to say — steered Harry to the silver.

“LADIES AND GENTLEWIZARDS! FOR THE THIRD AND FINAL TASK OF THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT, I GIVE YOU: THE LABYRINTH!”

The stands quaked. Draco winced and cast a Silencing Charm on his own ears, but it barely held for a moment.

“THE TASK IS SIMPLE! AT THE HEART OF THE LABYRINTH RESTS A SPECIAL REWARD. THE CHAMPIONS WILL RACE TO ACQUIRE IT!”

Hermione hummed thoughtfully.

“What?”

“Nothing. No — no, it’s nothing. It’s just… did you ever read the rest of that book on the Greeks? The one that Viktor left us?”

“I was rather busy brewing you a Sleeping Draught, as I recall.”

“Yes, yes. That’s fine, I’m sure it doesn’t matter; but when he said that, I just remembered… Labyrinth isn’t just another word for ‘maze,’ you know.” She was frowning. “It’s a very specific maze, in Crete, and the thing inside it… it’s not a reward.”

“PROFESSORS WILL BE PATROLLING THE OUTSIDE OF THE MAZE! IF AT ANY POINT, ANY CHAMPION REQUIRES ASSISTANCE, ALL THEY MUST DO IS SEND RED SPARKS IN THE AIR,” Bagman sounded faintly hoarse, “AND THEY WILL BE RETRIEVED! I REPEAT, AT ANY POINT WHATSOEVER!”

“Oh, *good,”* said Hermione, with feeling. “Finally! Where was *this* in the First Task, honestly? He can just shoot up red sparks as soon as he gets in!”

“If he’s got any brains at all,” Draco agreed, much cheered. Even Harry wasn’t so stupid as to stay in the Task longer than he had to. And they’d all agreed that his objective was to live, not to win.

McGonagall was saying something to Harry. She gave his shoulder a gentle shake, and Harry nodded up at her.

“SO! ONNNNNNN MY WHISTLE, THEN!” Bagman was certainly taking his sweet time; each word was drawled out to the point of parody, syrupy and trilled. “GET RRRRRRREADY…. ONNNNN YOUR MARKS….. GEEEEEEETTTT SEEEEEEEET…”

“God, I’m going to kill him if he doesn’t just get on with it,” muttered Hermione. He wondered distantly if the affection he felt at that was normal.

“ANNNNND! GO!”

The gates all swung open at once, with a thunderous *clang.* The cheers blotted out any sound from Bagman’s whistle, and the champions shot forth like sprinters off the mark — with the exception of Harry, who sort of trotted in after them, shooting a last anxious look over his shoulder.

The gates swung forth again with an identical clamor of metal, and there was a moment where the Spell-O-Vision swirled, flickering into a dull image of four dark lanes, lit only by the identical gleams of *Lumos* — resolving into that quartered screen from the Second Task — and then there was a *crack* like a firework detonating several inches over one’s head, and the screen went dark.

A heartbeat passed. Another. Then the shouts erupted.

“OI!”

“WHERE’D IT GO?”

“WHERE ARE THEY?”

“GET IT BACK ON—”

“What happened?” demanded Ron, shouldering in close.

“It’s — it might be a technical problem,” said Hermione, her voice pitched like a prayer. “These things happen, in areas with lots of magical activity — if you Apparate on the same frequency as a Spell-O-Vision projection, or a radio broadcast, it can disrupt the connection—”

“You can’t Apparate at Hogwarts!”

“No, of course not, but it might—”

Someone shouldered into Ron and he spilled his drink. “Sod this,” he snapped. “Let’s just go out and see, yeah? Maybe the big one’s working.”

“Yes— yes, absolutely—”

They wrestled their way through the crowd at the reception center, wading through a roaring knot of legs and dismayed Ministry workers, and spilled out onto the quidditch pitch in the same profusion as a flood of Ministry workers, all of whom were shouting at each other so furiously it was impossible to hear anything. Ludo Bagman was bellowing into an inert microphone like a soundless picture.

But outside, it was worse. The floodlights had gone out, and the whole pitch was lit by the emergency will-o-wisp lights that bobbed along the stairs, as well as the scant lingering daylight in the sky. Ministry workers raced back and forth, hurling screams and orders at each other, while the crowd bayed in furious bedlam at the upset. The champions were gone.

The worst of it wasn’t the chaos, however. The chaos was fine. Draco had been in bad crowds before.

The worst was that the Anti-Sensory Charm over the Labyrinth had been sealed over with the crackling, faintly glowing blue screen of an Anti-Enchantment Charm.

The champions, wherever they were, had been sealed off. And the Spell-O-Vision screens were all black.

Hermione's hand in his was a tourniquet. He was hers. A Ministry worker shoved past them and knocked her off her feet, and he caught her, hauled her upright against him, and held her there, which pressed into his wrist the ratcheting pace of her heartbeat, the rapid acceleration of her breaths, the strangled scream that was wrestling its way out of her throat, like an illborn creature—

"Granger."

"No! No, no, no, no, no! *Harry!"*

"You need to breathe."

"He's gone! He's *gone!* Harry's gone, they took him, something's wrong, it's like the World Cup again, he's *gone!"*

"I know, but you need to breathe."

"I can't! I *can't breathe!* They've taken him, oh, God, he's going to die —"

"Nobody's dying," he snapped, "unless you stop breathing, which is what's going to happen if you don't calm down— you need to *think,* alright, think *rationally*— "

"NO!" she screamed, and she bucked so violently he almost dropped her. "Don't tell me to *calm down!* Don't you dare! *Look* at what's happening! Look! And I told you it would, I knew it would, and now he's *gone,* and nobody knows what's going to happen to us—"

"I need you here."

Her voice cut off like someone took a razor to it. She breathed in ragged harmonies with him, crushed to his chest by the press of the crowd, her hand still knotted so tightly with his he would be surprised if either of them could feel it.

“I need you to think. You need to think. That’s your job. Potter is going to live,” he said, with confidence he didn’t feel, “but he needs you to think.”

“I — I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Listen to me. We’ve done this before—”

“Not like this!”

“—you and me, Harry needs you—”

“I can’t help him! What are we going to do? This isn’t like doing his homework, this isn’t an *exam,* Draco, it’s real—”

“Fine. Help *me.* I’m your partner, remember? I’ll handle the knifework. Tell me what’s next.”

She screwed her eyes shut. Her first deep breath was a jagged, pointy thing, full of wet edges, but she held it with the stubbornness of someone guarding a treasure. Then she let it go.

Roughly, she said: “Stay close?”

“Obviously.”

“Obviously,” she whispered.

Her hand was still tangled in his, so she clumsily extricated it, wiping her palms on her robes. He flexed his fingers and planted his palm on his wand, willing away the phantom warmth.

“Talk,” he said. “You’ve had a full fifteen seconds to come up with something.”

She blinked once, and her face was a clean picture of terror.

Twice, and it was the cool stare of a girl glancing down at her exam book, reading a list of problems she already knew.

“We could—” She turned around. Purple cloaks swirled among black and blue, shouts bled into screams, spells glittered across the night like a panoply of falling stars. “We could — and then — no, maybe — but we’d have to find someone who knew—”

“Orders, Granger.”

She stopped. “We need to find Ron,” she said, and pulled his arm — didn’t look back, didn’t wait for him to catch on — she knew he would — and they were running at once to the tent, through the flap, a Knockback Jinx and a Bombardment Charm issued at the same time.

She only had to shout Ron’s name twice for him to appear from the crowd, rumpled and breathing fast, and clamp his hands on her shoulders.

“Hermione! Are you alright? I didn’t see you—”

“Fine, now, doesn’t matter, we have to go,” she snapped. “We’ve got to get into the maze—”

“In!”

“Yes, in. Harry’s alone, and something’s wrong, and we’re not going to wait—”

“DRACO!”

There was a bellow from the front of the tent. Draco turned on his heel and nearly walked into Theo’s fist.

Theo had seen better days. ‘Better’ included all of them. Soot and bruising purpled his face where it wasn’t black, with an earring of blood dribbling from a deep gouge in his ear.

“What the hell happened to you?” Draco demanded hoarsely. He turned away from the others and stalked towards him, half of a mind to do the other ear. “What kind of a time do you call this? This is

some week you've had, you know — row with Greengrass in front of the whole school, make Pansy do more stairs than she's had in her life, vanish from the planet for three days—"

"Excuse me?" Theo, who was holding most of his blood in with one hand on his ear, was outraged. "Fuck off, Mum!"

"—come back looking like the cat wouldn't drag you in for fear of tetanus—"

"Oh, God, I cannot *deal* with you right now, mother of Merlin," he snapped, "I leave for seventy hours and you have an aneurysm. Don't you have better things to do?"

Draco shoved him. He squawked and shoved back.

"Daphne was worried about you, prat."

Theo took a sharp, short breath, and his eyes flickered over Draco. "Just her?"

"Entirely. I myself was enjoying the peace and quiet."

He gave a shaky gust of a laugh.

"Draco Malfoy," he said, "you're a remarkable fool."

An explosion sounded outside. Something shattered; a bulb went out. When the emergency lights came up, Theo seized Draco's shirtfront. "It's a trap," he hissed. His eyes were panic-wide and bright with a gleam of something slightly unfettered, some infant cousin to madness. "The cup is a Portkey. You have to tell Potter. You can't let him touch it. They're going to kill him."

"What?"

"What do you mean?" said Hermione. Her voice came from somewhere far away — faintly, through the screaming, but also

through the thunder in Draco's ears. She was strangely calm. "A Portkey to where? Theodore, who's going to kill him?"

"The cup! The *Triwizard Cup,* they're going to take him and kill him and I can't stop it, they'll kill me, my father, but you have to *get him —"*

Another explosion, and Theo tore away from him as if burned.

"This didn't happen," he said, breathing fast. "I never said that. You understand?"

"Theo—"

"No. Listen to me." His finger held them at bay, as if it were a rapier, a wand, anything stronger than a fourteen-year-old's naked plea. "Tell anyone I said that, and you've killed me. Do you understand? I'm not being figurative. If you tell anyone, I'll be dead, and it will be your fault. Yours. And I hope you never find peace for it."

It would have been more impressive if his voice hadn't cracked when he snarled. His shoulders rose and fell with a wild dog's ravenous breaths.

"We're not going to tell anyone," said Hermione, still very calm. On some level, Draco appreciated it, because shock had stilled his tongue. "Thank you, Theodore. What you just did was tremendously brave."

"No. It wasn't. I told you, *I never said that,"* he snarled. "Are we clear?"

"Perfectly. No one will ever know that you risked your life," she said calmly. "But I won't forget it."

She held out her hand. He glanced down at it for a long moment and swallowed. It was like watching a dog being held back from a bone.

“Spare me your pity, mudblood,” he said. Then he whirled around and stalked out of the tent, vanishing into the crush of the moving crowd.

Ron made a noise like he’d been punched.

“What an *arse,”* he said, thick with fury. “I hope he does get offed, raging bastard, after everything he’s said to you.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Hermione dropped to her knees and tore through her satchel, searching for something. “Where’s the sodding — tell me Harry didn’t take it — oh, he did, *damn* him! I didn’t want to go by memory. There’s a secret passage that runs under the quidditch field,” she blurted, by way of explanation. “I found it on the Marauder’s Map. It’s a steam tunnel, it’s built to carry water to the quidditch showers, and it terminates in a hatch under the east goalposts. That hatch is inside the maze.”

“Is it big enough?”

“Has to be,” she said breathlessly, shoving her bag onto her, “because they need to do maintenance work on the pipes. Only problem—”

“You memorized the Marauder’s Map?” said Ron faintly. “All of it?”

“No, I’m still working on the towers. The only problem, though, is the entrance, because they divert the steam—”

“Into the lake,” said Draco.

She nodded. “You’ve seen it?”

“No,” he said, “but there’s always steam on the lake after quidditch practices.”

“Quite. So — it might be flooded. Technically.”

“Technically?” repeated Ron. “And — sorry to ask — but on a scale from ‘oxygen’ to ‘no oxygen,’ where is ‘technically’, exactly?”

“Oh, I don’t know — enough oxygen? Probably? How’s that?”

“Uncomfortably subjective, frankly, Mione!”

“I’d *love* to hear your other ideas!”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Draco suddenly.

They gave him identical stares of disagreement.

“No, it doesn’t. Listen. It’s not a long walk from the lake to the pitch. Five minutes, possibly. Your Bubble-Head Charm,” he said, pointing at Hermione, “taps out at seventeen.”

She stared at him. Her mouth had curled, a little, under the rictus of fear, though the expression wasn’t quite happy — it was just fascinated, like he’d said the most interesting thing she’d heard all month. Like the whole world ought to get together and have a symposium on whatever came out of his mouth.

It was very nearly as good as her smile.

“Right,” said Ron loudly, “that’s great for *her,* but you and I—”

“Are at thirteen and four,” he interrupted, “and I’ve seen you swim. You can hold your breath for a minute.”

“I would prefer not to!”

“Then come up with another way to get into the maze,” he said, helping Hermione to her feet. “And do it soon.”

Hermione shook her head. “No,” she said. “Ron, Harry’s your friend. This is our best plan; what do you think?”

Ron blinked at her, surprised.

“What d’you mean?”

“I mean that I want your opinion,” she said. “Preferably sooner rather than later—”

“See above, *soon,”* said Draco, “and relatedly, it’s said that truly brilliant wizards can walk and talk at the same time—”

“—but all the same, if you think this isn’t a good idea, we can do something else. We’re not — we’re all here for Harry. Draco and I aren’t doing this by ourselves.”

“Yet,” said Draco significantly, hauling on her arm, as they stumbled toward the exits at an excruciating pace.

Ron raked one hand through his hair in amazement. Then he swept his eyes around, like he was flitting between squares on an invisible chessboard.

“I — I reckon it’s good,” he said. “Better if we had the Cloak, better still if we had a teacher, but one’s in the dorms and the other’ll be a nightmare to find in this mess.”

“I know. I was thinking McGonagall, but I couldn’t see her.”

“Nah, and they’ll all be with the Ministry. I saw four of them with Sprout trying to pry the walls open, but there’s something wrong with the maze, it’s not letting anyone in.”

“And I don’t want the Ministry to know what we’re doing, either — who knows how deep the conspiracy goes, but if Theo knew about it, then I’d wager his father does, too, and we’d make ourselves targets —”

“You wouldn’t need to wager,” said Draco darkly. “His father’s in on it.” He flicked out his wand and cast *Bombarda* at the turnstile, blasting a hole through which the three of them walked swiftly into the warm night air. The stars had begun to glint in the bolt of indigo

overhead, in between wreaths of clouds like snuffed candlesmoke, and the faint black shapes of trees lingered like palimpsests on the horizon. The lake glowed eerie with starlight.

“How d’you reckon?” Ron broke into a jog, catching up with Draco, and Hermione put on speed to keep up with them.

“He said ‘they’ll kill my father.’ That means they would be able to identify him as the source of a leak.”

“Blimey. So he’s in it? With the Death Eaters?”

“Or someone of comparable malice.”

“But why *Harry?* He’s not done anything to them!”

“And it doesn’t make sense,” said Hermione. Her cheeks were bright from running. They scrambled down the pebble shores of the bank. “Theo was helping Cassius cheat, not Harry, and if the Cup is a Portkey, you wouldn’t want Cassius close to it at all.”

She cut through a knot of cattails with a slash of her wand. “Which is another thing! The entrance gates were based on tournament rank, so Cassius has the best chance of getting there first! It’s certainly far more likely than Harry, who might do the sensible thing and just stay put!”

“In an awe-inspiring lifetime first,” said Draco, razing a hank of reeds like scything wheat, “from one Harry James Potter.”

“He *might.* We don’t know what’s happening in there. It could be anything.”

“In my experience,” he said, “‘it could be anything’ is rarely a statement of optimism.”

They waded into the water, a cold shock like several volts of electricity straight to the ankles, and through a tall clump of marshes that parted before them to reveal the gaping lip of a metal pipe rising

over the water like a sunken eye. The pipe itself was a flat black lightless disc that told some part of the hindbrain *STOP, DO NOT GO,* and emitted various smells that made the same argument. It was flooded, with only a slender crescent of air hovering between the waterline and the top of the pipe.

“After you,” said Ron.

“No, I insist.”

“Really, be my guest.”

Hermione huffed and shucked her robes onto the bank. “I’ll go, stop it. Just don’t touch the sides of the pipe, you’ll burn yourself.”

“What?”

She swirled a Bubble-Head Charm around her mouth, braced herself, and dove into the gloom of the gurgling steam pipe.

The water sloshed and swirled around her, and the darkness soon swallowed her up.

“Granger?”

There was a muted call, and a splash.

Draco cast his own charm and followed her.

The Bubble-Head protected him from the worst of the smell, but the best of the smell was none too pleasant, either. Scummy pondwater and mold and the peaty acidic smells of spongy things that grew in the damp, an ample helping of fecal matter, and whatever else had been embalming in the water since the beginning of forever. The water was oily and warm, filmed with things he couldn’t see too well and didn’t want to, and whenever something brushed up against his arm on the current he had to steel every nerve in his body not to jump.

Breathing slowly made the air last, but it was stale and clammy within thirty seconds. It was thin in a minute, musty in two, and foul-tasting besides. The intellectual understanding that he could survive on recycled air failed to convince his lungs, which insisted he was suffocating.

It was the last time he let Hermione make plans. Bathrooms and sewage pipes. Madwoman had some obsession with plumbing, come to think.

From deep within the pipes there was something churning, a burble like the indigestion of a buried beast, the deeper counterpart to the babbling current through the tunnel. His eyes adjusted to the dark gradually, making out the undulations of the water, and Hermione's silhouette wading through the path before him. The walls were ribbed with metal frets and behind them the light from the lake had faded to a ghostly gray pinprick. The minutes passed like hours.

By and by the darkness at the end of the tunnel changed in texture, and he belatedly recognized it for a wall. Faint gray light emanating from above suggested a channel overhead, and when he reached it, he craned his neck back and saw that the tunnel bent at a ninety-degree angle and ran upward. They were at the end of the pipe. Hermione was fussing at something on the ceiling, hauling like she were trying to do a pull-up on the roof; bemusement gave way to understanding when a shriek of metal let a bolt free, and a ladder came racketing down from the channel over their heads.

It cut the water with a splash. She hauled herself up, bringing her head fully free of the current, and dispelled the Charm with a gasp. Her shoulders heaved. Scummy water trailed from her shoulders and dyed an inky line of stains along her collar, running from the soaked ends of her hair. He gripped the ladder and pulled.

The Charm broke at a jerk of his head. The first breath of air was wonderful, being the first fresh oxygen he'd had in full minutes. The second was less so, as his brain recovered from the relief enough to actually smell it. He clung to the ladder and breathed shallowly

through his mouth, loathing everyone who had ever been involved in the invention of plumbing, and none more so than himself.

Ron erupted from the water behind them, spluttering like a breaching whale.

“Ron!”

“Weasley, *watch* it.”

“Lost the charm,” he gasped, his voice hoarse and guttering wet. “Something grabbed my ankle. Lost focus. Had to hold m’breath.”

“It was probably a bit of kelp,” said Hermione absently, already drawing herself up the ladder. Her clothes clung to her frame like they had been sewn to it. When she had climbed several feet out of the water, she carefully hooked her legs over the topmost rung of the ladder and leaned out, reaching for the hatch at the top. “There’s lots of rubbish floating around down here.”

“It wasn’t kelp. It grabbed me, I swear.”

“Keep an eye out, then,” said Draco, and he hauled himself up to join Hermione at the top of the hatch. Heat radiated from the sides of the channel, and a sting on his elbow informed him he’d brushed the walls; he flinched it back, hissing. “Or come help us.”

Hermione wrenched on the hatch, to no avail. The handle refused to yield. “Damn,” she said, “it’s stuck—”

“Let me do it.”

“Well, go on, but I warn you—”

He drew his wand and pointed it at the hatch.

“No! Wait, *don’t—”*

“Bombarda.”

The explosion flared like a white bloom in the tunnel. The shockwave hit the hatch and ricocheted back, wrenched him free of the ladder like tearing tissue paper, and he was hurtling back down into water that caught him like a hard *clap* to the back, solid like real ground. The pain lasted only a moment before he was underwater, head spinning, his balance scrabbling to reassert itself, and no idea which way was up, no air, no light, no upwards, just the dark filthy water like oil in his throat.

A hand grabbed his collar and hauled.

He came up with a wild sound, gasping.

Ron let go shirt and threw him aside, snarling, "—serves you right, you sodding idiot, she *told* you not to— where'd she go? *Hermione!"*

He dove back into the water.

There were two seconds where their heads were both gone. Draco breathed hard, air scraping his throat like the wind carried a serrated edge.

They came up with a pair of shouts. Ron hauled Hermione up by the armpits and shoved her against the ladder, where she fastened and clung like a soaked limpet, breathing in high short bursts. She was soaked down to the bone, now, her hair thick and ropy with water, and shaking.

"I told you," she snarled, "to *wait!* There's a Runic seal on the hatch!"

"You might have said that," he snapped, raking wet hair from his head. His heart was fast. She had been underwater for several long seconds.

"You might have *seen* that! I didn't think you'd go whaling on it like a first year—"

“—being efficient, ‘it’s stuck’ you said, the hell am I supposed to infer, unless ‘stuck’ means ‘Runic seal’ in *madwoman—”*

“I’m the madwoman? *I* am?”

“SHUT UP,” bellowed Ron.

His declaration bounced off down the pipe at a gallop. He shoved his hair out of his eyes and stabbed a finger at Draco. “Don’t do that again,” he said. Then he turned his finger on Hermione. “Go solve it.” Back to Draco. “You help her.”

“Hark at him — who died and made you king of the steam tunnels—”

“Shut up! I’d do it, but I don’t know how,” he snapped, drawing his wand. “So you get up there and break out some parchment, or whatever the hell you swots do in Runes, and I’ll keep watch.”

Hermione scrambled the ladder, muttering invective. Draco glared at Ron and clambered up after her.

The seal was a Runic triad, three concentric circles of engravings that rotated when pulled. Hermione cast *Lumos,* peering at the tiny scablike engravings, and was muttering something to herself as she ran the wand over each mark.

“Triad,” she decided. “It’s like a rotary lock, mechanically. There’s some combination that defuses the Lock enchantment. But you’d have to know the combination.”

“What?”

“The combination, the sealbreaker, the word that makes it unlock,” she said impatiently. “Whatever they set as the runic key.”

“Like ‘unlock,’ for instance?”

“That’s ridiculously simplistic. Who would use ‘unlock’ as a password?”

“This thing was built for plumbers, they’re not trying to wall it up like Gringotts. You’ve got the ingredients for it, there — the negating article, and two for the word, ‘lock,’ *laguz,* there, and *othal.”*

“Yes, but they’re on the same ring, so they can’t both be used in the combination. Besides, you’re trying a phonetic translation, that’s not proper form.”

“See again, *plumbers,* you think they’re cross-referencing with the Old English lexicon—?”

“I think that whoever knows runes well enough to engineer a triad seal *for* these plumbers you’ve so little respect for would probably know the correct translation of ‘unlock,’ Draco, yes!”

“Fine. Have it your way, but you’ll have to conjugate, I was arse deep in Sleeping Draughts the week we did all those sodding charts.”

“Hey? You lot?” Ron’s voice floated up the tunnel. “Something’s in here.”

“Probably fish,” called Hermione, hauling the first ring into place. “Keep an eye on it.”

“It’s not a fish. It’s — eugh!”

Splash. Ron jumped, and ripped his hand out of the water: it held a grindylow, which thrashed and writhed, its tiny pink tentacles slapping wetly and inertly at his arm. He thrust it away from his body, yelping.

“Grindylows!”

“Rats.” Hermione was still fixated on the seal. “Must’ve come in from the lake. Can you deal with them, Ron?”

“Reckon,” said Ron uncomfortably. He Stunned it and tossed it away with a wet *plorp.* “Not too keen on them if they swarm, you remember what Lupin said.”

“We only need a few minutes.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Another splash, and he grunted, wading up the tunnel. Now that he was paying attention, Draco noticed that the water had more chop than it did when they’d come in, still writhing white and foamy from the *Bombarda.* Three more grindylows encircled Ron’s ankles, and he ripped them out of the water, hurling them back up the pipe.

“Where’s thauris?” Hermione swept her wand over the seal. “Or is that wunjo? It’s so eroded I can’t tell.”

“Thauris, it’s curved.”

“Thought so too, but it’s missing a notch.”

“Guys?” Ron’s voice was louder. “Lot more of them.”

“Almost got it,” she called. “Babbling said simple triads use the infinitive, so we needn’t worry about subject agreement—”

“Guys!”

Something splashed, and something shrieked, and at least one was Ron. They whipped their heads around to see him vanish under the black water, covered in a circlet of churned foam. Hermione screamed.

Draco let go of the ladder and dropped. He landed in the water with a hard jolt and a small explosion of waves, stabbed his wand at the last place Ron had been, and cast *Relashio.*

Ron’s head thrust out of the water, spluttering furiously, while something enormous flipped and slithered back into the current.

“The hell was that?” Draco demanded, hauling him up.

“I dunno, but it wasn’t a grindylow,” he gasped. “It was bigger than me.”

Grindylows had started to swarm, their bony fingers pricking greedily at the bottom of Draco’s robes. He cut through them with a disgusted sweep of his wand, and they swam away, regrouping at the mouth of the tunnel.

“There’s something else in here, then.”

“I reckon,” breathed Ron, rubbing his wrists. “Whatever it is, it’s got fingers, and it wants us out. Nearly dragged me back into the tunnel.”

“You didn’t see it when it grabbed you?”

There was a long groan, and then something shuddered into place. A gust of steam shot up the pipe, spraying their faces with rancid hot air, and Draco hauled his shirt over his nose.

“How’s it going, Hermione?” Ron called bleakly, eyes watering.

“Good! It’s good! I’m close!”

The black water refused to grow still again. It thrashed and lapped at the sides of the tunnel, leaving fresh watermarks on the iron.

Draco frowned.

“Granger, how high was the tide when we got here?”

“I don’t know,” she called. Her voice was tinny. “My elbows, maybe?”

“It’s getting higher.”

The water lapped around his arms, soaking new stripes of his shirt. The current coming down from the lake was faster, more purposeful. The tunnel was filling.

“Oh, God,” said Ron thinly. “Great. We’re going to drown.”

“No we’re not, you louse, we’ll do a Bubble-Head.”

“Fat lot of good that’ll be when a sea monster sucks you under, idiot, it’s a concentration spell! Remember what happened to Fleur?”

“I’m not Fleur Delacour,” snapped Draco, but he spoke with more confidence than he felt. He’d never tried to do a Bubble-Head while under attack before.

“More’s the pity,” muttered Ron. “Now the last thing I see’s gonna be *your* weaselly face.”

“If that’s true, it’ll be because I strangled you before the water gets the chance.”

“Boys!” Hermione’s voice echoed sharply. “Do something about it, please!”

“Like what? Mione, it’s coming up, there’s no use—”

“For Pete’s sake! Shield Charm!” she cried. She turned away from the hatch, dangling from the ladder with one hand, and pointed at the tunnel. “Over the pipe, like a seal! The pressure will build, but you don’t have to hold it for long.” She wheeled back to the runes without waiting for agreement.

Ron squinted at her. “You can do a *waterproof* Shield Charm?”

“I can do an anything-proof Shield Charm,” she said absently. “That’s the point.”

It wasn’t even arrogance, just an absentminded statement of fact. Draco laughed, a little, just because she didn’t seem to hear herself. She wasn’t wrong, only egotistical, which was all the better.

The water rippled. Grindylows swarmed and then parted, as if split by an invisible edge, and something long and black rippled through the water toward them, arcing to and fro on a sinusoid curve.

“Shield Charm,” said Ron quickly, “shield, shield, Draco, shield—”

“Shut up! Hang on! Do you hear that?”

There was music drifting from somewhere; music in the water, a thin, warbling voice.

“What’s that?” said Ron.

Draco closed his eyes, briefly.

“Mermish,” he said.

He cast *Protego* as the mermaid surged from the water, eight feet of towering gray skin and a furious, ghoulish scream, the trident clutched in its skeletal fist.

The trident slammed into the shield and bounced off. The mermaid floundered back into the water, its tail beating thunder on the walls. The Shield held.

“Merlin’s fucking *sack!”*

“Calm down.”

“What the hell is that?”

“A mermaid.”

“What the hell’s it doing here?”

“She’s likely trying to chase us out,” Hermione called. “They’re tasked to defend the lake, and we’re not supposed to be here—”

“With a big fucking trident?”

“It could have killed you earlier and it didn’t,” he snapped. “So not only is it probably peaceful, it’s also incredibly good at resisting temptation.”

“Peaceful! Peaceful? Looked *peaceful* to you, did it?”

“I said ‘peaceful,’ not ‘pleasant,’ and have you noticed it hasn’t tried again?”

It hadn’t. The mermaid swirled in the water, its reptilian head just cresting the tide, glowering at them with its luminous, candle-yellow eyes. Its expression seemed faintly scolding.

“Thanks to your Shield Charm,” muttered Ron. “Give it a bonk on the head if it comes nearer, I don’t like the look of those teeth.”

The mermaid gave a shrieking bark, like the clap of a seal. Ron stumbled backward.

“I think the feeling’s mutual,” said Draco. “Granger, how’s it coming?”

“One circle left!”

“Grand. This thing wants to haul us out by the hair, and it’s got cavalry coming.”

Faint harmonies of music echoed queerly down the pipe, the echoes twisting into new pitches and striking new, gloomy minor chords.

The mer bucked out of the water, its teeth bared in a gravelly hiss. It slapped its hand against the Shield Charm, which buckled white, but held fast.

“Merlin,” swore Ron.

The mer blinked at Draco intently, a lightning shutter of transparent eyelids. It slapped the Charm again, twice, and let out another shriek.

There was another *Bombarda* on his tongue, this one well-suited for the task at hand. He could have cast it with a twitch. It was nothing to him if a mer lost a few fins, or if some grindylows were charred on the way up. Anything that stood between him and a healthy serving

of oxygen could well be seen as asking to be deprived of it, from his point of view.

And yet the mer was palpating the shield, not like it wanted to break it, but like it wanted to get his attention. Like it was knocking.

“It’s talking to us.”

“Yeah, and I’ll tell you what it’s saying,” said Ron. “‘Get out or I’ll bugger you with this pointy bit.’”

“No, you moron. Put your hand on the shield.”

“What?”

“It uses hand language. Put your hand on the shield.”

“What happens if your shield breaks?”

“Then it’ll be the funniest thing I ever did, and your twin brothers will write hymns to me once they’ve executed my murder. Do it, Ronald, it’s not going to break.”

Ron muttered something about tyranny and shuffled forward to press his palm gingerly against the shield. It flickered and warped around his fingers.

The mer reared up and slapped its hand against his, palms flush through the crackling layer of blue. It shrieked long and hard in Ron’s face, and he grimaced, leaning back, but kept his hand firm.

“Good. Now—” He tried to remember what Daphne had done. It had been so fast, and he hadn’t cared about it at the time, so he hadn’t thought to pay attention. “Touch your mouth. And then touch your palm.”

“Have you gone mad?”

“I’m sorry, are you busy? Do you have other things to be doing?”

Ron grumbled and obeyed him. It was clumsy, and not half as elegant as Daphne had done it, but the mer peered at him and gave a querulous croak.

“What does it mean?” muttered Ron.

“‘Help,’” said Draco.

The mer peered between them, and gave another suspicious shriek. It pointed a clawed finger at Draco.

He slowly touched two fingers to his lips.

“What is that? What are you saying?”

“No idea.” He spoke through his fingers. “But I suspect it’s ‘please.’”

The mer screamed, once more. Then she whirled and dove into the water. The snaking tip of her tail vanished into the current.

Distantly, the chorus of voices stopped swelling, and grew fainter, as if a roving band of carolers were moving away.

“Got it!”

Hermione’s cry of victory was swallowed by a shriek of metal. Golden bolts seared under the runes, and the hatch spun, the ancient tumblers rattling into place. When she pushed, it sprang free, pouring pale blue light into the tunnel from a hole in the ceiling so bright the world turned momentarily white.

“Finally!” Ron shouted. “Get up!”

Draco dispelled the Shield and clambered up the ladder, which was no easy task, dragging several stone of waterlogged clothes on arms that were already tired. He was faintly fatigued from spellcasting and filmed in scummy water, and when he hauled himself through the hatch, his arms gave a hard quake, not giving in, but warning him that the possibility was not so far as he might prefer.

Hermione was already there when he surfaced, grabbing his arms, trying to haul him up. Her strength being what it was, this failed to be of much help, but it was a comfort. He listed onto the ground and laid for a moment on his back on the damp grass as the air turned his wet clothes to a girdle of ice.

“Draco? Are you alright?”

Ron wrestled his way out and scrambled upright. “Damn,” he breathed, kicking it shut. “Think I’ll never swim again.”

Hermione prodded Draco again, fretfully. He groaned, waved her off, and rolled to his feet.

The walls of the maze cast deep shadows, and the wind moaned coolly between the hedges. Overhead there were no stars, only the blue glaze of the Anti-Enchantment Charm, like they were still suspended in some kind of subterranean realm.

The hatch swung closed with a cold toll like a steel bell. A black flutter of ravens lifted from one of the hedges and rose baying into the dead blue sky.

They were in the Third Task.

-Viktor's brother is speaking Bulgarian, which is written in Cyrillic script. The exchange, if you're wondering, is basically what you think it is.

-Harry is thinking of "paean," but he's trying.

-I always thought it was funny that in Chamber of Secrets, they could get the whole plot from one piece of paper with a word on it. Like, if that was all I had to go on, I would be wildly out of my depth. Even Hermione had to go to the library; that sort of riddling is pretty far-fetched.

-And we're off!! Thank you so, so, so much to all the love and encouragement — it's the reason I stay posting. Incredible love to all of you. I hope you have your favorite dessert soon this week.

-Next chapter: "The Triwizard Cup." In which we see what our respective champions are made of.

The Triwizard Cup

Chapter 53: The Triwizard Cup

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The race through the maze was stiff competition for the worst thing he'd ever done for Harry Potter. It was worse than any he'd ever done for any other reason, too, though those adventures were far and in between, being that he had only one friend who was this much goddamn work to keep, and really, he would've saved a lot of time and effort if he'd bought a cat.

Tendrils of Devil's Snare sprouted from beneath the hedges and lunged for his ankles, and he cleared these with blasts of *Confringo* that would've had Neville weeping. Sap and something viscous splattered on his trousers and he knew he'd have to burn them, likely on a funeral pyre, and if he was lucky he wouldn't be wearing them when they lit it.

If he was very, very lucky.

So he ran.

Through dark corridors of trawling vines and narrow blind corners, tight thorny archways that ripped at his shirt, ducking into and out of an alleyful of Blast-Ended Skrewts, running at such a pace that his breath turned to a constant harsh drumroll in his throat, Hermione's shirt fluttering in his periphery like a frantic white dove, the warm scent of spring on the grass and smoke from somewhere and above it all the silence, the intolerable fucking silence, the silence like a kettledrum that said *no one can hear you scream—*

He rounded a corner and almost stepped into a jet of red light.

The kettledrum broke with a shrill scream. He hauled around and shoved Hermione back with an arm that nearly sent her flying — but

she had her wand out, and the Shield fountained in front of them, deflecting the second curse of Fleur Delacour.

Fleur wasn’t well. Thick columns of blood trailed both nostrils, and her nose was crooked, the cartilage bent where something unforgiving had been introduced to it. When she screamed, rivulets laced her teeth. Long bolts of her flaxen hair was crusted with a rind of dark red clots. It was rather like a grotesque painting from one of those nasty bastards in the Baroque movement, the ones who liked killing almost as much as naked women.

“D'où viens-tu!” she screamed. “Quelqu'un m'a attaqué! Il a essayé de me tuer! J'aurais pu mourir, tu m'entends? Quel genre de misérable putain d'école—”

“Fleur!” Hermione ducked under Draco’s arm and tripped forward, hands aloft in pacification. “Oh, God, what happened to you?”

“Qu'est-ce qui m'est arrivé, putain de crétin insipide? J'ai embrassé un dragon! Imbecile!”

“Alright, that translates, but If you hold still, I can do something about —”

“Do not touch! Je vais crier si tu me touches, je ne peux pas le supporter!” Fleur tipped back her head and let out a long, tearful wail. “Où est ma mère? Je veux aller a la maison!” She started sobbing, deep ugly heaving sobs that brought new volumes of blood out of her nose. Hermione made an appalled sound.

Draco grabbed Fleur by the wrist and hauled her around. She screamed, and he plucked the wand from her hand.

“Fermez-la. Ressaisissez-vous. Ce n'est pas le théâtre,” he snapped, and stabbed her wand back at her.

She gasped herself into apoplexy, and then fell blessedly silent.

“Thank you,” said Hermione. “Now — Fleur, what happened to you?”

“A wizard,” she said stonily. “’E comez out of nowhere, a big man, and ’e curses me. And ’e breaks een my noze — PAF! — my beautiful noze! I am ruined, my face is *ruined*— ” Her mouth wobbled. She daubed at her lips and then spat. A red gobbet sailed into the grasses.

“None of that,” said Draco curtly. “What wizard? What did he look like?”

“I do not know! ’E wore a mask, I did not see his face!”

“A white mask?”

“Zhis is not fair! We were not told zhere would be wizards hunting us!”

“There aren’t,” said Ron grimly. “The Tournament’s off. The Task’s over. You have to get out.”

“What? Why? Why are you telling me zhis, and why eez it only you here? Where iz Madam Maxime? Where iz Dumbledore?”

“We don’t know,” said Hermione, with diminishing patience. “Outside, probably. They’ve closed the entrances, the maze is walled off. Fleur, listen to me. You have to get out of here. The man you saw was a Death Eater. Everyone is in danger.”

Fleur stared at her dazedly. “You are ze golden girl,” she said. “You came to ze Ball. With Viktor.”

“What? Yes! No! It doesn’t matter! Are you deaf? There are men in this maze who want to kill Harry, and believe me, they won’t hesitate to kill you, too!”

“They – they do?” She blinked. “Why?” she said, and her voice was harder, almost brittle, as if it were a personal annoyance.

“Because they’re shits,” said Ron calmly, standing up. “Because if you could bottle Harry’s luck, you’d have a weapon of mass destruction. We don’t know. It doesn’t matter. You have to go.”

She frowned, and rose to her feet. “No,” she said. “I cannot. ’Arry cannot die. I do not permit zhat.”

Hermione choked. “Oh, you don’t?”

“Non! He saved Gabrielle. I ’ave,” she said, “a debt.”

“No. You don’t. Really! He wouldn’t think so. Go! Right now! It would make it easier, in fact!”

“I do not know how they do zhese things in Britain,” she said haughtily, “but I ’ave my honor to think of. I will fight for ’im, as ’e fought for Gabrielle. I will find zhese terrible men in masks — these weak, pathetic, *cowardly* men, who do not show their fazez to fight! — and I will avenge my nose. And you will not zay of me, ‘zhat Fleur, she eez weak, and shallow, and zhinks only of ’erself.’ No, you will not! Zhey will zay: ‘Fleur Delacour, she eez brave, and good, and she did not forget zhe kindness zhat was shown to her!’”

Her chest heaved. She whirled on her heel and marched deeper in the maze with the panache of someone at the vanguard of the July Rebellion.

Hermione’s jaw dropped. She stalked after her.

“Fleur, you know he didn’t *actually* save her, right?” They followed, more or less from necessity, because it was the only path ahead. “The Second Task was on a timer. They weren’t going to kill her if you failed, that was never an option.”

“And ’ow you know zhat, I will be *fazzinated* to ’ear!”

“I know because I was in there with her!” Hermione was belligerent. “Are you listening to me? You’re putting your life in danger!”

The path winnowed and plunged under a gated archway of wrought-iron. Through the gnarled braids of iron wove a brilliant pepper of blue-and-yellow flowers, percolating fragrance, like the passage into a fairy garden. There were no hinges, nor handles, but the gate clearly was meant to be opened: the path continued on the other side, swallowed by gray mist.

“Zis eez a puzzle,” said Fleur, which made Draco begin to doubt the use of bringing her along.

Hermione drew her wand and used it to prod one of the flowers, which sighed a spring of yellow pollen at her touch. “Do you suppose there’s a pattern to the flowers?” she wondered. “Like a combination, or a code? I — oh, *yuck.”*

She whisked her hand back. The skin where the pollen touched started to flush and crack, beading little scabs of dead skin like sheddings of soap. Hermione made a panicked noise and smacked it off.

“It’s acid!”

“Technically, eet eez a base,” said Fleur, peering through the wrought-iron. “Ze acids hurt when you touch zem. Ze basez are more dangerous, for zey do not hurt, but zey will shred ze skin from your ’ands before you will even notice.”

Draco snatched Hermione’s wrist and cast a Scouring Charm. The pollen scattered, along with a skein of dead skin that fluttered into the wind. She sucked a breath through her teeth, and his stomach turned.

“Alright?”

“Fine.”

Fleur hopped up and down. “Oh! Eet eez a riddle!”

“Oh, good,” muttered Hermione. “The last one we had was a real treat.”

He tilted his head. “Do you think we solve this one the same way?”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

There was a plaque inset into the center of the gate, engraved with ornate script.

Halfway up the hill, I see thee at last

Lying beneath me with thy sounds and sights —

A city in the twilight, dim and vast,

with smoking roofs, soft bells, and gleaming lights.

Fleur peered at it. “Hm. Eet eez not very clear, non? What eez zhe hill? And why can you not see it before?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Hermione said shortly. “It’s a riddle, it’s not supposed to make sense. They don’t actually give you clues, because the point isn’t to help you solve them, it’s to suggest a plausible relationship *post facto* —”

“Eet eez lying beneath you… why beneath?” Fleur tapped her wand against her mouth, thoughtfully. “Why repeat zhat? And why is only zhe city in twilight? Why eez zhe speaker not also?”

“Because it was written by someone who didn’t care about narrative continuity. Listen, I think a good Freezing Charm and a Blasting Curse should be able to get us through here, we just need to check for holding runes. Ron, can you see—?”

“Aha!” Fleur snapped her fingers. “Ze past!”

The arms of the gate shrieked and pried apart. Each reaching curl of iron unwound and wriggled like it was a living tendril, transforming the complex lattice of metalwork into a writhing knot, like an anemone. The flowers shuddered and disappeared in tiny detonations of yellow dust.

“No,” said Hermione. “No. Really? That’s all? That’s absurd!”

“Jealous,” he said.

“I’m not! I’m just saying there’s *no* way to infer that from the riddle itself!”

“Eet eez not about inferenze, *cyprin.* You must think abstractly, creatively. Ze riddle,” said Fleur, with relish, “eez about ze observation of possibility.”

“I’m observing several possibilities right now,” Hermione muttered, and stomped after Fleur into the passageway.

They had made it only a few steps into the next corridor when a figure appeared in the fog. It was Cassius Warrington.

He came striding around the corner, his wand still glowing from the remnant of its last spell, and at the sight of Fleur, he barked and dropped at once into a dueling stance.

“Delacour!”

“Oh, perfect,” hissed Hermione.

“This git,” said Ron aggressively.

“Warrington,” Fleur said coolly. “Allo.”

“The devil are they doing here?” His wand skated from Ron, to Hermione, to Draco. His grip tightened. “Malfoy?”

Draco drew his wand and rolled it through his fingers. He narrowed his eyes.

Nobody would know. One curse, and they'd be the only ones to know. Could say it was a Death Eater. None the wiser, really.

"You'll be disqualified," Cassius told Fleur, his voice reverberating queerly in the gloom. He was faintly excited. "Once I tell them about this, you'll be done for. It's against the rules to get help in the Tournament."

"Zhe Tournament?" demanded Fleur. "Zhere eez no Tournament, you gormless shit."

"I *beg* your pardon?"

She gestured at the three of them. "Look around! 'Ave you not seen zhe men in here? Zhe Task is finished! Eet eez over! We must band togezzer, and escape!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said stiffly. His wand stayed level with his eyes. "If this is some sort of ploy, it's failing."

"Eet eez not a ploy! Ridiculous boy! Look at me! I was attacked!"

"Yes, that's clear. Your struggles in the Task are your own misfortune, not mine. What's not clear is why you felt the need to invite three children—"

"Children!" cried Ron. "Rich!"

"—into the Task with you, perhaps because your own magic isn't enough—"

"Ow dare you!"

"—to do the same work as real wizards, which isn't surprising—"

Fleur spat on his shoe. Cassius snarled and brandished his wand.

“Wouldn’t do that, Warrington.”

Cassius curled his lip at Draco, who rolled his wand through his fingers.

“What?”

“Flora Carrow,” he said. “Running around the dungeons looking like a vampire went after her. It’s the sort of information I’d want to keep contained, personally.”

“...That’s all?” He arched his eyebrows. “This is how you threaten me, Malfoy? A handful of — what? Vague insinuations?”

“You’re committing an indiscretion. I think your father might be interested to know about that.”

“You think my father gives a damn what I do behind closed doors? What licentious rumors my enemies care to spread are of no interest to anyone of substance.”

“Which is why you took such pains to hide it.”

Cassius shrugged. “Fine,” he said drolly. “Shout it from the rooftops, see if I care. It’s her reputation at risk, not mine. *She’s* a young woman of no prospects; really, Malfoy, you can hurt her if you like, but don’t imagine you’re touching me at all.”

Draco tilted his head and examined his face, the square set of his jaw, the pinched set of his mouth.

“You’re lying.”

“You’re free to think so.”

“And it still wouldn’t matter. Being a rake isn’t the headline you want running alongside the picture of you with the Triwizard Cup.”

“No?” Cassius smiled indulgently. “I quite agree. Which is why it’s terribly convenient that Flora will deny anything you say about it, like the good girl she is. And if you suggest anything she wouldn’t agree with, then I imagine a lot of newspapers will find all sorts of interesting things to do with the fact that you took a *lycanthrope* to the Yule Ball.” His smile widened. “And did a bit more, as I hear it.”

Ron gave a hard exhale. Draco’s fingers found the handle of his wand, and it stilled on the last spin.

“You’re a slimy little toad,” said Hermione.

Cassius quirked his eyebrow at her. “And you’re nothing,” he said indifferently. “I suppose you think I’ll take offense at that, but I can’t, because you’re not even real.”

“Warrington—”

“Your magic is an act of theft.”

“My magic is *mine,”* she said, with an awful little tremor.

It ought to be a hanging offense, that tremor. Or worse.

“You’re at this school on the charity of men like me.”

“No—”

“And when everything is sorted out,” he said calmly, “they’re going to send you back to your shack, or your cave, or whatever it is, where the other muggles live, and I’ll expect you to thank us for the privilege of borrowing our magic. Because it is, you know. A privilege.” He flicked his wand at her. “In fact, you ought to start now. Say ‘thank you.’”

“Stop eet,” said Fleur harshly. “Be quiet. Horrible boy!”

“Say ‘thank you, Cassius,’” he said, stepping forward. “‘Thank you for the magic.’ Say that, why don’t you? You’re rather clever, after all;

you only need to learn to mind your manners. Maybe I'll tell my father to take you on as a secretary. Might even let you have robes, like a real witch, instead of those little skirts that muggles wear—"

"Ulceratio."

The jinx was fast. Too fast for him to see it, let alone dodge. Draco had a fast hand.

Snape's curse was a dark salmon pink, like raw meat, and unlike the glitter of a normal spell, its body was thick, viscous, almost muscular in shape. He didn't have time to examine it before it collided with Cassius's cheek.

Sores blossomed on the side of Cassius's face, wide wet weeping red pustules that scrambled over the skin like a hungry parasite. They swallowed his cheek and one ballooned over his eye, swelling it shut, while his shriek was garbled by the white pustules exploding on his mouth. Draco's second jinx was the same, only lower, spreading the rash of bubbling flesh down his throat, and he savored the scream for a rare moment of pure satisfaction at a good hit, the clean running-water sensation of magic moving through his body like it was a river and he was the dam, the channel, the source of power.

Also, he now knew what his godfather did in his spare time, and it was horrifying.

Cassius went down on a knee, his hand palpating the sticky horror of his face. He gave a strangled whine, and Fleur said, "Mon *dieu,"* in hushed tones. Then she hurried forward and Stunned him. He toppled over with a groan of what might have been relief.

"Merlin," said Ron faintly. Hermione had one hand over her mouth, her expression unreadable.

Draco ran his wand over his fingers. The power and the anger still danced like lightning over the surface of his skin, a lovely little waltz that looked at the Dark curse unfolding and thought, *lovely, lovely,*

lovely . Lovely like Hermione when she got a spell right for the first time, lovely like pulling out of a dive. Lovely and deserved.

Not a real person… those little skirts.

There was a well in the bottom of his stomach and when he looked into it there was no bottom, and he wondered what would happen if he slipped into it, went deeper, reached for other spells he'd read in those books. Now he knew he could do it, with just a wand and a whisper and the still reservoir of rage in his navel.

"Draco."

It was Hermione's voice, so he listened. She was sheet-pale, and that wasn't necessary, was it? He hadn't done anything wrong.

"What?"

"What was *that?"*

"It's a Boils Jinx," he lied. "Sixth year Charms."

She stared at him.

"Flitwick teaches that?" she said, and it was about as credulous as it ought to have been.

"I'm not a sixth year. I wouldn't know."

While she struggled to decide whether to call his bluff, he sheathed his wand and walked away. His heart was hammering. He could feel her watching his back.

Ron and Fleur were fussing over Cassius's body, rolling him onto his side.

"We cannot leave 'im like zhis. 'E will be attacked."

"Yeah, here's hoping."

“Ronald! ’E is a bad man, but we must not let ‘im die!”

“Somehow, I don’t think the Death Eaters are gonna go after him.”

“Even so,” she said throatily, “ze maze eez full of ozzer creatures. Zere are scorpions, occamies, redcaps — I ‘ave seen zhem. Zhey will not ‘esitate. If ze Blast-Ended Skrewts come for ’im, ’e is defenseless.”

“Might be good for his character,” said Ron. “You never know.”

There was a faint shout, muffled by distance and fog. All stood at attention.

“Who’s that? Can you tell?” Hermione peered into the distance.

“We should hurry,” said Ron.

Green lights danced at the other end of the path, not spells, but the reflected glow of one against the dark hedge-wall. Shouts and roars of an animal that wasn’t human, and one animal that definitely was, more or less in the same amount of pain. Lights peppering the wall like the reflection of a fireworks display, and then an explosion, followed by screams plural and voices slightly less plural, signs of a pyrrhic victory.

“Death Eaters,” whispered Hermione. “We have to run—”

“Oh, Merlin,” said Ron, in a high-pitched voice. “Oh, Merlin, Merlin. Those were green lights. D’you think…?”

“Who cares, who cares! We still have to go! Hurry, hurry!”

“What! And leave ’im ’ere?” said Fleur, gesturing to Cassius.

“Yes,” said Hermione, bluntly, and for a moment Draco felt something in his chest that was very sharp and bright and pleasant, a sort of cutting pride — she was in fine form like this, cutting off a worthless bit of deadweight who would’ve left her to die, free at last of that

pesky *all-souls-on-board* streak that would shackle her to the sinking boat — but then she said, “They won’t bother with him if they’re in a hurry. Probably.”

“Getting closer,” said Ron reedily. “Pretty fast, actually, maybe we should run—”

“We can’t make it.”

“Well damn, Mione, I guess we shouldn’t try!”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it!”

“No,” interrupted Fleur. “You will. But you must ’urry. I will hold zhem off.”

“Absolutely not,” said Hermione, although her tone suggested her concerns were probabilistic, not moral.

“Yes. I am ze finest witch at Beauxbatons. I will hold zhem for a while.”

“You don’t understand what you’re offering, Fleur. These aren’t students. They’re grown wizards, and they could kill you.”

Fleur drew herself up to her full height, which was not considerable, but still taller than Draco had initially thought. He remembered her at the drawing ceremony, all of none and zero inches, tripping down the aisle like four solid ounces of ballerina, and it seemed that he was recalling a different person altogether. She was no one’s ornament. She had approximately a third of the blood in her body worn on her face like war paint, half the nose she used to, and the distinctly red-eyed glower of a girl not so far removed, genetically speaking, from a Dark creature as anyone else in the outing.

In short, she was precisely the kind of person you might want between yourself and any sort of trouble.

“I hope zhat zhey will try,” she said.

“That’s not — oh, fine, but Fleur — if it gets bad, you have to run, alright? Don’t be stupid.”

Fleur nodded. “Fly fast, *cyprin, mon chou,”* she said. “Be quick. Get to ’Arry.”

“Yes’m,” said Ron, and then blushed furiously when she kissed his cheek.

“Go,” she cried, “run!” And standing, she spun a long, glittering charm in the air over her and Cassius, forming a silver ball.

“A hemispherical Shield Charm,” said Hermione, wondrous. “Those are… I can’t believe it. They’re impossibly difficult. The theory alone…”

“Yeah, almost like she’s good at this or something,” said Ron. He grabbed her arm and hauled her along. “C’mon, we’ve got a job to do.”

Their job, by joint understanding, was *run like hell.* Their job was *move, yesterday,* and Draco executed it with vigor. He didn’t even remember which turns he took, whether they were doubling back or getting any closer to the maze center, and he shamed Mad-Eye by not checking his corners. By his thinking, whatever was ahead couldn’t be worse than the cost of slowness. He might’ve been wrong about that, but he was lucky enough that it didn’t matter.

The maze was an eerie lattice of corridors, dark and narrow and misty without exception, and they swallowed echoes to the point where space itself seemed to twist sound; the distance between each turn felt unreal and inconsistent. Sounds came spearing out of the night and then vanished. Something about the unique poison of adrenaline and dread stifled conversation; perhaps they were all silently afraid of drawing attention. When they hit dead ends he didn’t even bother to speak, just snarled and whirled into the nearest corridor they hadn’t taken, Hermione hissing curses a half-step behind him. Sometimes he would stall and let her run into him at

corners and junctions. The combination of sharp pressure and reprimand when she stepped into his back was a comfort as much as it was a precaution. The clasp of her fingers on his wrist when she shoved his arm out of the way to duck her head around a corner. It reminded him of running through the Forbidden Forest on a night like this one, nearly a year ago, her hand slippery and tight in his.

In the fug of focus and tension some part of his brain whirled and demanded of its other: *Really, now? Here?* And the other part replied, in a whinging voice: *Yes, always, everywhere.*

Besides which, if he was about to round the corner into an Unforgivable, he would do it having had as much as he could of the things he wanted in life. One of them being Hermione's firm insistent little hands pushing up against his back, and the soft rasp of breath against her set teeth, and the impatient little exhale that she made of his name.

Not that he had ever been all too strong in the muscle of self-restraint, but he was certainly not about to develop it here.

It was abnormal how fast they could move. It was the Third Task, and he would have expected something to leap out of the bushes and try to decapitate him, or at least get a few hits in before moving along. He'd read up on previous Tournaments, the sorts of things administrators liked to line up for the grand finale — runespoors and occamies and chimerae, just the sort of nasty customers he'd grown distressingly adept at imagining — but the maze was clear as a duke's garden, simply endless rows of darkness and the beckoning fingers of mist. This was highly suspicious, and he said as much.

"Don't jinx it," muttered Ron. His voice was thin and tinny in the fog. "Maybe they've gone to eat someone else."

"That isn't comforting," hissed Hermione.

"It's not *not* comforting," said Draco, thinking of Krum.

Something scuttled around the corner. It was a newborn fire salamander, barely large enough to muster a puff of smoke, but when it skittered across Draco's shoe he sucked air through his teeth and hiked his leg back as if bitten. This he elected to blame on poor visibility and the general atmosphere of creep, but it also stalled him at a junction, and in that time Hermione stopped dead like a startled bird, her hand aloft, stalling movement.

The susurrus of wind through the branches cleared and coalesced into human murmur.

"...find him in all…"

"...told to give us a map…"

"...a *moving* maze…"

Hermione took a half-step back, gesturing frantically for them to retreat, but the whispers abruptly cut.

"Wot — OI!"

"Reducto!"

"BOMBARDA!"

"Stupefy!"

Spells crackled in a blaze of light around the corner, and then there were three soft thuds. Quick footsteps stirred the rustling grass.

"Behind me," said Hermione firmly, her wand up, and there was a bit of blue light at the end that foretold a Shield Charm; and with a noise of irritation, Draco grabbed her arm to haul on it, because she was properly mad if she thought he was going *behind* anything — him having a better arm than she had, and also being of no mind to watch her get mowed down the first time she met a spell stronger than a fifteen-year-old's ability to cast *Protego.*

None of which came to pass: Viktor Krum stepped around the corner and let out an exclamation.

“Hermiown?”

“Viktor!” Hermione exclaimed.

“Vat are you doing? You are not supposed to be—”

“I know! It’s off. The Tournament is off. The Task’s compromised—”

“I know this,” he interrupted, patiently. “I haf just Stunned three men. This is not in order. Vat is going on?”

“Death Eaters are trying to kill Harry, we’re trying to stop them, I know it’s a lot but we don’t have much time—”

Viktor frowned. “Death Eater?”

“Bad men in masks who want to kill us for reasons that are complicated but not particularly relevant right now, and we’re running, you should go—”

“Harry Potter, they are trying to kill?” His expression darkened. “Your friend, Harry Potter?”

“Do you know others?” said Draco.

Viktor ignored him. “Harry Potter vill not be harmed,” he said stonily. “Ve must find him.”

“Yes! What?” Hermione blinked. “Why? I mean, I know why — it’s rather selfless of you, of course, but I didn’t think you two—”

“He is coming to help me. Vhen the First Task is still ahead. He comes to me, for nothing, and he tells me of the dragons. For vhat? No return. Who is he? A child. And still he is vorried for his rival of seventeen. The other man, Varrington, he is not doing this.

Varrington, he is doing his duty, and only that. He is serving his country only."

"Could have this conversation on the move," said Ron, edging away. "A movable thing, this conversation."

Viktor ignored him. "For Potter, it does not matter. He is only a boy trying to protect another boy. Of me, he is thinking: 'He is Bulgarian, and my enemy, and but I vill try to help him, for because it is right thing to do.' Vell. He is right. This is as great athletes do, I am thinking. This is sportsmanship."

"A questionable decision, since this may get him killed," said Draco, thinly. "And us, too, come to think of it."

Far from being offended, Viktor nodded. "For you, I am sorry. You have had no choice in this. Great misfortune. Vould it vere not this way. But I chose this task. I am the champion. I put my name into the fire." He drew himself upright. "Harry Potter will not die tonight. You have the word of Viktor Krum."

He cast *Lumos,* and sent its beam sailing into the dark.

"Onvard," he ordered.

Onward they went.

At the mouth of a wide circular junction they approached with more care than was necessary, since the space's only population was corpses. Six of them, to be precise, all lizardly little things with wide mouths and mushrooms sprouting around their backs, arrayed in the limp sprawl of deadness, half of them in states too bad to identify.

"Dugbogs," said Ron. "Hagrid had us doing them."

"Thank you for that. I had taken them for kittens."

"How d'you reckon Harry did this?" Ron probed through the clearing, astonished. "I wouldn't think… he loved these things, tried to teach

one to fetch."

"It's not Harry, it's the Death Eaters," murmured Hermione absently. She was checking the next courtyard for traps. "Trying to clear a path for him, I'd expect."

Ron touched one with the tip of his shoe. "You don't even have to kill them," he said sadly. "Hagrid taught us the tricky bit. You just bop 'em on the snout, they go stiff as a board."

Draco flicked a glance at one, and cut through the clearing. No use dwelling on it.

They broke into a run. A choice of paths ahead winnowed to one with Hermione's whisper of " *Point me,"* which cut them due north, through a volley of arrows that loosed at a height perfect to cull any healthy seventeen-year-old — enough for Viktor and Ron, anyway, though because Hermione reached it first, they triggered a hair too soon — and under coiling arms of Devil's Snare, which erupted from the side of the hedge to meet a swift end with her *"Incendio!"*

By and by, when she cut ahead a ways, Viktor checked that she was enough ahead to struggle hearing behind her, and touched Draco's arm.

"What?"

"You," he said. "I haf not known your name until now. But you are Malfoy."

"This isn't really the time, Durmstrang."

"She speaks of you very highly," said Viktor seriously. "Herm-own."

"Of course she does," he said tartly, "she's got a brainstem and an optic nerve. Now, about running—"

"I am vishing to make your acquaintance," he said, "because of how she is talking about you. But I am not knowing I haf made it already."

“Listen, if there’s a point to any of this—”

“I know you are not liking me very much,” said Viktor calmly. “And that you are not liking me because you are not liking that I am friendly vith her. I am understanding some things. I am also having vat you call ‘brainstem’ and ‘optic nerve.’”

Draco had nothing to say to that. He kept walking, briskly, and silently, in the hopes that Viktor could learn by example.

“But I am trying to know her friends, as vell. I am not having many friends,” he admitted freely, “except for team. I am flying too much often for that.”

“That’s your misfortune.”

“So I am thinking, you come to Bulgaria vith her,” he said, “and come see game. Ve vill play — vat you call it, here? ‘Friendly’? In off season. She says you fly. She says you are a good flier.” Then, slightly nonplussed: “ *Very* good, she says. She is alvays remembering it.”

“Does she,” he said, coolly. Then, with all the suspicion it was due: “That’s not a real invitation, I take it.”

His brow furrowed. Or furrowed more, rather. It was hard to alter something that was already one contiguous caterpillar of woe. “I am not being this insincere person,” he said, with more offense than Draco had ever managed to inflict before. “I am not making offers that are not good. You come vith her to Bulgaria. You vatch. You fly. Ve talk. Ve drink. Ve vill come to know each other.”

“Are you serious?”

“I vish to know you,” he said simply. “She is saying you are man vorth knowing. Good man.”

Draco tilted his head and probed his cheek with his tongue.

“Well, it’s perjury, if it’s not slander.”

“Vat?”

“Never mind. If we survive this, then I’d be delighted to go to Bulgaria, though I want it stated for the record that I shall be most unsurprised if an owl somehow mislays that invitation.”

“Vat do you mean?”

“I mean that you’re not subtle, either,” he said irritably. “I’m not eager to act as chaperone on your — *courting* holiday, and I don’t imagine I’ll be welcome there, either.”

Viktor blinked at him. His eyes were wide and dark as coffee grounds, the fine soft ones fresh out of the grinder, the ones that glittered.

“She is kind,” he said. “She is speaking to me in library, and I am thinking: she is not afraid. She is not vanting anything except to speak, and haf me listen. This is how it is, to haf a friend. You understand.”

“Daring of you.”

“You are understanding,” he urged. “Ve see it both. Every day of my life, the vorld is like this.” He laced his hands together. “But vhen she is speaking, the vorld is like this.” He spread them out, fingers splayed.

“...I’ve no idea what you mean.”

“You do. You are not liking me, because I see vhat you see, and you think I am vanting to take it for myself. No. I am not like this. I do not vant to take her away.” Viktor smiled, tentatively, like his face wasn’t used to it and was afraid of hurting itself. “I vant to come in.”

Draco was quiet.

Because that showed what he knew, really. Showed the colossal, hateful innocence of one Viktor Krum, a seventeen-year-old quidditch star who still somehow managed not to acquire any sense for what other people thought, because that wasn't what Draco felt at all.

If he could have said anything to Viktor — at any rate, anything that he could live with, and anything that didn't run the risk of being overheard — it would be that he was wrong. Wrong in his assumptions, wrong in his suspicions of some good-natured core of him that was soft and sweet and only wanted the best for her, and would just roll over and pant and share with as many people as she pleased. It wasn't like that, his feeling.

He *did* want to take her away. He wanted to put her somewhere that the world couldn't do anything to do with and hoard her up, every smile, every laugh, every single wink and smirk and nice thing she ever said, all of them only for him, and the worst part was it still wouldn't leave him anything but starving. Which was the whole fucking problem.

He wasn't like Viktor Krum. He didn't want things the same way this boy did, apparently, which was so fucking wholesome butter wouldn't melt. He was a Malfoy. He took the things he wanted. He didn't give them back.

Hermione ducked against the next corner and glared at them, jerking her head: *Hurry up!*

Viktor hurried up. Draco hung back, striding a heartbeat slower than he could have, because he knew it would annoy her. And because then he'd have another thing that Viktor didn't, another one of those expressions, the *could-have-done-it-faster* meets *glad-you-did-it-at-all.* And that was his. It was a glare for him. She didn't let anyone else get away with it.

Around the corner, there was a cobblestone courtyard, and upon a stone plinth at its center stood a silver cup. It was nearly Harry's

height, smithed from crystal, and glowed faintly with an ethereal light at the center of the maze. There was no one in the courtyard.

“Thank God,” said Hermione, faint with relief. “We’re in time.”

“Don’t jinx it.” He crept into the courtyard and swept his wand around each of the branching lanes, probing them with *Lumos.* “He could’ve run into someone else. Oi— *don’t you dare.”*

Viktor paused, one foot on the plinth, and tore his awestruck stare away from the cup. “Is beautiful,” he said. “Goblin-make. You can tell, by the striations.”

“What striations?” said Hermione curiously.

“My father, he is vorking as metalsmith. He is showing me. Come, come.” He beckoned her.

“Get away from that,” Draco snapped. “It’s a Portkey.”

“Portkey?”

“Yes. It’s a trap for Potter. Touch it, and you’re dead.”

Viktor took back his hand and rubbed it, glancing guiltily at the cup.

Draco turned his back. He shook out his wand and cast *Incendio* up one of the lanes, setting the grass on fire. Within seconds, tendrils of Devil’s Snare struggled out of the lawn, wriggling for freedom in the dense thicket of the maze walls. Hermione and Viktor were inspecting the Cup, and began discussing something about goblin-silver in low voices.

Fatigue was beginning to settle in. He’d used enough magic that day that his body was faintly warm, with whispers of energy drifting over his skin in an unpleasant crackle, like he was a rapidly disappearing fuse. The strain of casting another Shield Charm would be considerable.

Ron gave a shout. Draco whirled around.

Three figures appeared at the end of the path. They were tall and hooded — he mistook them for Dementors, until he saw the glimmer of bone-white over their faces.

His innards turned to cold water.

The three of them broke into a run. The first brought back his wand — who were they? — and yellow light clustered at the tip — at least it wasn't green — and loosed it in a bolt that soared across the courtyard — Travers? Avery? — and he was the last one to duck, when Ron screamed at him, but he did so, leaping sideways and slapping ungracefully onto the stone.

Yellow magic shattered into the maze wall and set it on fire. Flames billowed up the side of the maze, belching smoke, while the thick scent of burning greenery rose over the clearing.

The Death Eaters were a wall of black gliding down the lane. In his throat there was a knot of something so large and thick it hurt, and it left his lungs burning. Who were they? Igor Karkaroff? Sibelius Nott? Runcorn? Snape?

In the cold gleam of the mask there was nothing, no humor, no mercy, not even a pair of eyes to seek for understanding when they cut you down. And he understood, for perhaps the first time, why they wore them. Not for cowardice, but for strength.

You couldn't plead with a piece of bone.

It's me, I'm Draco, I'm a Malfoy. You knew my father, you served him.

And what would they say? He wasn't Cassius Warrington. He could have been, but he wasn't anymore.

More flames ripped up the sides of the maze, springing from the wands of the other two Death Eaters. The first reached the clearing

and pointed his wand at Viktor, who drew his own, grim-faced, and settled into a crouching, eastern dueling stance.

The other two came into the courtyard like a creeping ink stain, nearly silhouetted against the flickering flames. The handle of his wand was a sharp line in his palm, and he couldn't remember a single spell, not one, that would work. The terror was poison. It made him feel dead.

"Clear the altar."

The voice from behind the mask — he was pathetically relieved — it wasn't Snape. It was a deep, nasal Sussex, and he didn't know it. Not that he long dwelled on it, because the man lifted his wand.

"Serpens—"

"Stupefy!"

Something darted out of another path, dark and blurred. The Death Eater sidestepped the red light, letting it sail harmlessly into the flames, but its caster shot into the courtyard and skidded to a halt in front of Hermione, his wiry shoulders heaving with effort.

"Potter!"

"Harry!" roared Ron.

He was scratched and bleeding a bit from his cheek, with all manner of twigs and leaves in his hair, like he'd escaped a rather cutthroat production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* but otherwise, he was patently whole. One of the Death Eaters surged forward, but then — it surprised Draco — the other, their leader, threw out his hand and stopped him.

Then a Death Eater crooked his wand, and blue light forked like lightning over the clearing. Harry whipped around and rolled upright,

casting two Stunning Spells like a one-two punch over his shoulder, and skidded around to Draco.

“Alright, Draco?” he shouted, half-wild.

“Me?”

“Yeah! You! Not hurt? *No! Hermione—”*

Hermione’s Shield Charm exploded into force at the center of the field, catching the bulk of a curse that was red and nastily viscous. Viktor was dueling one of the Death Eaters in a deadlock on the other side of the courtyard, their wands moving in almost inverse motions of spell and counterspell, like a remote ballet at lightspeed.

“Don’t touch the Cup,” Draco snarled. He grabbed Harry’s collar and shook him. “Listen to me. *Don’t touch the Cup.”*

“Merlin’s taint, *really?* No shit, I’ve got other things on my mind!”

“That’s not—”

The ground of the courtyard surged and rippled in a shockwave. Viktor’s Death Eater had cast a spell. Bodies flew: Harry’s, who was tossed freely into the air, like he was on an invisible broomstick; Ron, who flipped and landed hard on his stomach; Hermione sailed into one of the maze-walls, and the quick use of a Cushioning Charm stopped her face from being shredded on twigs. Draco backhanded another one on the ground beneath her, and she dropped safely into a round of shattered cobble.

One of the Death Eaters pointed at Harry. He didn’t seem to say anything, just extended one long gloved finger across the burning courtyard, like Death marking out the next head for his scythe.

“Potter!” Viktor roared. Two Death Eaters had cornered him against one of the burning walls, and he was struggling to prevent being herded into the flames. “Run!”

And Harry did — in the wrong direction. He cut sideways, sprinting through the shattered remains of the courtyard, straight for Viktor.

Draco was going to seize. Hermine stumbled up beside him, bleeding from a cut on her lip, and screamed: *“Harry!”*

It was unclear what he meant to do: at any rate, they never learned, because the third Death Eater sprang forward and swept a long current of force from the side of his wand, sending Harry sailing at the podium. Draco’s heart teleported several stories down out of his body—

But Harry missed the Cup by inches, and instead knocked against the plinth beneath it, his body landing with brutal force on the stone.

One of the Death Eaters whirled to pursue. Draco saw him. The man’s elbow was up, hand poised in the overhand to cast, which opened up his flank for an attack from the right, and Draco didn’t have an eye on him anywhere, he could move fast, he could move freely. He didn’t remember telling his wand what to do. The curse rolled down his arm like it had always been there, like he was passing the quaffle through a basic underhand, his muscle wiser than his brain.

“Reducto.”

The curse bit its target and vanished. There was a piping scream, which he realized belatedly came from inside the mask, and the Death Eater swiped at his side, which had dissolved into a curtain of fine red dust. Flesh and bone sieved into a curtain of glitter on the smoky wind, and viscera spilled from the hole in his chest. The Death Eater went to his knees. Hermione gave a small scream and clapped her hand over her mouth.

Draco’s stomach quaked, once, and then stilled. The instinctive roil of discomfort disappeared. There was a moment when he was staring at a living man, with real flesh and real pain — but he blinked,

and it was a Death Eater again, the thing that would've killed him if it could have.

He could put the feeling away. That was interesting.

Viktor, meanwhile, roared approvingly, and kicked the fallen Death Eater in the head. He went over, and Viktor brought his boot down hard once, twice, three times on his face, until the mask gave a hard *CRACK,* and split in half. Viktor snarled and kicked his head again, letting the mask skitter free in two pieces over the stone.

The man flopped over sideways, unconscious. His hood and sheaf of dark hair spilled over his face, hiding it from view — nauseous, Draco took a half-step forward, and raised his wand, to cast it off, and see who it was—

Harry stirred against the plinth, groaning. Ron barked and took off running for him, but a Death Eater cut his wand back at him and hurled him into one of the burning walls, where he floundered, bellowing.

"Ron!"

Hermione tripped into a run. The Death Eater's wand followed her path across the clearing. Draco broke into a sprint after her.

"Stop!"

"Hermione!"

He got to her before the curse. He didn't exactly know what reservoir of his life's luck he'd spent doing that, and he didn't want to know, but he wasn't too late. He shoved her down and went down hard on top of her, covering her body, and the curse moved harmlessly over their heads, detonating in the air over their heads. His ears rang. He put his hand over her head and shoved it into the ground, and he didn't care if she was furious, he didn't care, didn't care, didn't care. The curses passed over them like a firestorm happening six inches

from their head. Her clothes were hot with smoke and exertion and her own residual magic, and she wrestled under him, trying to throw him off, shouting about something he couldn't make out and didn't care about.

He rolled up onto his knees and saw what had happened while he went down. Harry had staggered up on the podium, holding his head in one hand and his wand in the other. His glasses were askew, and one lens was cracked. The Death Eaters had turned back to him.

The first spell wasn't a jinx at all. It was *Flipendo,* the telltale green pinwheel. Harry dodged it, and the next, and threw back a few feeble curses. His foot slipped back onto the platform, and something sank into the plinth. A rumble like a grinding whetstone took up under the platform, and the cup began to sink into the plinth, its glow sharpening, like it housed the birth of a star.

His ears cleared somewhat, and he finally heard what Hermione was screaming. It was *Harry.*

A Death Eater threw his wand out, and Harry dodged again, with the seeker's reflexes that had never failed him once. A perfect sidestep.

Which meant the Death Eater's Summoning Spell hit the Cup behind him. And it hurtled off its plinth as if it meant to embrace him.

"POTTER!"

They were all too far. Ron was rolling in flame, Hermione pinned, and Draco too far away.

So it was Viktor who, with a monumental effort of the body — his great, lumbering, ungainly quidditch player's body, that never once moved on land with a tenth of the grace it did in air — launched himself at Harry. So it was Viktor who knocked into him, slamming him sideways, and for a moment the two boys hurtled free, wrapped together, spinning in air like the twirling arc of a helix.

Then the Cup knocked Viktor’s ankle, and gleamed white.

The clearing became a field of light. It outshone the flames. Someone was screaming. The light was so bright that it seemed to blot out even sound, like the world was glitching.

When shadow and figure returned, Death Eaters were gone, and so were the two remaining champions. And the clearing was full of three children, rubble, and smoke.

The riddle is a modified excerpt from Mezzo Cammin, a sonnet by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Bottom of the ninth, and we're really in it now. I hope it doesn't disappoint. Thank you so much for everything.

The Last Stand of Barty Crouch

Chapter 54: The Last Stand of Barty Crouch

The sound was shrill and high, ragged with the horrible harmonies of grief. Draco fumbled for Hermione — for her arm, her shoulder, any evidence that she was still there, and hadn't vanished with the light — and she was, fumbling back at him, her hand knotted in the front of his shirt like she could haul him out of hell by that grip alone — but it wasn't her scream.

The sound was Ron, who staggered out of the burning bush, smoke still trailing from his singed cloak, and reached for the plinth like it had taken one of his lungs.

"He's dead!"

Hermione's breath hitched, and her grasp on Draco's shirt tightened. "No," she said. "It isn't — maybe he might not — Viktor's with him, he could—"

"He's *dead!"* Ron was wild. He raked his hands through his hair, dislodging clouds of ash. "That's what he said, remember? They're taking him to kill him. And they got him, and he's gone, and oh God, *oh my God,* he's dead. Harry's dead."

"Stop saying that," Draco snapped. His throat stung from the smoke. He pushed himself upright, found that Hermione refused to let go, and nearly toppled over again. Fumbling, he hauled her up, too, by the elbows, and set her on unsteady feet. "We don't know anything. Do you see a body? No. Me neither."

Ron ignored him. "We failed, and he's dead," he said hoarsely. "The last thing I ever said to him — it was 'Good luck.' That's all. I never told him… he was… he was my brother. I never said…"

“He knew that,” said Draco, full of a deep, painful alchemy of fury and pity. “Merlin. Is that what you’re worried about? Dead or alive, if there was one thing he knew, it was that. Don’t be absurd.”

A deep groan emitted from the ground, like the earth was rolling in its sleep. The walls trembled, and then they began to fall: row upon row of hedges keeling over, as if the process of growing had been cut in reverse. Their gnarled limbs shriveled into stumps and shrank into the grass. The Anti-Enchantment spell overhead cracked and peeled back, shards petering into nothingness like a great split egg, and the quidditch stands emerged from behind the toppling walls.

The maze fell, and they found themselves standing in the wide open arena of the quidditch pitch, under the cruel bath of the floodlights.

The stands had been evacuated, but the Ministry remained, in a huddle with several professors and mediwizards, all of them hunched together under the dull glaze of wandlight. When the maze fell, shouting erupted, and there was a massive surge towards the three of them — Draco raised his wand, instinctively, afraid on some level that the next thing he would see was a Stunning Spell — but then one shoved in front of the pack, crossing the pitch at professional speeds.

Minerva McGonagall executing a dead sprint was one of the most terrifying things he’d ever seen in his life.

“Malfoy! Weasley! Granger! *Are you alright?”*

“Professor! No — no, it’s Harry—”

“Are you hurt? Weasley? Weasley! Come here! You’re burned! And you, Granger, you’re cut—”

McGonagall gave Draco a hard rattle, and her hands found his cheeks, his temples, his hair. He was disgruntled and stunned still by the way that she handled him, with a rough, ruthless kindness that his mother wouldn’t have dreamed of — but it wasn’t unlike his

mother’s gestures, either, the way that she silently asserted an almost proprietary discretion in interrogating his immediate bodily safety, as if his body were something that she had loaned him for safekeeping and she was furious with him for endangering it.

Satisfied, she gave him a hard, absentminded shake, and swept immediately on to Hermione, healing her cuts with a single brisk flick of her wand. “What *on earth* are you doing here? How could you be so reckless? Foolish girl! *Students were ordered to evacuate!”*

“Harry,” Ron said numbly. He was still staring at the place where Harry had disappeared. “We were going to… we were s’posed to… get Harry.”

“What? And where is Potter?”

“The Cup was a Portkey,” said Hermione. She took a step forward, swayed perilously, and lurched sideways. Draco caught her and held her up, letting her use his arm as a brace. “Harry touched it. With Viktor. And they disappeared.”

“What?” McGonagall froze. “What do you mean, Potter disappeared? Where did he go?”

A roar of noise swallowed them. The others had finally caught up, and they were thronged with people, mediwizards first, and then the Ministry men, bellowing for order, and the professors: Dumbledore, first, his face more grave and drawn than Draco had ever seen, and Fleur, Maxime, Karkaroff, Madame Pomfrey, and a dozen others he didn’t even get a glimpse of before the crowd surged, and they were packed in, being dragged in a dozen different directions, being interrogated by at least a dozen voices, his thoughts drowned out by the shriek of a panicking body of people.

“WHERE IS HE?” Karkaroff was roaring. “WHERE IS VIKTOR?”

And he wasn’t even the loudest: the Ministry workers were trying to wriggle in between the mediwizards, snarling at them for answers,

and Dumbledore and McGonagall had converged on Ron, who had sunk to his knees and started to scream again, both of them hunched down in the universal kind postures of caretakers tending to a frightened animal.

Someone shoved them sideways, and Hermione was thrown into his chest. She snarled, kicking at them, and he dragged her out of the way.

She pressed close to him and shouted in his ear: “—to — find o— Harry is!”

“How?”

“Theodore Nott!” she shouted. “—plan — knows — taking him!”

“We don't know where he is, either!”

“—check the castle! Students were evacuated! He knew what was happening — he wouldn't stay around—”

Right. Well, then.

He dug in his heels and grabbed her hand, and shoved through the crowd with all his strength. The bodies parted, not willingly, but he muscled through and wriggled through the tight channel of deadlocked bodies, ignoring the horrible smell of sweat and must and smoke, breaking at last onto the open field and breaking into a run.

There were shouts; they ignored them. They raced over the pitch and broke the stands, rocketing up sawdusted hallways and around old corners littered with cigarette butts, breaking at last into the starry windless night and onto the long clear hill up to the castle. A distance of how far he didn’t know, but he knew the fastest path up the pebbled hills, the little foxholes that hid to snare your legs, and he knew where to put his feet so he could very nearly fly, running like he

and the ground where in agreement on the need for haste, and it was ushering him along.

A dark figure stepped onto the path in front of them, and in his frayed state, he very nearly mistook the white pallid face for a mask. His wand was out and spitting red before he could tell the difference.

Barty Crouch roared in surprise, recoiling, and knocked his jinx aside. Draco flew to a halt, and Hermione nearly tripped into the dirt.

“Boy! What the devil are you doing?”

“Mr. Crouch,” Hermione gasped. “We’re so sorry—”

“Don’t apologize to him, he’s the one who jumped out of bloody nowhere, serves him right—”

“—what are you doing here? I thought you were fired!”

“That’s correct,” gritted Crouch, and he lowered his wand. “I am here in an unofficial capacity.”

“...What does that mean?”

“It means that many men here tonight have abdicated their duty,” he said grimly. “I will not be one of them. Come. I will take you to the castle, Professor Moody must speak with you.”

“Professor *Moody?”*

“The hell does he have to do with anything—”

“—can’t spare the time, sir, I’m very sorry—”

“—think he is, sending you to fetch us—”

“—we have to get to Gryffindor Tower, there’s something there I really need—”

“—if you had any idea what we’ve been through tonight—”

“If you want to see your friend again, you will come with me, and quickly,” said Crouch coldly. “I have no time to dwell in this field of sorrow. Haste is key.”

“...You mean Harry?” Hermione was stunned. “What do you know about him? How do you know—”

“It is my misfortune that I was not swift enough to save young Potter. But there may still be time. Come; you must trust me.” He turned, but when they did not follow, he exhaled sharply, in irritation. “Children! Come! I demand it.”

“Who you are to *demand* anything,” Draco said icily, “is of interest to me, being that you’ve neither title nor authority, and we’ve little reason to trust strange men insisting that they’re acting in our best interest. It’s nothing personal; it’s only been an issue, previously, and I’m not keen on it happening again.”

“I am not Corban Yaxley.”

Hermione twitched; Draco kept his wand-hand steady.

Crouch repeated, low with frustration, “I am not Sibelius Nott. I am here to save a child’s life. That is all.”

“You’ve done a fine job, then, haven’t you?”

“Now is not the time to litigate my failures.” Crouch didn’t even flinch. His expression was simply flat, like a bit of slate. “My name is Bartemius Crouch, and I mean you no harm. I swear it.” His eyes, like cold pieces of flint, slid to Draco. “I swear it,” he repeated, stiffly, “on the land and the blood and the name of my father, which is now mine, and ever will be.”

Draco set his jaw.

“It bears mentioning,” he said, stabbing his wand into its sheath, “that I don’t know your father, or whether you give a damn about him, so that could still mean nothing, as far as I’m concerned.” Still, he flicked his hand irritably at Crouch, indicating him to lead the way.

Satisfied, the man turned and began marching up the hill. They followed.

“What? What was that?” Hermione’s voice was low. “What did he say? Was that a special kind of promise?”

“It’s a very serious vow.”

“A magical vow?”

“No. But if he’s lying, it’s a curse on his house.”

“What? A real one?”

“As real as it can be, without magic.”

“So — not real,” she said doubtfully, but he shook his head.

“It’s not a promise you make lightly. It’s not a ‘cross my heart’ kind of thing. It’s a ‘death and ruin on my descendants if I lie to you’ type of thing.”

“But it isn’t *properly* magical,” she insisted, though they were now climbing into the shadow of the castle, which suggested her objection was more pedantic than pragmatic. Crouch swept back the door with a motion of his wand, and they hurried into the dimly lit Great Hall, where small beads of torchlight peppered the gloom. Through the eerie, dusted hallways, they ascended, following the whisper of Crouch’s cloak up the stairs to the third floor. “So you could say it and not mean it.”

“No. You could, but culturally, it’d be repulsive to — put it this way. *I* wouldn’t say it without meaning it, and you know my position as regards lying.”

“‘Safely, well, and very often’?”

“‘Acceptable when necessary,’ thank you, and either Crouch is the same, or he doesn’t think he’ll live long enough for it to matter. Either way, I don’t think he’d let us totter off to Gryffindor Tower if we said *no.* Do you?”

Hermione pursed her lips, and her silence agreed.

Moody’s office door was ajar when they reached the third floor, but Crouch surprised them by breezing past it, soaring up a set of stairs, and ducking past the open wing of a griffin statue. They were going to Dumbledore’s office.

“Why are we going to the headmaster’s office, sir?” Hermione called curiously.

“The headmaster’s office has an operational floo grate. It is the only route of magical ingress inside the castle.”

“Are we expecting someone, then?”

“You will see.”

He swept up to the door and burst it open without knocking. Inside that old dark wood study, the silver instruments twinkled slightly in the breeze of the flying door, and there, cast in golden light by the guttering fireplace, were Mad-Eye Moody and Theodore. His face had been healed, and the bloodstains on his collar had no twins on his face. Only faint crusts of brown on his neck marked the places where he’d been hurt, earlier; he was twisting and wringing his hands.

“Draco,” he gasped, and hurried to the door. “Thank Merlin.”

The jinx caught him in the face, with a wet *POP!* , and capillaries bloomed over his eye.

“OW! WHAT THE HELL—”

Draco snarled and lunged.

He landed three more jinxes, laying bright beautiful welts over Theo's wailing face, before Mad-Eye got between them and hauled him off with a grunt, shoving him against the wall. A flick of Mad-Eye's wand threw Theo into a chair and lashed him to it, where he wrestled and snapped, blood weeping faintly from one of his welts.

"How does it feel?" said Draco. His blood was fire. He could feel every nerve in his body, and they were all glowing with magic, fatigue gone, eager to serve. His wand *wanted* to move, it wanted to curse, it liked to do it. "How does it feel to have killed someone? Tell me."

"I didn't! It wasn't me! It *wasn't my fault,* you arse, I tried to tell you!"

"I asked you how it *felt—"*

"Enough," snarled Mad-Eye, "enough of that, now, *enough!"*

"—to be a killer, Nott."

Theo roared. It wasn't a pleasant sound, and it didn't seem directed at Draco, either, but at the world in general: an issuance of complaint, the expelling of something inside him, dark and built-up and long-suffering, that now came out in a rattling roar that scraped his windpipe raw.

"I didn't choose this! They'd have *killed* me if I didn't, Draco, you shit, don't you understand, *I never chose*— "

"Then you should've—"

Hermione made some sort of sound, but he could hardly hear her over the roar in his ears.

"Should've done what?"

The expression on Theo's face was indescribable. He repeated, "Should've done *what?"*

"Enough."

Mad-Eye shoved Draco against the wall again, and he fell silent. "You're no Auror, boy. Stop playing inquisitor. There's whole dimensions of this you don't know."

"I know he helped the Death Eaters." He made eye contact with Theo over Mad-Eye's shoulder, caught the glitter of panic there. "Did you know that? He let them into Hogsmeade last year. He conspired with them to plant the Portkey. I wouldn't be surprised if he put Potter's name in the Goblet—"

"No," interrupted Crouch. He shut the door and stood in front of it, his arms folded behind his back, like he was presenting a report. "He didn't."

"Then who did?" said Hermione.

Crouch jerked his chin at Mad-Eye. Mad-Eye grunted and released Draco, who dropped to his feet and straightened his shirt. His blood still boiled. He eyed Theo, but didn't jinx him, and after a probing glare, Mad-Eye stepped back.

"Theodore Nott is a protected witness," Crouch said quietly. "His safety is vouchsafed by the Ministry of Magic."

"He's *what?"*

"More importantly, it's vouchsafed by *me,"* grunted Mad-Eye, hobbling over to Dumbledore's desk. He leaned against it, resting his wooden leg. "So quit jinxing him, boy. It's not unimpressive, but he's not your enemy."

Draco ground his teeth, and by a hair-thin margin of self-control, he obeyed.

“Granger asked a question.”

“Ludo Bagman,” Crouch said briskly, crossing to the desk. He began rifling through papers.

Her jaw dropped.

“Ludo Bagman? The *gambler?”*

“The same.”

“How did he—and for what purpose?”

“Ministry administrators have permissions to cross the age line,” said Crouch, examining one document before tossing it away, “and Bagman had the particular responsibility of tailoring the Goblet’s enchantments before the Tournament. It is my suspicion that he entered Mr. Potter’s name under a fictional fourth school, and during the reaping, it selected Mr. Potter as the only candidate. However, since he has fled the country, we shall never know.”

“Fled the country? He was here just earlier today!”

“Indeed. Once the Third Task collapsed, he was seen fleeing to Hogsmeade, where Apparation traces suggest that he made several short-term jumps to dispel tracking enchantments, before finally leaving the country. I do not believe that there will be much effort to find him, however; he was not the true culprit.”

“Not the *true* culp— why on earth would he do that to Harry?” She voiced both of their confusion. “Is Bagman a Death Eater?”

“No,” said Theo, hoarsely. “But he owes my father two million galleons.”

Hermione mouthed wordlessly at him. “Million,” she repeated. “Million? As in…”

“Million as in million, yes,” he drawled. “Million as in *debtor’s prison,* if certain creditors get restless. So he’s very keen on cost-efficient deals, such as, ‘You put this bit of paper in that big cup thing, and I won’t liquidate your organs for cash.’”

“We thought he was gambling on Harry,” said Hermione, staring. “We thought—”

“Oh, I’m sure he was. No reason to let an opportunity go to waste, is there? I suspect he grew guilty about it, especially once the Tasks started, though; he kept whinging about his conscience.” Theo snorted. “His conscience! Bloody hypocrite. He was downright nasty to me, too, at the end there, blaming me for getting him involved, saying I’d put blood on his hands, with Potter… which might be fair enough, honestly. My father only had to get him involved in the first place because I’d failed with the Goblet. Banged up my hand something ferocious, too, since apparently Aging Potion isn’t worth the piss it tastes like.” He smiled bitterly at the floor.

“But you didn’t really want Harry to win,” said Hermione, like she was trying to convince herself of something. “You were helping Cassius. Because you knew… you didn’t want Harry to…?”

“What, Cassy? He was an extracurricular project. He’s practically the Minister’s nephew, he couldn’t very well lose. And he was leaning on me pretty hard, near the end there— couldn’t sneeze in the dungeons without a ‘What ho, Nott, what’s this Third Task about, then?’ Utter idiot. But he’d be suspicious if I didn’t help him, and my father was under orders to ensure the Tournament went a certain way.”

“To fix it, you mean.”

“The Ministry didn’t spend all this money to haul in some foreigners and ship the trophy off with *them.* This was Runcorn’s baby. It would be good for morale, he said. It would inspire *faith* in Hogwarts, after the past three years’ failures. The alternative being a complete administrative overhaul, a few sackings, and far more money than

anyone wanted to spend on installing closer Ministry supervision at the school. Which is going to happen anyway, now, I expect. So that's my silver lining." He laughed hollowly.

"It was a *morale* exercise?" Hermione was furious. "A bit of, what, advertising? Dragons? Drowning? All that for some stupid—"

"—piece of political philosophy? That was my reaction, too," said Theo calmly. "I voted for a quidditch tournament. But anyway, I've made a hash of it, so don't you worry. They'll not be advertising bugger-all about *this.* No ideas were communicated in the making of this disaster."

The silver instruments above twinkled discordantly, like windchimes. One of them had started to spin and let off a thin, panicky whistle.

"But Sibelius Nott had his own agenda," interrupted Mad-Eye. He clamped a gnarled claw on the back of Theo's chair, like a roosting vulture. "Tell 'em what you did, boy."

"Lord, must I? Fine. Draco, you know about the dragon tip-off, and it appears you made the best of it. Cheers to you. I had some books for you, too, if you'd ever sodding bother to ask—"

"You stole the library books?"

"It's not stealing, I got a permission slip," he said mildly. "I happen to attend this school. I would've tried harder with the Second Task, too, but Draco was unusually obstinate — I think I've you to thank for that, Granger, and tell the Bleeding-Heart Bureau to give you a commendation, you've got hooks in him I don't think even he knows about."

"What are you talking about?" she snapped. "You never so much as offered—"

But he had.

“Quilliam Coalhend,” said Draco. She broke off. “You invited me to his talk at the League meeting in January. ‘Revolutionized the use of aquatic plants in Potioneering.’ He was going to talk about gillyweed, wasn’t he?”

Theo shrugged. “Might’ve done.”

“And the gillyweed stolen from Snape’s stores. That was you, as well.”

“I had to make sure Cass didn’t get it,” said Theo, annoyed. “After all, he came to Coalhend’s meeting, and you didn’t. First thing he did afterward was pop off to Snape and ask for it. Not my fault you’re thick *and* slow.”

“Did you flood the bathroom, too?” Hermione interrupted.

“What?”

“The third floor bathroom flooded. That’s how we solved the egg, Professor Moody gave us the password to the prefects’ bath. Did you engineer that?”

“I didn’t do anything to the bathroom,” said Theo curiously, craning his neck about Mad-Eye.

Mad-Eye grunted. The glint in his eye was crafty and only slightly sheepish. “Caught the Warrington boy skulking around somewhere he oughtn’t have been,” he admitted. “Reckoned Snape was helping him out. Thought it might be fair to even the odds, score-wise. With Potter.”

Crouch pivoted, his hands on his hips, and shot him a look.

“Really, Alastor.”

“The boy was cheating!”

“That isn’t some sort of license—”

“It was more than hard enough for Potter on his own—”

“—interference in a Ministry event, if I’ve told you once I’ve told you a thousand times—”

“—no use pretending this was a fair fight—”

“—should’ve *contacted the authorities* if you suspected wrongdoing —”

“—jinxed the brat’s legs into a pretzel and it still wouldn’t have been even—”

“—against the *rules,* which exist for a reason, *need* I remind you.”

“You needn’t,” said Mad-Eye, and Crouch made an irritated sound, rolling his eyes.

“Anyway,” said Theo, faintly, after a moment. “Potter got second seeding in the maze, for being the runner-up. Father said there’d be men along to keep Cass out of the way until Potter could get there; it was only a matter of making sure nobody got to it first. Of course, Cassius had to be the winner by default, so once Potter was… taken care of… they would announce… anyway, it was a — delicate thing. I can’t tell you how many sleepless nights—”

“How strenuous for you,” Hermione said coldly. Theo winced.

“You were talking about Ludo Bagman,” Draco said to Crouch. “You and Snape and Dumbledore. You weren’t talking about Moody, you were talking about Bagman. Going after him.”

Crouch quirked a thick grey eyebrow at him. “How you know *that,”* he said, “I would be intrigued to hear.”

“Walls have ears in this castle,” Mad-Eye grunted. “Don’t be surprised. No, it wasn’t me, boy. Snape thought Bagman came rifling through his gillyweed stash, sent Barty after him. Had him arraigned for questioning and everything, recitation of charges, the *great*

sodding idiot, might as well have sounded the bells. So this one—" He kicked Theo's chair, and Theo yelped— "ran to Papa, and told on him, and they put paid to that. Had his office clean by five o'clock. I don't suppose I need to tell any of you what would've happened after that, now, if Junior here hadn't ratted out to me. I assume none of you have heard lately from Bertha Jorkins."

This last was rather pointed, and aimed in Crouch's direction. Crouch's mouth flattened. "It was the right thing to do," he said. "There were protocols."

"It's the reason Ludo Bagman's somewhere buried in the Caribbean instead of hog-tied at my feet, Barty."

"Which makes them no less compulsory," he said, "for an employee of the Ministry, much less one who is no longer an Auror."

"You should've come to *me,* then."

Crouch said nothing, but the look that passed between them was tremulous and old, like an ancient bridge worn thin by traffic, and held now only by the surface tension of its crumbling pillars.

"Doesn't matter, though," said Mad-Eye gruffly, turning away. "Doesn't matter. Worked out alright, just the same."

Draco wasn't paying all too much attention to the geriatric melodrama happening to his left; he was focused on the boy at his right.

"You ratted?"

"My father said he was going to *kill* somebody," Theo snapped. "Of course I ratted. I told you, *I didn't want this."*

"Why Moody? Why not Snape?"

"You trust Snape?" Theo gave a shrill laugh. "With Dumbledore's leash on him? You're even more foolish than I thought."

“But you knew,” said Hermione, whirling on Mad-Eye. “If Theo told you everything, then you knew the Third Task was compromised! And you didn’t do anything about it?”

“Hold your hippogriffs, girlie. Young Nott told me Barty was in danger because of who he’d gone after, not what his father was doing, or why he’d got Bagman in a headlock. I didn’t have all the information until an hour ago.”

“And besides,” said Crouch calmly, “we had no ability to influence the Tournament’s operation. Lord Nott controls that machinery. Attempting to use young Mr. Nott’s testimony to halt the proceedings, absent stronger evidence of wrongdoing, would have placed his life in great danger for no profit.”

“As opposed to now, when we’re doing what, exactly?”

Crouch hiked up his sleeve to check his wristwatch. “Waiting,” he said.

“Waiting for what?” she demanded.

“For Sibelius Nott to receive word that I have his son in custody,” said Crouch calmly, “and have administered to him four ounces of veritaserum, as of nine twenty-two P.M., Greenwich Mean Time. And that I expect him in the study of Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts Headmaster, at no later than ten o’clock P.M., to report for arrest.”

“What!” Hermione was shocked. “I — but that’s highly — *did* you?”

Theo snorted. “I’d bite his fucking finger off if he tried.”

“It strikes me as unnecessary to inform Lord Nott that Theodore testified willingly,” said Crouch. He drew back his sleeve and folded his hands behind his back crisply. “I am not in the business of endangering star witnesses.”

“But he’s his father,” said Hermione.

Theo guffawed. She stared at him.

“No, *really.* He wouldn’t… would he?”

“It’s a great joke, Granger, that you’d dare to suppose what my father would and wouldn’t do,” said Theo. “Did you know he’s been in contact with Peter Pettigrew since August? Pettigrew, who happens to be involved in things so deep my father won’t even tell *me* about them? And for perspective, here’s what my father thinks is an *age-appropriate* assignment for me — how about I help put a Herald in the air over a symbol of international magical unity, eh? How’s that for a character testimonial?”

She looked like she’d been struck.

“You’re Mimsy’s family,” she said. “The house-elf they have in custody. She’s yours, isn’t she?”

“Property of the state, now, technically.”

Hermione’s knuckles were white on her wand-grip. “I thought your father didn’t have his wand at the Cup.”

“He didn’t have *his* wand,” said Theodore comfortably, kicking his feet up on the ottoman. *“That* was missing all day. Which he complained about. Loudly. To several prominent people.”

“You fetched him a spare, didn’t you?” said Draco. He found that the few reserves of pity he’d withheld for Theo, at the mention of his betrayal to Mad-Eye, had vanished rapidly at the reminder of the Dark Mark. He recalled the nights he’d woken in cold sweat from dreams of floating bodies in the sky, and Hermione’s scream dwindling on the air, and he found very little fucking forgiveness in himself at all. “That was why you were Apparating around. Trying to be in multiple places at once. Was it your wand he used?”

“No,” said Crouch, relieving an increasingly uncomfortable Theo of the need to speak. “The boy’s wand was tested in the initial

investigation. Hawthorn, seven and a half inches, brittle. Guilty of several minor incidents of underage spellcasting, attributed at the time to accidental magic—"

"Apparation," grunted Mad-Eye.

"—but not *Morsmordre.* It was checked."

"The wand that cast the Mark belonged to Bertha Jorkins," said Theo. To this he was answered with a fourfold silence.

He added, "While living, anyway."

Hermione made no sound, but if her knuckles got any whiter on her wand they'd be transparent. He wondered what spell she was holding on her tongue.

It was the first thought he'd had in a while. The rest of his brain was reeling to haul all of the filing cabinets back into place from where they'd been knocked over. Put the papers back in order, try like hell to alphabetize. Get the facts in the row, then figure out what to do about them. If there was anything to do about them. Which there might not be.

When the fireplace burst green, only the children jumped. The two adults turned with expressions like men watching the bottom fall out of a gallows, and did not evince slightest surprise when Sibelius Nott strode out of the grate.

"Good evening," he said, and took a long, cold look around the room. After the initial beat of silence, he nodded to Crouch. "I received your note."

"'Night, Dad," said Theo, quietly.

Sibelius gave him a considering glance. "They've hurt you," he said, and though it wasn't exactly affectionate, it wasn't pleased, either.

"What, are you jealous?" said Theo, and tried for a grin.

Sibelius narrowed his eyes. But the corner of his mouth bent, in a wretched, crooked little snarl, and with a pang of disgust, Draco recognized it as humor.

He'd seen that smirk. He couldn't remember where.

"Lord Nott, you are under arrest," said Crouch. He drew his wand, oddly formal, like he was unsheathing a sword. Mad-Eye just yanked it out and stabbed it at Nott as if it were a shiv. "You are charged with conspiracy and treason against the Ministry of Magic. You are charged with child endangerment, child abuse, criminal neglect, and attempted murder in the first degree. You are charged with aiding and abetting terrorism against the British Empire."

"I always thought we should've killed you, Barty," said Sibelius, quietly, reflectively. "There were opportunities. You always were such a hatefully lifeless creature, no faith, no loyalty to anything that wasn't part of parliamentary procedure."

"You are charged with the performance of illegal magics. You are charged with inciting others to perform illegal magics on your behalf. You are charged with the creation of forbidden imagery, including the Dark Mark of Lord Voldemort. You are charged—"

"The only reason I bothered to keep you alive was for your son. He begged the Dark Lord for your life. He went down on his hands and knees, and said that he would keep you drugged, harmless, under Imperius, if only alive. Did you know that? I must thank Alastor for liberating me of that inconvenience." Sibelius indicated Mad-Eye with his wand. "I imagine that was the last time he was useful to anyone."

Mad-Eye spat.

Sibelius looked at it, then at him. His lip crooked further.

"He never begged for you, though."

Hermione’s breath caught. Draco stared into the heart of a fourteen-year grudge and realized that what lay at the heart of it was that, just that, plain and simple: a dead boy and the fathers who failed him, the scent of his corpse still hanging in the air between them, his existence still as fresh a wound as the day they laid him in the dirt.

He rolled his wand into a western underhand, and shifted his feet apart. Magic crackled like static in the air. One of the instruments whistled keenly.

It was the Sneak-O-Scope. He could have laughed.

“Commend your soul to whatever creature will take it,” said Crouch, and lifted his wand. “My son is dead. When you see him, tell him he is not forgiven.”

With a whisper of static, bolts of magic crossed and glanced off each other in the air. Each spell piped and shattered against some instrument or bit of furniture in the overstuffed office, sending chairs rocketing into walls, shattering decorations, fountaining glass into the air. The air was thick with energy and hot with woodsmoke and the dry useless air of summer, sickly sweet, flowers on the glen. Sibelius marched forward like an automaton for a duelist’s class, block, parry, pivot, but Mad-Eye was right, Nott wasn’t a duelist, and even if he had been, he still wasn’t Mad-Eye Moody.

The old auror kicked a table into Sibelius’s face and roared, sent two hands of snarling rope at his ankles, ribboned a current of fire into his face, and followed it with a flying spear of shattered glass, all in the first three heartbeats of the fight — dueling like *genius,* dueling like a duel was something he’d invented five minutes ago. Draco had thought he himself was fairly good at dueling — he’d been a fool, a bare wretched fool, but in his defense, he hadn’t realized there was this much *good* to be had. At that moment, someone could have convinced him that Mad-Eye single-handedly ended the first Wizarding War himself, with five minutes and a sock of coins.

“Merlin’s blood,” marveled Theo, sounding like he’d had similar thoughts.

Behind him, his partner followed with a volley of defensive spells. Compared to Mad-Eye, Crouch was less flashy, but there was something in the perfect lockstep of his execution — *shot, backstep, counter, forestep, shot, backstep* — and his speed, which made it almost hard to tell everything that he was doing perfectly. He snapped aside one of Sibelius’s curses and whirled it around like it was a physical piece of string. This was how dueling was supposed to look, dueling-as-theory, the violent potential of magic made manifest in two men who knew the wide dark universe of what it could do.

Sibelius couldn’t hold them for long. He sprang back and nearly hit the grate, ripped a Shield out of the air and thrust it at them. Mad-Eye and Crouch dropped into a holding pattern, waiting for the Shield to drop, and Sibelius feinted right. This fooled nobody but made unanticipated the leftward flick of his wand, which sent a green bolt leaping across the room, sailing wide of Crouch, in a spell that would have missed dramatically had its target not been instead Hermione, whose arm — the world was moving slowly, now — was rising with apparently exaggerated lethargy, up, up, to summon a Shield Charm.

For the second time that night, he found himself lunging for her. For the first time, he wasn’t fast enough.

Crouch was, though.

He stepped between Hermione and Sibelius, raised his wand, and dispelled the curse with a brisk flick of his hand.

“A second charge of attempted murder,” he said, “against a Hogwarts student.”

“You can’t prove *murder,* Barty,” said Sibelius. His breath came fast, and he still hunkered behind the shield. Mad-Eye prowled to and fro

around it like a caged wolf. “That was always your problem. You could say it, but you couldn’t prove it.”

“I do not require proof,” said Crouch, with the first ghost of real anger on his face. “I am not an auror. I follow no law in this except the oldest. Know that when I do this, I do not act on behalf of the Ministry of Magic.”

Then he snarled and said, *“Cru—”*

“Expelliarmus.”

Crouch’s wand sprang from his hand and soared high. It pinwheeled into the waiting hand of Theodore, who stood, slack ropes piled in the chair behind him.

Sibelius’s shield flickered out.

“Theo,” said Draco, sharply. He hauled Hermione behind him — she let out an aggrieved shout, trying to shove him away — but he wasn’t making any more mistakes. He just had to convince Theo not to, either. “Nott. *Theodore.* Be intelligent about this.”

Theo turned to him. He had no smile on his face, no laughter, not even his characteristic smirk. In him was only dread, the dull dread, the kind that didn’t even bother to steer away from the cliff face.

“Sorry,” he said. “He’s my dad. You understand.”

“No, I *don’t.”*

Theo lifted his wand at Crouch, who slowly raised his hands. His face was stern, but not hateful. The anger was gone. Left in its place was only the miserable vestiges of regret. The unfathomable tiredness of a man who, perhaps, knew that he was about to speak in vain.

“Put it down, boy,” he said. “There’s still time—”

“Avada kedavra.”

It wasn’t Theo. It was his father, whose spell whistled through the air left by his dispelled Shield Charm.

Green light.

Thump, ,muffled on the carpets, crumpled on the floor.

Hermione, screaming.

Time seemed to trip over itself, as if it had seen Crouch’s body drop, and feared trodding on it. Crouch’s wand rolled free of his hand, which was slack, all its muscles relaxed, with an ease that life had never given them. For once, that hunched, tightly wound body slipped into a pose of utter rest, and was gone.

Hermione shoved him. He stumbled behind the bookcase while the colored lights flared; she was trying to herd him out of the way, and it took his numb brain a moment to pick up on it. He pulled her into the little alcove and wedged them both against the wall. Body over hers. Head over her shoulder, his hand cradling her head.

Heart doing something it shouldn’t. Breath doing something it shouldn’t. Brain doing something it shouldn’t. Well, what else was new.

He’d watched a man die and his head was a clean white series of instructions, which were: *not her; not you. Not her, not you.*

Press his face into her neck, breathe. Hear her screaming the bloody obvious, inches from his ear. In her hair, the smell of smoke and flowers, like someone had set the glen alight. Fire. That was Hermione, at her core, wasn’t it. The fire, the gleam, the little gold things that sat at the bottom of a hearth.

He didn’t want to die.

Mad-Eye was roaring. Spells sounded and explosions rattled the office, silver instruments plummeting like falling stars of flame like comets, and Sibelius and Mad-Eye were dueling again, while everything in the earth screamed except for him. More green lights, reflected on the small glimpse of wall he could see.

Then there was a horrible, fleshy sound, and a howl, and when he turned Mad-Eye was down, clutching his face, while blood poured from between his fingers.

Sibelius lifted his hand, and through the slick coat of blood in his palm, Draco glimpsed the shine of a blue glass eye.

“Why, you’re asymmetrical,” he said wryly, and closed his fingers over the eye. He pointed his wand at Mad-Eye’s face. “I’ll assist you.”

“Dad,” said Theo raggedly. “Let’s just go. It’s enough. Can’t we just — let’s go?”

Sibelius shrugged him off. “Leave,” he said. “To Hangleton. Go.”

“But—”

“Now, Theodore.”

Theo went. He crossed to the Floo and took a handful of powder, hesitated, and turned back — not for his father, but to Draco.

“Tell her,” he pleaded, and it took a confounding second to realize he wasn’t talking about Hermione. “Tell her what I did. All of it, not just — this.”

Draco lifted his wand for a spell whose name he didn’t yet know and was saved from ever knowing when the door burst open. Theodore hastily stepped into the fireplace, blurting something that Draco couldn’t make out, and disappeared in a blaze of green.

And then there were people coming into the room, many people, enough that he couldn't see them all, but he knew the one who came first, because the lash of white through her dark hair was the same shade as his own.

"Stand down," ordered his mother, with the cold tone of a woman not given to issuing ineffectual commands.

Sibelius whisked his wand around at her, but hesitated.

"Narcissa," he said, in faint dismay.

She took three quick steps across the room — advancing right up the duelist's line, he noticed — and in all that time, Sibelius didn't touch her.

"How *dare* you? How could you?"

"Narcissa—"

"Stand down!"

"There is yet time—"

"Electrosempra."

It was like a divine invocation. Lightning forked from the tip of her wand — not just spell-energy, not just the electric crackle of spellwork, but true, honest-to-God *lightning:* white and shuddering and volatile, the trembling knife of God that left whole trees blackened and set forests alight, channeled in a single finger that shattered Sibelius's lone effort at a Shield like it was glass. Narcissa's curse caught Sibelius in the chest and hurled him against the wall, convulsing horribly.

She shook out her wand, which scattered sparks, and pointed it at him again.

"That will be quite enough, Narcissa."

Dumbledore and Snape stood by the doorway, their wands drawn but unused. Dumbledore took in the gruesome scene that laid on the floor of his office, and let out a quiet: “Oh, Barty.”

“Mum?” said Draco, faintly.

She lowered her hand and sent Dumbledore a black look.

“And *you.* I haven’t forgotten you,” she hissed.

“I understand. And believe me, I do not look forward for whatever accounting you have planned,” said Dumbledore pleasantly. “But please refrain from killing Lord Nott. He is much more useful to us alive.”

“Killing!” she spat. “Don’t talk to me of killing. I’ve forgotten more about killing than you’ve ever known.”

But she sheathed her wand, and stalked away from the motionless Nott.

It took Draco a moment to process what he was seeing. He was so glad to see her that he very nearly didn’t have the heart to be angry, but then his anger regrouped, and found he was quite capable of doing both.

Narcissa didn’t give him a moment to mull it over. She swept down on him and wrenched him to the side, took a deep, searing look at his face, and then she buried her face in his shoulder, her arms a throttle around his neck.

“Oh, my *boy,* my darling Draco — oh, Draco, Draco, *Draco—”*

The whiplash could have broken a man’s neck.

“Mother, what the devil—?”

He jerked his head back. He was taller than her, now. Had he been taller than her at the start of the summer? He couldn’t remember.

Snape crossed the room swiftly and pointed his wand at Nott's head.

"Obliviate."

Draco's breath hitched. Dumbledore said sharply, "You are about to render his testimony unusable, Severus."

"I'm aware."

"If he cannot remember committing the murder, it may be difficult to demonstrate his guilt."

"He saw Narcissa," Snape said flatly, and Dumbledore abruptly dropped the argument, turning away.

"Speaking of which. Lady Malfoy," he said, and she detached herself from Draco.

"I know," she spat. "I *know.* May I have a moment with my son? My son, whom I have not seen for a *year,* I will remind you, as often and as loudly as I am able?"

Draco couldn't make heads or tails of that at all; it was her fault they hadn't seen each other. She'd been the one who went away and made it so he couldn't come home.

Dumbledore folded his hands behind his back, serene. "I was going to say," he said, "that I believe Mr. Malfoy may require medical attention, of the sort that I am happy to provide, if he consents."

He checked himself over. There was some blood on his shirt, and a bit of charring here and there, little nicks where bits of glass from the duel had rebounded at him. Hermione was the same, scratched here and there, a coronet of snapped twigs buried in her hair, and when she twitched up her sleeve he caught sight of a bad burn lacing the length of her forearm, pink and flushing from the recent touch of fire.

Snape had knelt over Mad-Eye and whirled his wand in swift motions over his face, muttering frantically.

“How is he, Severus?” said Dumbledore.

“Alive,” said Snape shortly. “But he’ll need a transfusion. Or four.”

“Easily done. Poppy stocks plenty of Blood-Replenishing Potion.”

“Does she stock eyeballs, too?”

“I’ll inquire,” said Dumbledore. He held out a hand to Narcissa. “Please — if I may?”

Hermione stepped out from behind Draco. She was touching her burned arm, and she lifted it, hesitantly. “Professor,” she said, in a steady voice, “I’d like someone to see about this, at some point, if there’s time.”

“Certainly, Miss Granger, I can—”

“But it can wait,” she interrupted. “Theodore Nott is gone, and someone should be sent after him as soon as you can. I read that you can trace someone through the Floo network, if you do it quickly.”

“Theodore?” Narcissa’s tone was sharp. Hermione hesitated, then nodded.

“He helped his father rig the Tournament.”

“Well, for Merlin’s sake, why didn’t you catch him?” she snapped, and after a jolt, he realized she was talking to Dumbledore, over Hermione’s shoulder.“Whinging all year about having to stay put and run the school, and you can’t even stop one fourteen-year-old boy —?”

“A fourteen-year-old boy with several very capable Dark wizards backing him, and need I remind you, Narcissa, that I was otherwise occupied this year, as well?”

“You shouldn’t have been! Is Minerva McGonagall so very incapable —?”

“Mother,” he said, “could you please hold off on abusing my headmaster — it’s glorious, truly — and bother to call me in on what the hell is happening at all? Thanks ever.”

“Don’t mouth off, darling.”

“Excuse me?”

Snape straightened up. “Nott first. The elder. The boy matters little.”

“Excuse me,” said Hermione hotly. “Theo’s the reason that Crouch is —” She jerked her head, choking on something, but forced out: “— the reason he’s dead.”

“He’s a child,” said Narcissa coldly.

“He’s an accessory to murder. He knows that, that’s why he ran,” she said, and she lifted her chin a little. “Crouch promised him amnesty, but the deal is gone, because he’s dead, and now he’s going to find the Death Eaters, and tell them—”

“Pure speculation. Albus, remove the girl.”

“Miss Granger has a right to answers,” said Dumbledore, with faint warning, “and this is her school. I would warn you, Narcissa, of your tone—”

“Of my *tone?* I come here to find my son huddling for his life in the floor of *your* office, a dead man on the floor, and you dare to speak to me of *tone?”*

“I do,” he said, “because it remains my office, for the time being. Speak as you will to me, but you will address the students of Hogwarts school with respect, or you will not address them at all.”

Hermione raised her voice again. “I don’t care,” she said loudly, “but you really need to send someone after Theodore, because he’s going to warn the Death Eaters that their plans have leaked, and he also might know where Harry is.”

There was a beat.

“Well?” she demanded. “Someone *do* something!” She drew her wand; Draco moved forward and took her arm, mindful of the burn, but hoping to hold her back from saying anything she might not be able to recant at leisure. She was shaking and her voice was much higher than usual. It was more than likely that she was in shock. They both were.

“Where Harry…” Dumbledore began, frowning. Then his expression cleared. “Ah. You have been here since the Third Task ended.”

“Yes! Obviously!”

“Granger,” he said quietly.

She shrugged him off. “And nobody’s told us what the hell is going on, either! Why did it take you so long to come get us? Why is Draco’s *mother* here?”

“I might ask the same of you,” said Narcissa.

She whirled on her. “Because I’m Harry’s friend, thank you,” she snapped. “I’m sorry that Draco was in danger, but that’s no need to be nasty. If it helps, I’d rather he wasn’t, either—”

“As you have so clearly demonstrated.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“I suppose it was my son’s idea, was it, to run into the labyrinth? To follow Crouch into the castle, to seek out Sibelius Nott? Was he the mind behind these proposals?”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “But — that’s not fair,” she gasped. “That’s completely unfair. I didn’t make him do anything.”

“I daresay you didn’t need to. You don’t fool me, you know, I was a girl once—”

“That will be enough,” he said, and when he heard his own voice he was surprised that it sounded so very deep and cold.

Narcissa gave a full-body flinch.

Severus tilted his head, one ear pricked.

“Thank you, Mother,” said Draco.

Narcissa’s mouth folded into a miserable pucker, and she turned her head away. The guilt settled in like a polite visitor and lingered in the antechamber of his heart, waiting for an opportune moment, but he was too angry to entertain it now.

He knew that Hermione was staring at him, but he avoided her eyes on purpose. “Professor Snape,” he said stiffly, “there’s a body. Is there a procedure?”

Snape gave a short nod. “I will deal with Crouch,” he said crisply. “First, however, the problem of Nott—”

“I will manage him,” said Dumbledore.

“I have suggestions.”

“Which I will consider.”

“To wit,” said Snape, ignoring the rather obvious gesture at a dismissal, “if you do not make use of Veritaserum, at this of all times, I will make a point of reminding you of your failure in each and every subsequent avoidable disaster.”

“For one, I should never fear but that you will do so anyway, Severus,” said Dumbledore, “and, more importantly, for two: it may surprise you to know that I do not generally discuss my plans for interrogation in front of schoolchildren.”

Severus cut Draco and Hermione a cursory glance, as if he’d just remembered they were in the room. “Send them away, then.”

“In a moment. I must speak with them first.”

“Why—?”

“They will stay because they need to understand,” said Dumbledore curtly. “Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery. They deserve to know for what purpose Barty Crouch was killed.”

For the second time that evening, the door burst open and snapped against the wall. The doorstep splintered.

The Minister of Magic stood in the doorway, haggard, dark circles like caves under his eyes. His eyes swept over the scene and the extended point of his wand jumped around, apparently seeking a target: Dumbledore, Snape, Narcissa, the body on the floor.

It took him a moment to conceptualize what he was seeing, and when he did his wand sank in horror. “Merlin’s wounds,” he murmured. “What a pity.”

Brave as an idiot, Hermione demanded: “And now what are *you* doing here?”

Snape jerked his head at her. “I would ask the same,” he said quietly. “Who summoned—”

The answer came with the second figure who poked his freckled nose into the room.

Percy Weasley, dressed in purple robes and the most ruffles Draco had ever seen not on a woman, edged around the Minister and stood by the doorway, transfixed by the body of his old employer, his face slack and pale with unbelieving horror.

“Oh, you slimy git,” exclaimed Hermione, after a moment. “You ran to the Ministry?”

“It was hardly a secret, Miss Granger!” he snapped. “The Third Task had collapsed; word was flying to every corner of the Wizarding World—”

“But *you* had to fetch the Minister!”

“It was an emergency! He deserved to know—!”

Runcorn silenced Percy with a lifted finger and stepped gracefully into the room, where he bent to press his hand against Crouch’s throat.

“He’s dead,” said Dumbledore, calmly. “I assure you, everyone here can identify a Stunning Spell from a Killing Curse.”

“Certainty is worth a moment’s hesitation,” he said, but he rose to his feet. “I understand. Who is responsible?”

Dumbledore folded his hands and looked calmly at the unconscious body of Sibelius Nott.

Runcorn paused, and a hard, disinterested expression shuttered his face. It was like a light going off.

“You witnessed it, I presume?”

“Not directly. But being that the only wizard in his company at the time of his death was Alastor Moody, I feel comfortable in my assessment.”

“What about the children?”

Runcorn turned, and Draco was electrified by the full force of a rather accusatory stare.

“The children were present,” said Dumbledore, “and may testify as much. However—”

“So you’ve interrogated them? You’ve ascertained that their story is correct?”

Snape let out a brutal bark. It might have been laughter.

“The alternative being,” he said, sounding very near to enjoying himself, “as you suggest, that one of these two fourth years produced a Killing Curse capable of felling a fully grown auror? Albus, let him take it to the Wizengamot, I beg of you.”

Runcorn blinked. It was a strange, lizardlike movement, and then he gave a small, unfelt smile. “I’m only trying to be thorough, Severus,” he said. “You must understand; this man was very close to me, and I should prefer to indict him on nothing but unimpeachable evidence.”

“You will indict him on the evidence before you,” said Dumbledore, “or I will make certain that you do not have to.”

“I beg your pardon. Is that a threat?”

“No, Lord Minister. Only a reminder that Mr. Crouch was a thorough man, and he documented his inquest rigorously.” Dumbledore’s tone was light, but the words were not. “He took extensive precautions. The testimony of Theodore Nott should suffice for whatever prosecutorial purposes you require.”

Runcorn sighed. He set his hand on his hip, tapped his wand on his thigh, and then gestured tiredly at the body.

“Sibelius Nott,” he said, “is hereby charged with the aggravated murder of Bartemius Crouch. I take him into custody on behalf of the Ministry of Magic, where he will await further questioning.”

He flicked his wand, and glowing silver cuffs fashioned themselves around Nott's wrists and ankles.

"No," said Hermione. Her voice was hushed.

Runcorn was now saying something to Percy, who was taking notes. As he watched, the Minister ran one hand through his hair, as if the whole ordeal was a vaguely tiresome logistical exercise.

Draco elbowed her. "What is it?"

"No, he can't… the Ministry's not going to do anything."

"Keep your voice down."

"Dumbledore can't let them take him," she said. "Don't you see? *He* cast the Dark Mark. He's the one they were covering for, firing Bones. It's all corrupted."

"Runcorn just put him in chains—"

"Runcorn is standing in front of six witnesses, one of them Dumbledore," she hissed. "Of *course* he did."

"Thank you, everyone, for your patience," Runcorn announced, turning back. Percy hurried out of the room, clutching his notepad to his chest. "The Department of Magical Law Enforcement will soon be notified. In the meantime, I ask that all of you not present at the time of the incident — that would be Professors Dumbledore and Snape, and Lady Malfoy, if you would — would vacate the premises so that the witnesses can be questioned—"

Suddenly, Snape gave a piercing cry, and dropped to his knees.

Draco started forward, alarmed; Narcissa darted to his side and caught him before he crumpled entirely; Dumbledore closed his eyes, and gave a very slight shudder.

"Professor?" Hermione's voice was shrill. "Are you alright?"

“Severus.” Narcissa was shaking him. “Severus. Be alive. Stand up.”

Snape struggled upright. He was clutching his right forearm, his face a knot of pain.

“What’s this?” said Runcorn sharply.

Snape ignored him, and turned to Dumbledore. “Albus,” he began, expression hoarse, but Dumbledore held up a hand.

“Go.”

Snape fled. In his haste, he shouldered past someone in the hallway outside, who gave out a faint cry of surprise.

“What absurdity is this?” Runcorn demanded. “Does Professor Snape have an alternate engagement? Did we wear on his patience? It seems you know something I don’t.”

“Oh, almost certainly I do,” said Dumbledore calmly. “But first, Minister, be assured that if you have to excuse yourself, you are more than welcome to.”

There was a long beat.

“I have no idea what you mean,” said Runcorn, with palpable frustration. “I sincerely don’t.”

“That may be so,” said Dumbledore, and there was another loaded silence; but then he set it aside, and turned to the doorway. “That being said. We have guests.”

“Wonderful,” said Narcissa tartly, “more people, just perfect,” which was exactly what Draco had been thinking, but then someone coughed and the door creaked open, and Hermione gasped.

Harry edged into the doorframe. It was the worst he had ever been. Were it not for the beautiful, undeniable fact of his living uprightness, Draco would swear for a jury that he was dead.

Pallor and white ash turned the planes of his face to a chalk relief, pitted by the two bright wet pits of his eyes, which were bloodshot from dust and rimmed in red, like wounds. Blood streaked his face and trailed from a bandaged wound on his wrist, and he was holding the hand of Minerva McGonagall as if it were his last tether to the living world.

McGonagall herself, though unhurt and visibly unharmed, had the expression of someone who had just marched through hell to haul him back.

“Harry,” said Hermione, almost silly with happiness, and she hurried forward — but stopped, then, when Harry didn’t answer her, or even seem to really hear. The boy turned his head and fixed her with a gaze that was searing in its emptiness, no happiness, no pleasure, even, at finding her alive and relatively unharmed; he might have been alive, but Harry Potter was not home.

“He’s back,” he said.

Then he turned to the middle of the room, and kept staring.

“What?” said Hermione, after a moment. “Who’s back? What’s back?”

“So we have been asking Mr. Potter since he returned,” said McGonagall, quietly.

“He’s back.” His voice sounded like it hurt to speak. Smoke inhalation and strain; it sounded like he’d been screaming.

“Potter,” said Draco, who was beginning to be unnerved. He could only suffer so much in a day. There was only so much you could take. He’d watched a man die — he’d watched a man *die* — there couldn’t be more, there couldn’t possibly. Days had to end, at some point.

But what if they'd done something to Harry? Something worse than torture, worse than death maybe, like Longbottom's parents—?

"He's back," repeated Harry. He worked his jaw, and then gritted out: "The portkey — took us to the graveyard — and Viktor tried to Apparate us — and they — he was trying to save me, and they—"

No more; his struggling throat gave up again, and closed off.

Hermione made a noise and sank immediately into the nearest chair, clutching her chest. Draco's legs sent up a warning about integrity and he lurched hard against the chair.

But then Harry stepped aside, Hermione gave another cry. Floating on a stretcher behind Harry and the Minister was a body under a white shroud.

The body had wide shoulders and more height than the stretcher rightly was meant for. A hand spilled from the side, the dirty cuff of a Durmstrang uniform just visible above the wrist.

It hung unmoving, like the pendulum of a frozen clock: proof that Viktor Krum had kept his word.

The Victor

Chapter 55: The Victor

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

It couldn’t be.

Viktor was seventeen, and young, and he laughed like a lion, and he flew like a poem, all that talent and verve and fire — and he was a pureblood; not that it mattered, not that it could possibly fucking matter, but the men who killed him were supposed to care — you couldn’t kill someone like that, it wasn’t right. He was supposed to be one of the best. That was supposed to keep you safe.

Runcorn was speaking.

“—happened to him? *Potter!* Answer! Who did this?”

He reached for Harry. Draco tensed, and he wasn’t the only one; Narcissa made a noise, and reached for her wand.

McGonagall stepped in between Harry and the Minister.

The Minister of Magic stumbled back, and for a fleeting moment, Draco saw an entirely new expression cross McGonagall’s weathered face. He realized, in a surreal moment, that all he had ever thought he knew of McGonagall’s anger had in fact been the sunlight zone of a trench so deep the bottom was only theoretical.

In the meantime, Dumbledore put his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I apologize, Harry. Understand that you are under no obligation to answer that question. I know you are experiencing extraordinary grief, and we will have time to speak of this later.”

“No.” Harry lifted his head. An angry ring of red circled his tear-swollen eyes, but he spoke evenly, without doubt. “I’ll tell you who it

was. *Voldemort."*

Narcissa hissed a little, at the sound of it, like someone had burned her.

Hermione said, "No, but — it couldn't," and her voice was thick with something that wasn't even fear, it was beyond it. It was the place where fear didn't matter, because the worst was staring at your back, and you were soaring toward something so bleak you had never even thought to worry about it. And there was a strange, black peace in that, the knowledge that even the worst couldn't happen now, because it already had.

The world was upside-down. Draco closed his eyes. It didn't help.

"Dumbledore, enough of this farce. The boy is mad."

"I was not aware you were a medical expert, Albert," said Dumbledore loudly. "I am amazed and delighted that you may be of such service to us, in this very dark hour."

"The Portkey took me to a graveyard," said Harry, speaking over the din, "and there were Death Eaters — forty or fifty of them — and there was a potion, and Wormtail was there, and he cut off his hand and — and put it in the cauldron, and then they said my blood would make him stronger than if he'd used someone else's. He said the protection my — my mother left in me — he'd have it too. And he was right — he could touch me without hurting himself, he touched my face."

Hermione was crying. Draco reached for her arm without knowing why, or what he could possibly do about it — it was above him, all of it, the upside-down world — and then, somehow, he was holding her, and she was clinging to him, her face buried in the front of his shirt. He put his head against hers and shut his eyes and then the world wasn't upside-down, merely crooked, irreparably crooked. Cracked down the middle. Cracked around a word in Harry's shaking voice.

Lord Voldemort. Lord Voldemort. Lord Voldemort.

Narcissa gripped his hand.

“And then I — I got my wand, and he tried to kill me, but something happened, and then some people came out of his wand — and it blew up, and I used the Portkey—”

“And you are prepared to accept this story, Dumbledore?” said Runcorn coolly. “You are prepared to believe that the Dark Lord has returned? On the word of a dead man and a boy who has just watched his friend die?”

McGonagall scoffed.

“Look, I saw Voldemort come back!” Harry shouted. He tried to stand up, but McGonagall grappled him back down. “I saw the Death Eaters! I can give you their names! Peter Pettigrew! Brutus Travers! Orpheus Greengrass—!”

Narcissa made a sudden movement toward Harry, but when Dumbledore cleared his throat, she fell still.

“You are raving,” said Runcorn calmly. “You have experienced an extraordinary trauma tonight. Your mind has confused Lord Greengrass with a person you saw in that graveyard. But I assure you, he has spent the whole night at the Ministry.”

“Macnair!”

“Whom we shall find at home with the same bout of Spattergroit he has been battling for two weeks. Would you like to Floo his wife and ask her?”

“Avery — Crabbe — Goyle—”

“You are merely repeating the names of my staff,” snapped Runcorn. “I am sure you found those names in the papers. You are looking for scapegoats, and finding them in men who have long since acquitted

themselves through service to the Ministry of any crimes they might have done."

"Minister, what is the point of this?" hissed McGonagall. She patted Harry's shoulder, as if to comfort him, though Harry did not seem to need comforting anymore; what he needed was someone to stop him from jumping up and clocking the Minister in the face. "Have you no heart? After all that has transpired, you would question a boy's credibility to his face?"

"My point is simple. Harry Potter should be taken to St. Mungo's, where he can be treated properly for whatever psychiatric problems he may or may not have manifested in the wake of this understandably troubling evening."

Narcissa inhaled sharply.

Hermione tore herself away from Draco's chest and rounded on Dumbledore. "Veritaserum," she exclaimed. "Harry's not lying. He's not, he wouldn't. Professor Snape said he had Veritaserum — it's simple—"

"Thank you, Miss Granger, but Harry has been through an extraordinary night," said Dumbledore patiently. "I will refrain from dosing him with anything except a sleeping potion, for the time being, though your suggestion is not unheard. As for *yours,* Albert, I would prefer I could unhear it; you may take your leave with Lord Nott, or stay and confer with us, but if you attempt to compel a student into medical custody without a court order, I will defend him with the full force of my authority, as a headmaster, a wizard, and a human being."

Alarmed, Runcorn touched his wand. Dumbledore folded his hands and smiled.

"No, I like Hermione's idea," said Harry, and then broke into a fit of coughing. "I can — I'll prove it — give it to me — I'll prove it's the truth."

“No one is asking that of you, Potter,” snapped McGonagall.

Runcorn was shaking his head. “I don’t know what you and your staff are playing at, but I have heard enough. I have no more to add. I will be in touch with you tomorrow, Dumbledore, to discuss the running of this school. I must return to the Ministry.”

He levitated Nott’s body alongside him to the Floo grate, where he paused. He turned around and walked over to Harry’s chair.

“Your winnings,” he said, taking a large bag of gold out of his pocket and dropping it onto Harry’s lap. “One thousand Galleons. Paid in full, to the victor of the Triwizard Tournament. Use—” He made a short, acidic expression, very near a smile. “Use it in good health.”

He straightened his cloak and walked into the fire, which signaled his exit in a flash of green.

Harry made a strangled noise, like he’d been burned, and shoved the gold off his lap. The coins spilled across the floor like a bloodstain.

“I don’t want them,” he said. “I don’t want it, that’s horrible. It’s Viktor’s money, I don’t want them, I don’t need them—”

With a sweep of her wand, McGonagall scooped the coins up and punted the bag safely onto Dumbledore’s desk. “Quite right,” she said. “Dumbledore will hold them until such a time as you desire.”

“No, no. You don’t understand. I don’t want him to hold them, I don’t *want* them, do you get it? I don’t want that gold, I didn’t *win anything!”*

“We understand, Harry,” said Dumbledore quietly. “Put it out of your mind.”

“Good!”

“In the meantime, Minerva, could you take him to the Hospital Wing? He has some visitors that I believe will be growing—”

A door slammed in the hallway.

“OUT OF MY WAY!"

“Never mind,” said Dumbledore.

The voice came through the door, still ajar from the Minister’s entrance, and rattled the floorboards. “WHERE IS HE?”

Harry’s head snapped up.

“Narcissa, please step away from the door,” said Dumbledore.

“WHERE DID YOU PUT HIM? GET THE HELL OUT OF MY WAY — MOVE — *THERE HE IS!* HARRY!”

The door whipped around and slammed the wall. Dumbledore stepped to the side, and McGonagall hastened behind him — cleaving a path for a red-faced Arthur Weasley, who burst through the doorway like he had a battalion at his back.

He crossed the room in three long steps and ripped Harry out of his chair.

Harry stumbled, gasping for a breath he choked on, and tried to lean around Arthur to see the body in the hallway, but Arthur would not let him.

He barely got out: “Victor—"

Arthur heard no more. He hauled Harry into his chest and buried the boy in his arms so tightly that Harry all but disappeared.

“It's alright," he said. “It's alright, son, it's alright. You did the right thing. It's alright."

“But he, he, he's — he's d-d-d—"

“I know.”

“He *died—”*

“I know. I know. I understand, son. You don’t have to tell me.”

Harry choked twice, three times, and then started to cry. In the hallway beside them, Ron, Molly, Bill, and Charlie huddled together, their eyes like a small coterie of blue planets.

“It's alright,” said Arthur. “It’s not your fault. You understand? Listen to me, Harry. It's going to be alright. It’s not your fault. You're a good boy, and you did the right thing."

Harry gasped and clung to him, and they stayed that way, knotted together on the floor, rocking back and forth together, like the child he’d been, once before, in a different world than this.

And Draco was sympathetic — he wasn’t heartless, he was glad that Harry had someone to do it — but in the grungy corner of his mind, he wondered where his own slice of comfort would come from. Where was his Arthur Weasley, to come and hold him, and tell him that he was good? Only gone. Not coming back. Never coming through the door.

You’re ruining your life for the approval of a dead man.

He hadn’t understood it until now. He saw that there was no version of Arthur Weasley that wouldn’t come for Harry. It didn’t matter what he’d done or not done in the graveyard. Arthur would find him, hold him, and tell him he was good.

Which, of course, were three words that Lucius Malfoy would never say.

Hermione’s arm was tight around Draco’s waist, and she was still half tucked under his elbow, hoarded against his chest. She made a

small sympathetic sound, might've been pity, might've been gladness. He ran his thumb over her shoulder and felt the involuntary shudder go down her spine, a reflex, a wave like a bird arching its back before flight.

He might have cared, in any other universe, that his mother could see it. But this wasn't any other universe. There was a dead boy in the hallway and a dead man on the floor, and he was allowed to hold Hermione Granger if he wanted to.

And he had to. If he couldn't, he couldn't see a way of getting through this, any of it — the next minute, the next five minutes, the next fifty years. The rise and fall of her ribcage under his palm was one of the few remaining vital organs of the world.

So he was allowed. He was a Malfoy, and it meant he could have what he wanted, and he wanted this. Her. Alive and next to him and closer to him than anyone else.

If nobody else had been there, he might have said as much to his mother, who kept looking at him from the corner of her eye. Pointedly. As if he couldn't read her. He was half her, of course he knew what she wanted to say.

He put another hand around Hermione's head and ran his fingers into her hair, and that was a pleasure, itself, the reliable spring of her curls at his touch. There were some things that didn't change. This was something real — the texture, the smell, the color. It would get everywhere, and he would be peeling long brown hairs out of his shirts for weeks, and that was good, that was another real thing. The next few weeks would still happen. The world hadn't ended, just lost direction.

From the doorway, Molly, Bill, and Ron hurried inside, collecting around Harry, forming a kind of human shell. For Draco it would've been a nightmare, that many persons trying to get personal at once, but Harry drank it in like water for the parched.

A terrible voyeurism flooded him, pity and discomfort, the jangling unease of something he wasn't supposed to watch. He turned, but the other things to look at were not much better: his mother's long accusatory stare, Dumbledore's quiet conference with McGonagall, a dead body, or the unconscious one-eyed man.

And Hermione, who was scrubbing out her eyes, and he found that was best. She had teartracks like railroads splitting her freckles and she was trying to rub them out before anyone could see, but new ones kept spilling down involuntarily, even as she tried to hide them.

It occurred to him that her father wasn't coming through the door, either. Her father was a hundred miles away, probably sleeping beside his wife, and had no idea that his daughter was crying, or why.

He understood it. How hollow it felt, how lonely. It was a different kind of orphaning, but it couldn't feel all that different, could it? It was the same for both of them — it didn't matter how hard they yelled or cried or hurt. Their fathers weren't coming to save them, couldn't. They would never even really know how great they were, would never look on them with the same pride that Arthur might Harry or Ron; for all that Hermione's muggle father must have loved her, it didn't matter, because his daughter was no longer any order of creature he could understand. And no matter how long Hermione waited, Herbert Granger would never be coming through that door.

He suddenly wished that they were alone, so he could tell her that he understood. He'd tell her—

He'd tell her that he'd come for her. Through the door. And any other door she'd care to stand behind, anywhere in the world, always. They could do that for each other, couldn't they? Who said it had to be a parent? They could do it themselves. Find each other. Tell each other they were good.

His father had already given him the most important things he'd ever need, which were the name and the blood, and the rest of it — the

rest of it he could do on his own. With her. He could be Draco Malfoy, the scion of the two greatest houses to ever live, un-fucking-touchable, and he could have her, too, and if anyone told him he couldn't, he would make it their problem. Immediately. Violently, if necessary. Vincit semper.

"Draco," said his mother.

He startled. The situation reasserted itself: Arthur was escorting Harry out of the room, cocooned by Ron and Bill; Dumbledore and Molly were talking in low voices together, their expressions identically businesslike and firm. Dumbledore was talking quickly, and making some kind of list; Molly was doing a lot of nodding. McGonagall had knelt over Moody, and resumed Snape's work tending to the fallen man's eye.

And Narcissa had one hand on his shoulder, with the same grip a sailor might apply to a rudder.

"A word," she said.

"Fine."

She looked at Hermione.

Hermione said, "Oh," quite embarrassed, and started wriggling out of Draco's grip. Draco didn't let go.

"What," he said.

"A word alone."

"Perhaps later."

"Draco."

"No? Then speak."

Narcissa pursed her lips. She murmured, “If I have done something to offend you—”

“I don’t know,” he snapped. “It’s possible. What do you think? Vanishing for a year, no announcement, no explanation, shipping me off for the summer, three letters in as many months, all but *ordering* me away from the Manor, and forcing me to beg Severus for answers to make sure you hadn’t *died*— does that strike you as offensive?”

“We will discuss this at length. I promise you. There are apologies,” she said, haltingly, “to be made. But here—”

“No, we’ll do it here,” he snarled, “because you’re the one who decided we needed to speak *now,* when you were perfectly content to leave me in the dark for *months* as long as it suited you, but when you’re asked to wait a fucking hour—”

She had nothing for that, but her eyes were sharp.

Hermione cleared her throat and gingerly extricated herself from under his arm. His side turned cold without her. “I actually wanted to go visit Harry,” she said, in low tones. “They’re taking him to the Hospital Wing, and I want to speak to him without… I want to speak to him. And I still have to get this looked at, so.”

She gestured to her burned arm. Narcissa made an appreciative noise of discomfort. Draco’s stomach twisted.

“Do you need help?”

“They didn’t burn my legs,” she said.

They stared at each other. She gave a shrill giggle.

“God, I don’t know why I said that,” she said. “I, er… I think I might be in shock. Actually.”

“Quite reasonable.”

“I’m going to talk to Madam Pomfrey,” she said faintly, nodding to herself. “I’m going to… I’ll find you later. Alright?”

He nodded. She touched his wrist — furtively, like she wasn’t sure she was allowed — and then left, skirting a wide circle around Crouch’s body, and her heels crunching quietly on the broken glass.

He’d walked these halls for four years now. He knew them as well as the Manor, or near enough. So he chafed at the way his mother took lead of him on their way downstairs, her steps ringing on the stone like some kind of military fanfare, as if he needed the instruction. He was a week short of fifteen years old, and he needed no one to lead him. He lived on no one’s leash.

So it was no small amount of pettiness that he overtook her on the grand staircase, and cut ahead, taking advantage of a newfound edge in height and speed. He took her destination for the Great Hall, or perhaps the dungeons, which was why it surprised him when she turned off only at the seventh floor, passing halls upon halls of study rooms and crossing through a narrow channel walled on either side with windows that cut away to a dizzying drop below. This was a part of the castle he hadn’t visited, though he was vaguely aware they were close to Ravenclaw Tower, since he remembered streams of students in blue ties always toddering off this way at the evening’s end.

With a rustle of black skirts, she swept around the last corner and came upon a dead end. She marched up to the wall and began pacing in front of it, her hands behind her back, dainty brow knit in concentration.

“Mother?”

“In a moment, Draco.”

That stung a part of him he thought he’d lost years ago. When he was nine, he’d found a way to jimmy the lock on his father’s broom

collection without tripping the alarms, and made off with one of his antique Thunderbolts, selected chiefly because the solid bronze dorsal fin flaps were, in a nine-year-old's estimation, 'really sodding cool, Mum,' and 'not tacky at all.' He wasn't found out in his theft so much as caught hovering about five feet north of the chimney stacks — though even then, he likely could have beat the charges if he hadn't resisted arrest, forcing Dobby to scamper around the Manor roofs like a foxhound while he bobbed and weaved between the wrought-iron embellishments, sometimes pretending — and this was the thing that did it, probably, he could admit — to spear himself on them; a pantomime which he acted out, for his mother's benefit, with bloodcurdling screams.

He still got phantom tingles from the aftermath of that episode, sometimes, in his eardrums. That or tinnitus.

Nostalgia prickled, deeply and dissonantly out-of-place in a miasma of horror and grief. The first year without his father had been horrible, and he hadn't made it easier, but his mother's frustration had been something familiar and old even then, a trustworthy constant, just as her forgiveness would be, ten minutes after it was over. It felt the same way now that it had then.

Now he was older and taller and smarter, and he understood his mother like few other things in the world, beside the wand at his hip and his own face in the mirror, and knowing that she would forgive him in ten minutes didn't help anymore. It didn't make him worry less.

Narcissa stopped. "There," she said, with satisfaction.

The bricks rippled, peeling back to reveal a tall door of dark wood, crosshatched with iron deadbolts.

"What—?"

"Not here," she hissed, glancing down the hallway, and she ushered him inside.

If the ornate door had raised his expectations, what laid beyond it quickly punctured them. It was a wide stone room, half the size of a quidditch pitch, absolutely resplendent with dust. Whoever had touched it in the last half-century had not done so with a custodial affect. Its windows bore clouded smears of age, and chandeliers cloaked in sheets. A fireplace glittered weakly at the far end of it. It was completely empty, save for a small table and a pair of chairs near the fire, and a coat rack by the door.

The door closed behind him with a dull *creak.*

Draco ambled curiously around the room, peering into some of the windows, scuffing his shoe on the ancient blue carpets.

“What is this room? I don’t know it.”

“It’s called the Room of Requirement,” she said briskly, stripping her coat and gloves. Both floated onto the rack with a twitch of her wand, and the rack, if he wasn’t mistaken, seemed to bend over slightly to accommodate them. “In my time, at least. It goes by several names. Some of the Slytherins called it the Come and Go Room.”

They sat down at the table. Narcissa snapped her fingers, and a tea set shimmered out of the aether, crafted in the same bronze as the teaware in the common rooms and the Great Hall. She reclined, and he poured her a cup.

“That’s helpful,” he remarked. “Is there a trick to that? It would save me a lot of time in the library.”

“It’s not a spell. The Room isn’t just a ‘private place.’ It responds to the needs of the person who calls it. You remember how I take it?”

“Don’t insult me.” He dropped a single lemon wedge into her tea and slid it across the table. “Under what limitations?”

“Theoretical ones,” she said, lifting her teacup to her lips. “Space and time are constants.”

“Obviously. I understand that the laws of magic don’t change here.”

“Don’t get lippy. I tolerated your cheek earlier, because we were in company, but I’m not your little muggle-born friend. And you’ve grown rather loose in your manners all around.”

“Do you mean Hermione Granger?” He dropped his cup onto the table with a bit too much force; it rattled. He sat back in his chair and crossed his legs. “Because I’m almost certain you know what her name is.”

Narcissa gave him a flat look.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Her look continued, but harder.

“I’m offering,” he continued, blithely, though he was approaching the level of anger that jittered. “I’m glad to talk about it. Perfectly delighted. We can have it all out, right here. Spare us the trouble later on.”

“I doubt anything needs to be said,” she said stiffly. “You know what I think—”

“As does everyone you’ve ever met,” he said sharply. “Granger included. I told you we were friends; I thought that might buy her a modicum of courtesy.”

“You are asking far more than you know of me, Draco.”

“No,” he said, now sailing past the jittering point, and straight up in volume. “Because you think I’m asking you to accept her, and I’m not. Frankly, I don’t give a damn whether you like her, or whether it bothers you that I keep her company. I’m asking you to shut up and pretend, in the same way I have—”

“Draco!”

“—faithfully pretended to like everyone you’ve ever asked me to, which incidentally is not a short list, and exercise some level of dignity and forbearance in the face of someone who, whatever else you think of her, is at least graceful enough to look past the fact that you want her dead.”

Narcissa blanched. She put her teacup down hard on the saucer, and the crack was loud.

“I don’t want her dead.”

He gestured at her irritably. “See? You’re doing it already.”

“I don’t.”

“I told you, I really don’t care. All I’m asking for is an old fashioned grin-and-bear it. The rest, you can hammer out with whatever deity that cares.”

“I don’t want them dead,” repeated Narcissa, in a voice that was thin but firm. “I’ve never been one of those people. You know that.”

“You just married one.”

Crack.

She set down her teacup.

“I married your father.”

“I’ve gathered,” he said.

“Do you want to talk about him?” Her tone was velvet.

“Not really,” he said. He felt belligerent and restless. “Apart from my having spent the afternoon being traumatized and hunted, it strikes me as the sort of conversation that keeps.”

She smiled.

“I know it makes you sad when I mistake you,” she said, “and I don’t mean to. But there’s a reason. It’s not just the hair and the eyes.”

He stared at her. She had never admitted, in so many words, that she was mad before. Her episodes had been an untouched invisible *thing* that sat over their heads, while he fretted over them, and she pretended that the world above was nothing but sky.

It was a relief.

“How?” he said, trying for ‘casual,’ and ending up at ‘concussed.’

“A certain affect,” she said. She was fidgeting with her signet ring, spinning it around and around her third finger, the same way he did with his. “A way of speaking. He showed me this room, you know.” She paused, glanced at him, and quirked the corner of her mouth up. “The Come and Go Room. If you will.”

He gave a horrified start.

“Mother.”

“For Merlin’s sake, darling, you’re nearly fifteen.”

“I’m *sitting here!”*

“It’s been twenty years. I’m sure whatever remnants that prior occupants have left behind—”

“Will haunt my memory forever, thanks to you! Merlin’s beard!”

“And that’s another thing you two would have in common, you’re prudes,” she remarked, and sipped her teacup.

“I wish it was something you and I had in common,” he said disgustedly, and escorted his tea back to the table, as far away from him as possible. His stomach had violently submitted its resignation.

Awkward silence sank in like nightfall. Dourly, he raised his eyes to meet his mother's, and found her watching him with a fond but tentative sort of expression, as if she were seeking something she didn't know if she'd find. Probably she was frightened. She'd never had these kinds of conversations, either.

"What was your business with Theo?"

She frowned. "What business?"

"You wrote him letters. You're not obligated to tell me, but I'm curious."

"It's no particular secret," she admitted. "I only thought he seemed like he needed a bit of affection. And he's a good boy, under everything. He reminds me of a boy I used to know, I… a boy who would have profited from having a better kind of mother." She sniffed. "I imagine Theodore would have, too."

His throat tightened, but he didn't chase the point.

It was a principle of their family — which, he was now realizing, might have been erroneously instantiated by people with very different problems than themselves — that they didn't talk about everything that was wrong with them. The general theory being that there was no point, because the things that were wrong with Blacks and Malfoys couldn't be fixed.

"Uncle Severus said that your condition deteriorated. Over Christmas."

Then again, he was the head of his family. He decided what they would or wouldn't talk about.

She considered.

"It didn't," she said.

"I gathered."

“I gave license to Severus to speak on my behalf.”

“I assumed.”

“He was attempting to find a pretext that would not alarm you.”

“He failed.”

She pressed her lips together. Abruptly, she vanished the tea set with a wave of her hand, and leaned over the table on her elbows.

“Draco.”

“What? What is it?”

“I am taking you into my confidence. I require your oath on our house that you will not discuss the contents of this conversation with anyone except Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape.”

“Albus D— why does he get to know?”

“I require your oath before I can answer that question.”

“Mother, it’s me,” he said incredulously. “I’m your son. I’m not going to gossip—”

“I am sure it has not escaped your notice that Harry Potter and Hermione Granger are not included on the list of people whom you will be permitted to take in confidence. If that is a problem for you — if you feel unable to commit yourself to that promise, knowing that it may be difficult to harbor secrets from them — then I urge you, now, to refuse me, and I will tell you as much of the truth as I am able.”

“But not all of it,” he said, after a moment.

“No.”

He sighed.

“I swear secrecy. On the copious land, the spotless blood, and the dread name of my father, Lucius Malfoy, which is now mine, and ever will be, I swear to share confidence in this with none but Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape.”

“Thank you.”

“Whatever. Now you’ve promised, so talk,” he said, flicking his hand at her. “This had better be worth it, because if I learn you’ve been pub crawling with Aradia Burke—”

“Do you remember when there was a break-in at the Manor? In your second year.”

He blinked. “It was one of the more wretched nights of my life. I have the main points.”

“They were former Death Eaters. Corban Yaxley. William Jugson. They stole a book from your father’s library, a Dark artifact.”

“I recall. Yaxley wanted it,” he said, frowning. “He said it was of use in… something or other, for the Dark Lord.”

“Yaxley was a fool, but he was correct.” She fidgeted restlessly with her ring. “That book… the diary, rather… was created by the Dark Lord himself.”

He sat up straighter. “What was it doing in my father’s possession?”

“Being protected,” she said. “Hidden. Kept, I believe, for some point in the future, when your father would either require leverage with Dumbledore and the Ministry, or…”

“Or?” He paused. “Or what, Mother?”

“Or proof of loyalty,” she said. “If he decided to go back.”

“That’s not possible. Nobody thought it was possible for him to return.”

“It was,” she said quietly. “Your father was one of perhaps ten people who knew it was possible. Who survived the war.”

“What on earth do you m—”

“The Dark Lord is immortal,” she said.

His head shook. It was a tiny movement, not voluntary, just instinct.

“Immortality is impossible,” he said, reflexive. “Even through the use of magic.”

“Is it? Is that a law, that it’s impossible?”

“No, but it’s — it’s the Peverell Paradox, right, no amount of living can prove immortality, but whereas one death proves the converse —”

“What about a resurrection, then? What does that prove?”

His jaw snapped shut. Quiet descended like a shroud.

“The Dark Lord has split his soul among several vessels,” she said calmly. “His body being only one. When the body was destroyed, he subsisted in transient forms, as a revenant, until he found a vehicle that could carry him to power. That creature found its way to Hogwarts, where Harry Potter killed him, and in so doing almost certainly saved your life, as well as the life of everyone who witnessed his weakness; the Dark Lord cannot permit evidence of the machinery he uses to survive.

“The number of the Dark Lord’s vessels is uncertain, but Dumbledore believes, as do I, that it may be seven; it would be traditional, and we have reason to believe that he would honor tradition, all else being equal. The diary was one. It was given to your father upon his ascent to the highest rank of Death Eater, the innermost circle, to whom less than ten people, living or dead, were

ever made party. They were his lieutenants. His knights, some called them."

He slowly raised his hand to his temple and massaged it, head throbbing.

"The night Yaxley stole the diary, Severus brought me to Hogwarts," she said solemnly. "Dumbledore revealed to me his theory about the vessels — a theory that was confirmed, at the end of that year, when the diary came back into his possession. Severus and I helped him to destroy it. What I saw that night — I cannot speak of it — but it made clear that he was correct in his assumptions, and that whatever creature lurked in the diary, it was not only a fragment of the Dark Lord, but a work of magic more vile than anything your father ever conceived of, even at the height of his powers."

This was the first good news he'd heard in what felt like years.

"They can be destroyed?" he croaked.

"Not easily. A soul is a resilient thing, as you may imagine. Fiendfyre was our third or fourth attempt, and it took considerable ingenuity on Severus's behalf."

"What's fiendfyre?"

She flicked her fingers dismissively. "There's theory to it, which I never bothered about, but the essence is a kind of necromancy. You summon a revenant—"

"Oh, good, so it's easy, then."

"—and bind it to a magical fire, which gives it a sort of corporeal form, though of course it's a devil to get rid of, now you've given it a permeable floating vessel — I'm sorry, this was never my area, you should ask your godfather. But he did it, and the thing… *died,* I suppose, or whatever you can even call it, and then Dumbledore asked me to swear an oath."

“And you refused him.”

She said nothing.

“Mother, you didn’t.”

“I made a good bargain.”

“What did you give him? What on earth did you get?”

“I swore to provide him with any and all services he may require in his efforts to kill the Dark Lord,” she said, without one ounce of regret.

He stared at her.

“You swore your *service.* Full stop.”

“In a very specific capacity. I am not a house-elf.”

“For *what?* What could possibly be worth that?”

“Albus Dumbledore has promised to keep you safe,” she said, and it was rich with triumph. She thought she’d won, he realized; he thought she’d *swindled* him, Albus Dumbledore, the great pigeon himself, the latest in fifteen generations to be manhandled into the losing side of a deal with a Malfoy.

She was an egomaniac. He didn’t know why that surprised him, she was his own mother.

“To keep me safe.”

“Correct.”

“You’re joking.”

“Why do you say so?”

“Because he’s not very good at it!”

“He raised his own concerns about your growing appetite for danger. We negotiated broad parameters.”

“Is ‘broad’ closer to ‘alive’ or ‘well’ in this context?”

“He is sworn, specifically,” she said, with cool satisfaction, “to protect your life, health, and happiness, in that order, insofar as he is able, and to do whatever he must, in the pursuit of his objectives, insofar as it does not cause you significant or avoidable pain; to which the only exception, in any instance, is an act that may through its direct and immediate consequences bring about the death of the Dark Lord.”

She folded her hands in her lap, awaiting judgment.

“I see.” He paused. “Did you get Gatz to draw that up?”

“I obtained counsel.”

“Merlin.”

“That was a joke. You’re allowed to joke, but your mother isn’t?” She arched her eyebrow, amused. “It’s not so grave as you make it sound.”

“It’s a *suicide pact.* It’s exactly as grave as it sounds.”

“It’s a formalization of an arrangement that we would have held anyway. We have each other by the throat, you see.” She settled back in her chair, still distinctly proud. “If I betray him to the Dark Lord, then he will know that Dumbledore has learned the secret of his power, and will act swiftly to secure his vessels, erasing what little progress we have made in discovering them. If Dumbledore allows harm to come to you, meanwhile, I will find him and kill him, and the Dark Lord shall reign eternal on a throne of muggle bones.”

His stomach turned. She tilted her head and said, “Well— not *bones,* exactly,” in a tone that was grotesque, frankly, in its abstract consideration of something all too clearly remembered — and he found his voice.

“‘We’ have made?”

“Hm?”

“You said ‘progress we have made.’ Implying that you’ve been involved.”

“Yes. I have been hunting them for him,” she said. She ran her ring up and down her finger, rolling the stone here and there in the light. “I believe I may have found one; but I have yet to find a witness who can confirm it. There are not many alive who harbor such information.”

“That’s what you were doing in Romania.”

“Yes.”

“You were hunting his… vessels. Because you thought he might have hidden one there.”

“Correct. I no longer believe so,” she admitted, “but Dumbledore wanted to be sure. He argued that it would be tactically superior, in abstract, to disperse the fragments as widely as possible. Which is true. But it does not fit with the custom of the Dark Lord. He would never permit them to be so far from Britain, his homeland, his magical terrain… Severus and I are of one mind on this.”

“So Severus is in on this, then.”

“Don’t use such pedestrian phrases, Draco, it wants for an understanding of how I hate them. He is not ‘in on’ anything. We are *parties* to a *confidence.”*

“Fine. Alright. Do you know what the… ‘vessel’... you’re hunting will look like?”

“No.” Narcissa slipped her ring back into place on her knuckle and folded her hands under her arms. She leaned on the table, weary. “In the old days, there was a certain… ceremony involved, when he raised a servant to the highest rank. He would offer them a gift of some sort, a rare jewel, a historical artifact, a personal item... Something they were to protect. With their life, if necessary. I don’t remember now what all they were — I wasn’t there, you understand, I learned all this through your father, and we agreed that I wasn’t to know everything… But there was a gilded chalice, once. For Roddy.” Her expression was distant. “A necklace, for Regulus.”

“And were they told what it was?”

“No. I don’t know if anyone realized what, exactly, they were protecting… Even your father never knew, in so many words, although he came to understand that it was more than a test of loyalty. But it was important, they all understood that much.”

“Who else had them?”

“Not many. Your father was one. Bella. Regulus. Rodolphus, too, though I always suspected he rode there on Bella’s coattails... Those were the ones I knew. Others, I’m sure, now dead or missing.”

There was a lot of ache in him. Mostly in his head, which was in levels of discomfort both physical and mental, as he tried in vain to wrap its weary corpus around yet another set of facts far too enormous for reason or sense. His body was going to be sore probably forever. The lines on his forehead were soon going to be geologically classified as caverns and be studied by anatomists for years.

He struggled to keep his tone even. Narcissa’s hand found his across the table, and he let her take it, too stunned to deny the simplicity of a minor comfort.

“You turned coat,” he said, which was not what he’d meant, but it was the first thing he could haul out of the flaming office system in his brain.

“No.” She was calm, and it was grounding. He wondered why his mother could never have been like this, in the moments after she resurfaced from her episodes — cool and still, a pillar of something harder than steel. “I never swore an oath to the Dark Lord. I made no promises.”

He hadn’t known that, actually.

“You understand that he won’t care,” he said. “You do understand that, though. That if — when. He comes. He won’t care what you did or didn’t say.”

She nodded with dignity and acknowledgement. “I do. And he will hear the truth: that with your life in the balance, I had no choice.”

“What? So it’s my fault?”

She gave him a look full of sorrow and reproach. His knee was starting to jog, his hands twitching, and actually, hang tiredness, hang soreness, he wanted to run somewhere. He wanted to strike and throw curses and feel like he was bigger than something, like the world wasn’t one great totem of cruelty that he’d never understand.

“You aren’t going to understand this, and in fact you’re going to find it rather patronizing,” she said quietly, “because I found it to be extraordinarily so, when my mother told me; but someday, Draco, you will hold your first child in your arms, and you will find yourself capable of almost anything.”

He gave it the consideration it was due.

“You’re correct. I *do* find that patronizing.”

She smiled slightly. She stood up. Her chair vanished, and it was as good as a dismissal.

“I love you,” she said, quite seriously. It did not sound like a happy statement. He didn’t know how to feel about that. “From any distance, from any height, from any disappointment, from every betrayal, just as I have loved everything that was ever worthy of it.”

“Mother,” he said, wishing fiercely to shuck his own skin and temporarily vacate it for less humiliating pastures.

Then she smiled at him, warm and twinkling, like it had all been an excellent joke. And perhaps it had been. Perhaps it could be, her smile said, if they wanted it to.

They were Malfoys. The past was what they wanted it to be, between them. If they made it so.

Except. *Except.*

He rose. Table and chair vanished. Now the room was empty, and they were alone in it.

“Come home tonight,” she murmured. “You’ll be happy at the Manor.”

Which was true, on the one hand. But then, on the other.

I’ll find you, Hermione had said.

She was going to be looking for him. And he had a promise to make her.

Through any door.

“I’ll be home in a week.” He offered her his arm. “You’ll have me for the summer.”

“A mere instant.”

“So you think. I want to try the Thunderbolt again,” he said. “I think I’m big enough for it, now.”

Her slender fingers pinched his arm, punishingly, but she was laughing when they left the Room of Requirement. When he looked over his shoulder, the last thing he saw was the pale brick curling back over the iron lattice, walling it up, sealing the echoes of what they’d said inside.

Somewhere amidst the horror, the night must have passed, because inconceivably, it was morning: a dull cyan pigment that stained the sky and stripped it of blackness like paint thinner, letting the black furrows of the Forbidden Forest gradually swell into existence against a softening shade of blue. Ghosts and torchlight flickered over the vacant halls as he and Narcissa crossed the castle, out of ancient stone passages and past classrooms of rich dark wood, moving into the airy chambers of the Hospital Wing.

Hermione sat on one of the long benches outside it, cross-legged, reading from a copy of *Defensive Magical Theory.* A quill and leatherbound journal levitated close within reach, and a pair of ink pots orbited her head slowly, like binary stars.

Their footsteps made them known. Pots, quill, and journal all settled to the bench, and she closed the book, lifting her head. She had been cleaned up, her face was clear if deeply tired, deep circles under eyes raw with bloodshot and crying. She had changed out of her uniform, and wore what were obviously someone’s spare clothes: a baggy cardigan with sleeves cuffed thrice, a pair of brown muggle mud boots, a paper hospital band still encircling the smooth, healed skin of her forearm.

She stood up.

“Don’t tell me,” he said. “He’ll survive, but he’ll lose the baby.”

It was gratifying that she smiled, even if it had all the humor of Mad-Eye on a bad morning. “We’re still deciding how to tell Ron.”

“Don’t fret, he’ll have other chances. Is the full clan in attendance?”

“Yes. The Weasleys are all there. And a few others.”

She held something up. It was a flap of old parchment, weathered to hell, and it was bare, so it took him a moment to recognize it as the Marauder’s Map. Which meant Lupin and Sirius.

Narcissa was examining one of the oil portraits of old school nurses.

“I’m sure Madam Pomfrey wouldn’t welcome more company, then.”

“She’s been dropping hints.”

“Hints such as ‘get the hell out of my ward’?”

“Loud commentary about the difficulty of working in crowds.”

“Subtle.”

“She’s a light touch.”

He laughed. Hermione snickered, and then wiped something out of her eye.

“Granger, you remember my mother.”

He extended a hand to Narcissa, who floated back into the conversation with the grace of someone who had never been outside it.

“Miss Granger,” she said. She was staring down her nose at Hermione as if the secret to eternal life was inscribed on her forehead in a language she didn’t speak. Draco had never been so miserably aware of being powerless to do anything about his own

problems. He felt like a child crushing two puzzle pieces together, wanting them to adhere, even as the wood splintered.

“Hello, Mrs. Malfoy,” said Hermione.

“I beg your pardon, dear one; I assume you have not been informed, and so I entreat you not to think me rude, but the title of a Malfoy’s wife is ‘lady.’”

She was back in the formal register, the soprano flute of parties and dinners, a voice that carried between clinking glasses and humming violins. He ought to have been grateful, but what he found instead was a profound disgruntlement, and a lonely sort of melancholy.

Hermione tilted her head. “That would imply Draco was a lord,” she said skeptically.

“It does, by law. Custom forestalls the use of that address until his seventeenth birthday.”

“Is that a formal holding, or only a title?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m asking if you have vassals, Lady Malfoy.”

Somewhere along the line, she’d picked up Harry’s knack for making a title sound like a silly headdress.

“Not quite so many as we did two years ago,” said Narcissa, and then Hermione gave a cold little smile.

“I see.”

“Mother—”

“Does Binns still teach History of Magic?”

Hermione went frozen. She looked like someone had jumped her in a dark alley with a pop quiz, and her wariness was warring with her natural instinct to rip out a quill and ace it.

“Yes?”

Narcissa sniffed. “Has he reached the life of Emeric the Eminent?”

“Mother: what?”

“Do you mean Emeric the Evil?” said Hermione, somewhat pointedly.

“Apparently not. I will educate you. Emeric was a great wizard of the middle ages, and he drew many followers,” said Narcissa. “One Yuletide, two followers came to him with a white stag, and both claimed the right to make a tribute of it in their liege’s name. Emeric gave judgment: he would sever the stag in half, with one stroke of his mighty wand, and a half would pass to each claimant. To share the tribute. And the first follower said: ‘Lord, I yield claim. The tribute of half a dead thing is no tribute at all.’”

The notes of condescension were neither missed nor ignored by Hermione, who on her most patient days did not ooze restraint.

“I know what this is,” she interrupted. “It’s just the story of King Solomon. Two women bring a baby, both saying it’s theirs, and he offers to cut it in half, and the one who objects is the real mother — did someone adapt it for wizards? Because the Bible’s much older.”

“And Emeric replied,” said Narcissa stiffly, ignoring her, “‘it is true, half a stag is no fine tribute; but it is better to destroy one’s enemies than to give them succor, even if in the pretext of nobility.’ And he cut down the first follower, for weakness, while the second follower received the tribute and his favor.”

Hermione blinked, aghast.

“What a horrible story,” she said. “That’s a terrible way to treat your followers. His retention must have been awful.”

Narcissa said, “The man who forsakes his claim easily is not worthy of it. Nor any other kind of service.”

Hermione made a skeptical sound like a creaking hinge.

“Fine,” she said. “Literarily, that isn’t really — but sure. What I don’t understand is this: you’ve implied the stronger wizard was willing to let Emeric kill the stag.”

Narcissa inclined her head. As near a thing to surprise as she ever showed in public.

“You disapprove?”

“Of course I do,” she said. “Apart from the fact he’s evil—”

“A simple word for simple-minded people.”

“No, it’s actually, literally, true in this case — but apart from that, I don’t see how the kind of man who thinks ‘cut it in half’ is any kind of equitable solution to the problem of limited indivisible resources could be worthy of tribute,” she said, mildly indignant. “And there’s two of them. They ought to just kill Emeric, and let the stag go.”

Draco’s face did something entirely unlicensed and probably unremarkable, or at least not the sort of thing he’d want in print.

For her own part, Narcissa looked like Merlin had just swaggered up and taken a knee.

“Interesting idea,” she said, her voice wooden and odd. She rolled her signet ring around her knuckle, pensive. “You’ve an innovative mind. I hear you are somewhat formidable with a cauldron.”

“Or without it,” said Hermione, who never could take a caveat lying down.

It was a sign of who he was dealing with that he wasn’t sure if the interaction was going well or not.

His mother turned away from Hermione and took his face between her hands. She gave him a kiss to the top of his head, like a crown. It felt nice, but also vaguely pointed; perhaps it would have been less so if she had ever done it in public before.

But he didn’t mind it, either. Especially because she bookended it with a cryptic murmur of: “Remember to come home, darling.”

Her palm cupped his cheek. She cut a glance at Hermione, wordlessly turned her back, and walked away.

On the way out of the Hospital Wing, another figure hobbled into the hallway, and gave a cry. It was Filch, his ratty coat flapping at his hips, his keyring jingling with the quake of his wizened shoulders when he saw her.

“Lady Black,” he gasped. And — Draco squinted, sure that the night’s terrors had at last broken his powers of perception — without reservation, he swept into a deep bow.

“Hello, Filch,” said Narcissa, and in her tone was a startling warmth. “I know it’s after hours.”

The caretaker gave a toothy grin. “Never did give an old man no rest.”

“Goodness, no, darling. Time enough for that when you’re dead. How fares the Widow Norris?”

“Still kicking. Just here, in fact. ’Spect she remembers you.”

“I should say. No creature of taste has ever forgotten.”

Narcissa bent, and held out her fingers to the aged cat, who mewed and shoved its head into her waiting hand. He had never seen the

creature take kindly to anything before, much less permit itself to be touched.

Filch stepped out of her way, ushering her down the stairs, and she swept ahead of him. He followed two steps behind, hobbling along like the world's oldest living footman.

Hermione made a curious sound. They both stared after his mother for a moment, reconfiguring their assumptions.

"I didn't think Filch liked anybody," she said. Her voice was small and echoing in the wide corridor.

"No. Nor I."

In the windows, the blue had thinned to watercolor, streaked with paper-pale veins of clouds, and the lavender light of morning spilling out in the east. There were voices now, in the castle, murmuring from behind the doors and in the creak of staircases shuffling from landing to landing. The Beauxbatons carriage caught the first sparkles of sunlight on its spire and twinkled. The masts of the Durmstrang ship were a dark forest of crosses on the lake.

Hermione brought her arms around herself and held tight, as if an internal entropy was driving her apart at the atomic level.

"I spoke to her." It was important that she knew this. This was the first thing he thought she ought to know. "About the— blood issue."

"Oh, God, please d— I'm sorry." She broke off, cringing. "That's just — I can't take it. Not tonight, please? I don't care. Or, rather, it's not that I don't *care,* but it isn't… If the resolution wasn't 'I'm forswearing your company forever and camping in Slytherin,' then let it wait, please."

"Do I act like a man who's forsworn you?"

She went thoughtfully still.

In the silence, he could hear everything he wanted to tell her.

The Dark Lord is immortal. He's split his soul, my mother is Dumbledore's agent. They're hunting him. He was never dead, not really.

Dumbledore has an Unbreakable Vow to keep me alive.

My father was the highest kind of Death Eater there is. You were right about him. He'd likely have killed you.

I wouldn't let him.

"It doesn't feel real that he's dead," she said, by and by. Lost in the fugue of thought, he very nearly mistook her for speaking about his father, and in that haze he almost agreed. "He can't be. I keep thinking that he's going to… to wake up. That I'll see him again. Like he's gone on some kind of vacation."

At first, he thought she meant Crouch.

"I'm sorry, Granger."

What an awful distance there was between the word itself and what it tried to convey.

"It's alright. No. Sorry— no, it's not. Actually, it might never be alright," she said, oddly calm. "He's dead. I keep trying to think about it, because I hate it whenever I forget, and then have to remember it again. You'd think remembering would be easier. But it's just as bad as learning it all over again."

"I know."

"His family was here earlier. To collect him. And Dumbledore spoke to them, first, because I… I didn't want to. Isn't that horrible? I didn't want to speak to them."

"You're not awful, Granger."

“But Mrs. Weasley said I should, and I did, and they were… they were so kind. They invited me to the funeral. Harry’s coming, too. And Ron, I suppose. You can—” She broke off. She could not look at him. The place between her shoes was hoarding all her attention. “You could come, too, if you wanted to. I mean, I would invite you, and I don’t think they would… I didn’t ask, but I’m sure you could. Oh, God, that’s terrible phrasing. Who wants to come to a funeral? Never mind. I don’t know what I was—”

“Of course I’m coming. Don’t be stupid.”

She might have had the decency not to look so hopelessly relieved.

“Thank you.”

“You and Potter don’t seem to understand this principle: you don’t *have* to say thank you for that.”

It occurred to him that Hermione had brutally exacting standards in almost every area except the way people treated her personally, where she had almost none. Or perhaps that was unique with respect to him.

“He has a little brother,” she said hollowly. “Had.”

“Etiquette dictates that you can table issues of verb tense until after the mourning period.”

“What?”

“I knew what you meant.”

“He was — he was seventeen,” she said, “and— and he said he liked talking to me, because he’d never had a real friend before. And he took me to the ball, and now he’s— he’s dead.”

“I assure you, the two events had nothing to do with one another.”

She hiccuped a laugh, and promptly started to cry.

“Oh, hell. That wasn’t meant to be flippant. I meant it sincerely. Survivor’s guilt, and that rot, you know.”

“I’m such a twit,” she said thickly. “When Molly and Arthur and Bill and the Krums all came and they were nice to me, and I couldn’t stop crying for ages, and then *you* come here with your stupid accent and you say something *utterly* stupid—”

“Go on then, blame a man for trying.”

“—and you make me feel better, which is horrible,” she said, savagely. “I’m not *supposed* to feel better. I’m supposed to be miserable. Because he’s dead, and I’m — I was his only friend, and — it hasn’t been a day, and I’m laughing. I’m a bad person.”

“I beg your pardon,” he said, as his concerns multiplied in dizzying arrays.

“I lead him on. Rita Skeeter was right—”

“Are you joking? You’re crying over a muckraker who’s approximately two thirds plastic?”

“Don’t make me laugh!”

“That was a factual statement, one, and two, and if I can’t have irony, then the enterprise of this conversation is simply sunk. You vastly overestimate my emotional range.”

“I’m serious.”

“Fine. What would you prefer?”

“I should be crying!”

“You are crying,” he pointed out, and she froze, full of mixed dismay and surprise.

He was tired. It had been almost twenty-four hours since his head had touched a pillowcase and his body was triggering every alarm that told him so. His arms were full of ache and his brain was still riding out aftershocks from several consecutive earthquakes in reality, and he had no more patience for this nonsense, when he wanted her sensible and bright and *present.*

There was a dead boy in the room. Not present, physically, but he was still there. It dawned on him with some fear that there might always be a dead boy in the room.

“Granger.” He cut through whatever the hell she was saying about him, and eased himself down on the bench beside her. Merlin, but it was good to sit. “You’re tired.”

“I’m a bad person,” she said, very quietly, with terrifying certainty.

He scrubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger, straining for something that would make her understand. Abruptly, he turned to her.

“No, you’re tired,” he said flatly. “The fact that you’re upright speaks to an ungodly level of stimulants being wrung from your pituitary gland, and I simply will not think about your cortisol levels for the sake of mine. I’ve never known you to be this stupid about anything in your life, and you should be religiously grateful that it’s only me to witness it, because if it were anyone else they’d mistake what you’re doing for some sort of tearful emotional catharsis — instead of what it is, which is a raw biochemical punishment for your brilliant life plan of fighting everything evil that moves, ever. And then you’d have to kill them, so the secret doesn’t get out that you’re mortal.”

She shook her head, still crying silently into her hands.

“You’re a good person,” he said quietly. “Krum knew that, it was part of why he adored you.”

“He didn’t know me.”

“I do.”

“You could be wrong.”

“Not likely.”

“You don’t know what I’m thinking,” she said thickly. “I tried to save Harry, and I couldn’t. I failed him, and I failed Viktor, and now I can’t even mourn properly. I was *relieved* when Harry came back with his body — do you know that? Relieved. Viktor is dead, and I was *relieved,* because it wasn’t Harry. How can you do that to someone you called a friend? What kind of horrible — *thing* — feels that way? I didn’t deserve his friendship. I don’t deserve anyone’s friendship, I’m hateful—”

“If you were anyone else, I’d have their tongue out for saying that about you.”

She scoffed, wetly.

He consulted the truth, found he had nothing better, and deployed it warily, without any particular expectation that it would work. It rarely had before.

“If you’re hateful, then nothing in the world is anything but,” he said tiredly. “I’ve destroyed three hundred years of tradition just so I can sit here next to you, Granger, don’t go telling me you’re not worth following.”

She wrenched her head out of her hands, stared at him, and made a sound of inchoate rage and incredulousness.

He didn’t quite understand where the rage was from. He thought it was a perfectly normal thing to say, if admittedly somewhat saccharine. Perhaps she thought it was overdone.

Then there was a blur of motion, and he reeled back in alarm as something warm and wet slammed into his collarbone. She’d

scrambled into his lap.

“Granger—”

“Don’t.”

“I said *one* word.”

“Too much.”

“Excuse me?”

“Shut up,” she said, clearly and calmly, though still crying quite furiously. “You’ll ruin the moment.”

“It’s *my* moment, too.”

“So don’t ruin it, then.”

She was holding his chest as if she had to protect it from a band of chest-thieving ghouls.

“You annoy me,” he told the top of her head, which was nestled firmly against his collarbone.

“You,” she told his sternum, “make me feel murderous,” and her breath washed through his shirt.

He touched her waist, a recollection of the waltz position, fingers spread over the plane of her back.

“Better than anyone else, and never you forget it.”

It wasn’t a hug, exactly. He had by now experienced enough of them to make an authoritative judgment. It was more of an informal, etiquette-to-the-wind, thank-God-we’re-not-dead type of grapple. Of which he had also experienced more than one, but few like this.

Her head fit neatly under his chin, and it was easy to dip his head and be lost in her hair, which was always so wonderfully *warm,* even in a cold castle, even when the rest of him was prickling numb. The points where they were touching were pleasant anchors to the physical world. It was nice, for a change, to *want* to be in his body, to feel the things he was feeling, and not to escape them.

The door to the Hospital Wing creaked. He turned his head.

Ron stepped through the crevice in the door and stared a stare of such distance it could be charted in lightyears. For a moment he thought he was going to comment on how it looked, the two of them, toss off a sneer and a sour remark that would spike the memory of the whole occasion with a bad aftertaste.

Just then, on the heels of the night he'd had, Draco was fairly certain he would start a firefight in the hallway if he tried.

But Ron shut the door, folded his arms and firmly addressed the eastern window.

"Can come in now," he said. "Pomfrey's waiving the limit, now Harry's awake."

Hermione breathed out, long and slow. "How is he?"

Ron shrugged. "Better than before," he said. "You?"

"Not very good," she said.

His mouth crooked. "Yeah," he said. He nodded at Draco. "And you?"

"I'm still here."

"Right. That's something, isn't it." He reached for the door, to pull it back, and Draco realized that there would be a whole crowd of people on the other side of the door. The identity of the people didn't strictly matter; it was overwhelming by itself. He wished that

everything would have the common fucking decency to stop happening for five minutes, so he could get it all straight, and sort things out with Hermione. He was fairly certain they could cobble together a ten-step plan to set the world to rights, if only they could get five invulnerable minutes.

Four and a half, with Ron.

“Ron—”

With one hand on the door, he stopped, and looked at Hermione — a queer, furtive thing, out of the corner of his eye, like he didn’t really want to see her.

“Does anyone know what’s happening?” she asked, in one breath, like an exorcism.

“No. And I reckon they won’t, not for a long time.”

“But did Dumbledore say anything to your parents? About what’s going to happen to the Ministry, or to Nott?”

“I dunno. Maybe. He’s been coming and going a lot, and he and Padfoot and Moony went into a room with her and Bill and Dad, and they talked for a long time. But they didn’t let me or Charlie in.” He nodded at Draco. “What about you, do you know anything? Did your mum let on if she knew what’s coming?”

He could hear the question under the question. They were both watching him in sad vain hope of an answer, and he had two answers on his tongue, one a lie, the other a broken promise, neither one of which would satisfy.

What’s going to happen to us?

“Nothing,” he lied. “I don’t know.”

The next chapter, and the last of book 4, will be called "They Shall Not Grow Old."

Thank you — for everything.

They Shall Not Grow Old

Chapter 56: They Shall Not Grow Old

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Harry stayed in the Hospital Wing for a day, and then he moved out of the dorms. Professor McGonagall helped him carry his bags down to the Shrieking Shack, where Sirius and Remus were waiting for him. He spent the last week of class skipping school and living in the Shrieking Shack, where Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey would come down to visit in the afternoons, and various Weasleys could drop by through the Floo grate as they pleased. If the appearance of Sirius Black, wanted murderer and fugitive from the law, disturbed any of them, they resolved it behind closed doors with Dumbledore and Sirius himself. Remus was welcomed by all, and spent fifteen minutes locked in the dead heat of a hug with Molly while she sobbed an ocean into one of his shirts.

At school, Harry's absence was filled with rumors of its cause. It was in one sense fortunate that the last week of exams was a series of silent periods and study halls, not much opportunity for conversation, and though Dumbledore offered to let all three of them to skip the tests, as Harry had — and Ron accepted — Hermione put her hand up and became the first person in Hogwarts history to beg permission to sit an exam.

Draco sat them, but only because they were easy, and he wanted everyone else to know it.

Most people, he noticed, were skirting him in the corridors, avoiding his eyes. Whispers trailed him, as did their less common cousin, which was questions. He could blame no one for their curiosity about what had happened when the maze went down. He could blame everyone for the delusion that they were entitled to ask him about it.

It would have been easy for McGonagall to make a killing on House points, especially for the five minutes that Zacharias Smith spent floating up-side down over the breakfast table when he asked why Harry had gotten to “lark off” after the Tournament. But she ordered Smith to class and instead gave him a detention that was to be served out on Saturday afternoon in the Shrieking Shack.

“Thanks, professor,” he muttered.

“It is unorthodox to thank professors for giving detentions,” she sniffed, but then she touched his shoulder on the way out of the hall, and murmured: “It was well done, Mr. Malfoy.”

He doubted she was talking about Smith.

Which was worse than if she’d yelled at him. Kindness from her and other members of the staff did nothing to calm him, and in fact made him feel surreal, like he’d tripped into a wonderland where everything was cotton and rainbows and glass. It made him even more terrified about what would happen when he’d left it. What was the point of this pretending? The world was *over.* The Dark Lord had returned, and everyone was fucked.

Professor Snape didn’t return from wherever Dumbledore sent him by the end of the week. Potions exams were proctored by the Bloody Baron, who whisked up and down the aisles, cackling whenever he saw a student struggling with an answer; Defense Against the Dark Arts, whose professor had been transferred to St. Mungo’s for advanced tissue damage, was finished out by Dumbledore himself.

Cassius Warrington was admitted to a private ward in the Hospital Wing, where Madam Pomfrey spent three very long nights attempting to dispel what she called a “remarkably resilient” Dark curse. Flora Carrow could be found floating in the hallways near the east wing, often crying, and snapping at anyone who tried to help her.

In Harry’s absence, life was quieter. It was also worse. He spent sunlit afternoons reading in the window, orchestrated by the soft etch of Hermione’s quill on the desk beside him. He lost four in five games of wizard’s chess a day with Ron, who had become so unmercifully bored that he started to make up new variations on the rules, duplicating the chess board, playing in three dimensions, giving pieces new powers and ranges of motion, and other modifications that Draco enjoyed puzzling out the enchantments for while Ron mused on the strategic possibilities. By the week’s end they had developed spins on blitz chess that would make Ernie Macmillan, captain of the Hogwarts chess team, soil his trousers.

And still, it wasn’t enough. On nights when sleep eluded him, he would creep out of bed, unlatch the window, and draw his Nimbus from its case stored under his bed; and there, stepping out into the cool rich air of a cloudless summer’s night, he would fly long circles from Gryffindor to Ravenclaw to the Astronomy Tower, pushing until his thighs burned and his chest hurt from breathing, and float there with one foot barely brushing the tallest spire, watching the moon’s reflection on the lake spill like cream from a pale glass.

Dreams brought narrow corridors, hedges that closed in on him as he ran, bone-white masks that never flinched, and green lights that always found their target. In the worst ones, there was screaming — sometimes his, sometimes his mother’s, and sometimes a thin high girl’s scream that he would have known at any distance. He woke up fumbling for his wand and a curse that he knew with dreadful certainty would be too slow, sick from panic. Once, he found himself halfway up the stairs to the girls’ dorms before he realized what he was doing, and went to get his broomstick.

Hermione started drinking coffee in the mornings. Dark circles were her constant accessories. She was sharp as always in class, but tired quickly in the afternoons; when, as she sometimes did, she fell asleep during their afternoon study halls, her head wilting gradually and unwillingly onto the desk in front of her — or memorably, once, his shoulder — he didn’t wake her.

On some level he was afraid of what would happen when they left Hogwarts. For himself, of course — the people they had to fear could breach the Manor walls, and in fact had already done it, once. But he had his mother. He had the Manor, which was a fortress, properly used. Nobody stood watch at the Grangers' door. Their house wasn't even warded. And yet Hermione was intransigent to the suggestion that she spend the summer somewhere else, like the Weasleys'. The last serious discussion of the idea escalated to a shouting row, and that more or less put paid to it.

He wanted to inquire if Dumbledore could do something about it, but the headmaster didn't seem to have a free moment to ask: when he wasn't in class, he was pacing the halls, usually accompanied by a man or two in Ministry robes, discussing something in tones that always seemed dour and on the knife-edge of becoming uncivil.

There were things happening, somewhere, in closed rooms, and behind locked doors. Everyone knew it, but nobody knew what they were. Daphne's father revealed nothing except to warn her away from "the Potter boy," a loophole that she gamely exploited to continue sharing a room with Lavender and Parvati. Pansy, meanwhile, had withdrawn from school the day after the Tournament, and had supposedly taken her exams from home.

On Saturday afternoon, three fourth years crossed the lawns under a sweltering profusion of sunshine to take the passage under the Whomping Willow, and emerged into the Shrieking Shack.

Inhabitation had transformed it. The windows had been cleaned and repaired, filling the living room with summer's yellow dust-strained glow, and the furniture had been resuscitated with stitching. Fuzzy throw pillows and blankets heaped high on the sofas. Stacks of books tumbled sideways and over side tables for want of a shelf. Flowers bloomed promiscuously from a legion of vases, white roses and white lilies and white tulips and ferns laced with tiny clouds of baby's breath, bereavement flowers, like a wild meadow leached of color. Harry usually sat under a blanket on the sofa, reading *Quidditch for Seekers* or *One Thousand and One Tricks For*

Broomsticks, or studying the gnarled chessboard on the ottoman, while Remus or Sirius puttered around in the kitchen and pretended not to be watching him.

When the three of them came in he smiled, and it was very nearly not sad at all.

Ron came over, glanced at the chessboard, and moved a knight. “Check.”

“Ah, no! Really? I’ve worked on that for days.”

“Bad luck, mate. I’m not going easy on you because you’re bedridden.”

“I’m not bedridden,” Harry informed him, peeling back the throw blanket.

“No? Just lazy, then.”

“Oi! I wanted to go flying, but Remus said it wasn’t a good idea. They want me where they can see me.” He checked over his shoulder and lowered his voice. “I think they’re worried I’m going to do something reckless.”

“That wouldn’t be like you at all, would it,” said Draco, and dropped himself languidly into one of the armchairs. Hermione drifted into the room, lingering to inspect one of the books on the ottoman, and then perched on the arm, where her ankle slightly brushed his leg.

She’d been touchier, this last week of classes. She sat closer to him at meals, where a shift of her knee or elbow could find him, and she’d made a habit of walking with him in hallways — not that she hadn’t, before, but now she would take his arm or his hand sometimes, coming down stairs, the little flourishes of etiquette she’d always called *frippery* before.

It was for comfort, he supposed. It didn't bother him, except that it made it hard to focus on anything.

Ron leaned down to snag one of the tarts on a platter beside Harry's afternoon tea.

"Hagrid," warned Harry, too late. Ron's teeth sank into the confection and stayed there.

"He came to visit?" said Hermione, flipping through one of Remus's books.

"Yeah, to say goodbye. He's going away, after the end of term," he said. "He's not coming back to teach next year."

Ron gave a sad cry, muffled by glue.

Harry looked at Hermione. Then at Draco.

"Oh, no—"

"I mean, that's awful."

"I do hope he'll stay as groundskeeper."

"The lawns never looked better."

"And of course it's sad, he's a dear friend—"

"A reassuring constant, in these trying times. A large, hairy, constant."

Harry snorted. "Alright," he said. "No, he'll be coming back, but not for a while. Dumbledore's sending him to go liaison with the giants. He's worried about them siding with… you know."

"Voldemort?"

"D'n *sheh* ih," Ron warned, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

“They will, you know,” said Draco. “The giants.”

“Dumbledore thinks they might not, though.”

“But they will. They were better off with the Dark Lord than they ever were with the Ministry. Unless Dumbledore can promise to let them wander around eating people as they like, he’s got nothing in his arsenal that will compare.” Draco slouched into his armchair, freshly dispirited.

“Why do you call him that?” said Hermione, curiously. “The Dark Lord? Instead of—”

“Hr mnee!”

“—instead of *You-Know-Who.”*

“It’s what he is, isn’t it? It’s a title, like anything else.”

“But he’s not lord of anything,” she said. “He’s just a man.”

He wasn’t. He was an immortal creature of Dark magic. But he couldn’t tell them that, and wouldn’t have wanted to, even if he could. What use was letting them know the case was hopeless?

Hermione was watching him keenly. He shrugged and crossed his legs, removing his ankle from hers. She thinned her lips and folded her arms.

“Oh, Hermione,” said Harry suddenly, reaching for the ottoman. “Here’s something I found — this’ll cheer you up! Did you hear that Rita Skeeter got fired?”

Hermione paused. “Why, no,” she said, in an odd voice. “That’s excellent news. Did her editor finally happen to read one of her articles?”

It perturbed Draco that she was so calm. The downfall of a sworn enemy was the sort of occasion that ought to be met with drinking

and dancing, and declarations of one's eternal glory, etc., etc.

"Better. It's right here," announced Harry, rustling open the newspaper. "'Former *Prophet* staff writer Rita Skeeter was arrested yesterday on charges of operating as an unregistered animagus. The Improper Use of Magic Office, unusually, took her into custody the previous morning, when the Office received an unmarked parcel by owl post, containing within it' — listen to this! — 'containing within it the *animagus form* of Ms. Skeeter, a horsefly, *entrapped in a jar.'* " He crowed. "In a jar! It goes on: 'Representatives found that the jar had been perforated and stocked with foodstuffs for the unfortunate Ms. Skeeter, suggesting that she had been in captivity for some time. The identity of the culprit remains unknown.'"

Ron gave a cheer.

"It's a shame that owl post doesn't use return addresses," said Hermione. She turned a page of the book. "The muggle government would've been able to trace the sender."

Ron pried his teeth free and spoke thickly through a crust of fudge. "Who cares? Ding dong, the witch is dead!"

Her lip quirked. "Where'd you get that from?"

"I dunno, I heard Dad say it when Thatcher resigned. Anyway, that's *great!* No more adventures in newsprint, eh?" He elbowed Harry.

Harry smiled thinly and tossed the paper back on the ottoman. It fell with the front page up, and Draco could read it by tilting his head.

MURDER AND MADNESS: HARRY POTTER SOLE WITNESS IN SUSPICIOUS DEATH OF BULGARIAN SEEKER. Column two: *A CRIME OF PASSION? AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE RIVALRY BETWEEN KRUM AND POTTER.* Under the fold, top line: *KRUM KILLED, BUT POTTER PROFITS: MINISTRY AWARDS ONE THOUSAND GALLEONS TO ILLEGITIMATE CHAMPION.*

None of the bylines were Rita Skeeter.

Hermione cleared her throat and surreptitiously flicked her wand at it. It flipped over to an advertisement for broomstick polish, in which Oliver Wood, decked in a Pud U jersey, wielded a keeper's mit and a maniacal smile.

She was being quite reserved about the situation, for someone who had more to loathe about Skeeter than any of them. He might have expected a little fanfare, at least. 'Reserved' was not generally a word apt to describe Hermione.

Abruptly, Harry grimaced and reached for a chipped brown mug on the table. He finished the dregs of it and wiped his mouth without much pleasure. Ron picked it up and made a face at whatever he smelled in it.

"You've got to stop letting Sirius make your tea, mate."

He laughed gratefully. "It's Pain Relief Potion. And lemonade."

Draco checked the time. "It's ten to five," he remarked. "Early in the day for sedatives, no? I'm sure Granger would be glad to go over the History of Magic exam, if you need rest. *Ow."*

Her foot swung back, guileless. Tempestuous creature.

"It's watered down. Pomfrey says I should take some whenever my scar starts hurting."

"Does it often?" said Hermione.

Harry shrugged.

"Is it bad?"

He shrugged again.

They lapsed into reflection.

Remus came in from the kitchen and leaned on the back of Harry's sofa. "Plotting and scheming for next year, you lot?" Harry craned his neck up and grinned at him; Remus gave his hair a ruffling that would have rendered it disastrous if nature hadn't seen to it already. "What's next? Occamies, lethifolds? Basilisks?"

"Worse. O.W.L.s," said Ron.

"Oh, you'll do all right. Defense Against the Dark Arts, at least, you've got locked down. 'What are the properties of a werewolf'?" He winked at Harry. "Clumsy… bad cook… fond of cardigans…'"

Harry laughed. Remus visibly relaxed.

"You're not a bad cook."

"Lucky for you, I don't believe you. Dinner's coming from the Three Broomsticks, what's your pleasure? Oh, no, hang on — it's the Closing Feast, isn't it? You'll want to eat at the castle."

There was a beat.

"Remus," said Hermione, with as much softness as she could — which still wasn't perhaps all that much — "the funeral's tonight."

This landed on Remus like a bird dropping. He screwed up his face and tried to make the most of it, but it was clearly not his preferred forecast.

"Ah," he said. "You'll all be going, then."

"Yes. Dumbledore arranged a Portkey for us. I don't know why we can't just Floo."

"Floo networks don't cross international lines," said Draco. "It's regulated."

"Why don't we table foreign policy," said Remus. "Harry — are you alright to go? It's a long way from home, and Sirius and I can't come

with you.”

Harry shrugged. “I’ll be back by midnight,” he said. “Anyway, saves me having to go to the Closing Feast. I dunno what I’d do there, besides have people stare at me. Ask me whether I’ve really gone loony. Or what Voldemort’s like, if they happen to believe me. Bet Colin would ask me to draw him a sketch.” He laughed forcedly.

Hermione cleared her throat. “They wouldn’t…”

But she could convince no one, and seemed to realize it, because she left the sentence dangling there.

Remus didn’t seem at ease with Harry going, but whatever his doubts, he swallowed them. The door creaked, and a dog came panting through the doors, shaking sweat from its coat.

“Kill you to do that outside, would it?” Remus called.

Sirius transformed and swaggered in from the foyer, holding a bundle full of something dark and fragrant. “And deny myself the pleasure of your sweet reminders? Wouldn’t do. Hello, you lot. Hermione, Ron.” He nodded. “Draco.”

“Hello, Sirius!”

“Wotcher, mate.”

“Black.”

“Harry’s going to the funeral,” said Remus.

Sirius paused. “Well, ’course he is,” he said gruffly, after a moment. “Got to. Right thing to do.”

“Yes, but it’s quite far—”

“We’ll be there," said Ron, folding his arms.

“It’s just one night,” said Harry. “I’ll be back before we leave tomorrow.”

“Before you all leave?” said Hermione sharply. “Are you going with him?”

Harry opened his mouth, closed it, and looked at Sirius. Sirius smiled.

“Dumbledore managed to dig up an old safe house for me,” he said. “He’s been secret-keeper for the past fifteen years, and he’s letting me take a loan on it. He reckons with a good Fidelius, we’ll be safe there — and Harry, too.”

“No,” said Hermione, alarmed. “There’s a blood protection, through Harry’s aunt, you can’t take him, it’ll break it—”

“When Voldemort took my blood, the protection broke,” said Harry quietly. “So he can kill me now. But that means I don’t have to stay with the Dursleys anymore.”

This was delivered in a tone of reassurance and relief. Only to Harry Potter could being hunted by a violent demigod be an acceptable sacrifice.

“But — but — where are you going? Can we visit?”

“Oh, you can!” said Harry eagerly. “It’s cracking, Hermione, we’re going to be in London, not far from you — you and I can see each other every weekend, it’ll be grand—”

Draco twitched. Wouldn’t *that* be a lovely summer they’d have, popping in and out of each other’s living rooms, having a ball of a time palling around the city. Just like the Burrow, wouldn’t it be, and then everyone would’ve met the Grangers but him.

“—and Ron, you’ll get to come up and we’ll have you, it’s going to be mad— you’re welcome too, Draco—”

“Give us the address, and I’ll check the datebook,” said Draco, polishing his fingernails. “I haven’t much free time in the summers, but we’ll try a visit if it’s convenient.”

“Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place,” said Sirius, grinning.

Draco stared at him.

“You’re joking.”

“Am not.”

“But it’s not yours.”

“Is too.”

“Isn’t. You were disinherited, if I recall. Usually, that means *no inheritance,* either in cash or real estate.”

“Not from Mummy Dearest,” he said smugly, “but Twelve wasn’t hers to give away. Pollux bequeathed it to Uncle Alphard.”

“Who was *also* disinherited—”

“After mon Grandpére kicked the bucket, I’m afraid. Not that it mattered during the War, he was off sleeping with half the blokes in Manhattan, but when I got out of Azkaban, I came to find out he left it to me — one last ‘go stick it to them, kid,’ from one disappointment to another. Bloody inspirational, really. Anyway, it’s not part of the Black estate proper, anymore.”

“What,” said Ron, “it’s some kind of mansion, is that it?”

“No,” said Draco.

“More of a manor,” said Sirius. “It’s this big silly townhouse with lots of frills and unnecessary rooms. Harry, you’d love it, you can fly your broomstick through the drawing rooms—”

“Which he *won’t,* Sirius.”

“—so long as no one *prissy and boring* is watching, you’ve got to be careful, there. But there’s loads to explore…”

They led off in a grand discussion of summer plans, and he watched Harry drift into the dreamy haze of excitement for the months to come. And then he realized what Dumbledore was doing, letting him leave the Dursleys, after three successive summers of insisting on a return. It wasn’t just that the charm had expired; frankly, he didn’t know if it had ever been. He’d never heard of a blood protection that depended on residence with one’s aunt.

Harry was being hidden.

Grimmauld Place was a war safehouse. That meant defensive charms, wards, fortifications. It meant that Sirius, as the adult master of the house, held control of the manor with household magic. Real household magic, like the Manor, or Knotscliff. It meant that no one was coming in unless Sirius Black wanted them to.

It also meant Dumbledore didn’t think the muggle world was safe for him anymore. And he was willing to risk sacrificing Harry’s blood protection for that purpose.

And Hermione was walking right back into it, her head high.

He was going to be ill.

The conversation stalled when he stood up, scraping his chair back.

“Black.” He jerked his head at the kitchen. “A word.”

Sirius sauntered in after him, sharing the heat of four curious pairs of eyes at their backs.

He secured the kitchen door and cast *Muffliato* before he spoke. Sirius leaned against the counter, arms folded.

“Dumbledore expects the first attack soon, then?” he said brusquely, without preamble.

Sirius exhaled slowly, turning his head aside.

“It’s possible,” he said quietly.

“How possible? *Likely* possible, or *known?”*

“Depends on how much Nott and Wormtail have been able to do since last year. We’re waiting on intelligence from Snape.”

A small warm thread of relief unspooled down his spine. “So Snape’s alive, then.”

“As far as we can tell,” Sirius muttered, without much happiness. “Trying to worm his way back into his master’s good books, and expected to have *great* success, no surprises.”

Draco narrowed his eyes. “He’s risking his life for you, you know.”

“He’s risking his life because Dumbledore’s got him by the bollocks.”

“It doesn’t — never mind. It doesn’t matter.” He folded his arms. “How much does Potter know about what’s happened?”

Sirius set his jaw and gave him a hard look.

“Nothing? You’ve told him *nothing?”*

“Not by choice.”

“You haven’t told him that he’s about to be hunted by the most dangerous men alive? Do you think it’ll be any difficulty for him to *guess?* Not to mention this smacks of duplicity, incidentally — he thinks you’re taking him in because you’re adopting him, because you’re his godfather—”

“We are adopting him,” snapped Sirius. “I *am* his godfather. Harry belongs at *home.* With his family.”

“Couldn’t agree more. Why isn’t Dumbledore letting him stay at Hogwarts?”

Something flashed across Sirius’s face. He opened his mouth, but with a sickening pang, Draco answered his own question.

“Because he doesn’t think Hogwarts is safe, does he?”

“It’s not—”

“The Ministry’s been sending men around. Do you know anything about that?”

“Dumbledore’s been in negotiations with Runcorn,” said Sirius quietly. “That’s all I know, and it’s all I could tell you, even if it wasn’t.”

He was quiet. He twisted his signet ring back and forth, grounding pressure.

“I didn’t know Uncle Alphard was dead,” he said.

Sirius shrugged. “Neither did I,” he said. “Think one of the dementors ate my funeral invitation.”

There was a pause; and then they both laughed, a little, at the ridiculousness of it. At the ridiculousness of the world, that let the two of them stand in the kitchen together, discussing what they discussed, knowing what they knew, and didn’t combust from intolerance.

When you were flying into a dive, there was always a moment before you crashed when it was still possible to pull up — the last possible moment when you could even out, and still fly away free — and the tricky point was that you never knew exactly where it was. So you could keep going, in theory, well past it. If you didn’t notice in time. But there was still some distance between that point in the ground,

and so you could go sailing on for a few more dizzying seconds, and it was only when you tried to pull up that you'd realize you were going to crash.

Which was all to say that his current feelings weren't unfamiliar. Asphyxiating, perhaps; nauseating, certainly; but not unfamiliar.

When a wizard died, there were certain customs to observe. Draco knew these customs very well. He had already done them once.

Funerals took place at sunset. At seven o'clock, they reported to Dumbledore's office, and traveled by Portkey to the embassy in Sofia, where they were hastened through a series of low-ceilinged bureaucratic rooms and then handed another Portkey, which deposited them on a grassy hillside sloping down to a riverbank. Through a crest of poplar trees, a river glittered under a harsh, slanting sunset, so bright it hurt the eye. Deep shadows striped the grass. A squat brick cottage sat under the arm of the hill, so low its roof sat almost level with the slope, with deep-set windows and a single lonesome chimney.

Dumbledore wore robes of pure white, hemmed in gold, and a fine gold wizard's hat with tassels and a gold bulb at the tip. His beard was groomed neatly and tied with a gold ribbon. It was a touch flashy, in Draco's opinion, but presentable enough.

He'd opted for subtlety. His proper funeral things were locked in some closet at the Manor, but he'd found in one of his deeper trunks a black double-breasted coat with gold bars embroidered onto the cuffs, which matched the metallic glint of the buttons. It was a militant sort of thing, terribly out of fashion, but he doubted the Krums would judge. Harry came in his dress robes; Ron wore his uniform, but he'd Transfigured a gold handkerchief that sat in his breast pocket, and they'd both combed their hair, which showed if nothing else that they were living in unprecedented times.

Hermione wore a black dress that fell wide around the shoulders, though she hid it with a gray jumper. A gold pin, which she confessed came from Lavender, and a ribbon in her hair, though its grasp on her curls seemed temporary at best. Someone had done her makeup. He suspected Daphne's signature in the flick of eyeliner.

They were the only people of Viktor's age. The oldest after them were the other members of the Bulgarian quidditch team, who filed in at the back of the glade with a quarter to the ceremony. They all wore quidditch uniforms dyed in black and gold.

Viktor's parents wore distant expressions, their responses slow if given at all. The only time they seemed to wake was when Dumbledore arrived and produced a bouquet of lilies for Viktor's mother, who seized his hand and began speaking frantically in Bulgarian, and refused to let go until her husband dragged her away. Dumbledore made no effort to free himself, and watched the pair of them stumble off with a sadness that was deeper than words.

He leaned down to speak in Hermione's ear. "What did she say?"

Hermione twitched. "I didn't get all of it," she whispered. "I don't… it was something, something, 'great wizard,' and — 'return,' I think."

"'Return' as in 'leave'?"

"No. Sorry. Return, transitive," she said, her voice roughening. "As in — return something. Return *him."*

"'Bring him back.'"

"Yes," she said, and her voice broke, and she fumbled furiously for her handkerchief. Ron put his hand on her shoulder and offered her his.

They were not the youngest guests, however. That fell to Viktor's brother, a dark-haired boy called Ivan, who did not say one word but scowled at everyone as if prepared to swing at them.

Igor Karkaroff wasn’t there. No one knew where he was, but Draco could take a guess.

At sunset, four members of the Bulgarian team bore forth the coffin on their shoulders. It was plain wood, lacquered, with a spray of golden roses lain across the top. It was placed on an altar near the riverbank, under an arch woven of elder branches. Dumbledore lifted his wand high, and a gold carpet unfurled over the lawn, where the guests knelt. Hermione lagged, watching the ceremony in disorientation, until Draco tugged her down.

The river rolled past without noticing them. The chatter of birds threw singsong echoes down through the thatched green pergola of the trees, among the slender chinks of sunlight and the weeping wind. Viktor’s parents huddled together near the front, not weeping.

Hermione leaned into Draco’s ear.

“Are we—”

He put his finger to his lips. She fell silent.

By and by, his knees started to hurt. He’d forgotten that, from his father’s funeral. He hadn’t noticed much about it at the time.

When the coins of sunlight on the lawn had closed, and a dusky film of twilight had settled over the river, lights gleamed to life in the canopy. Viktor’s mother stood up on wobbly legs, staggered to the coffin, placed one hand on it, and began to speak.

It was in Bulgarian, so he understood nothing, but it wasn’t necessary. There were only so many kinds of eulogy in the world. Nor was it a surprise when she started to cry, broke off, and went back to kneel with her husband.

Then Ivan Krum stood up and went to place his hand on the coffin, where he withdrew a piece of parchment from his pocket, and read

slowly, in a thick, lilting accent that cloaked surprisingly strong English.

“Good evenink,” he said stiffly. “Thank you for coming to celebrate v — *with.* Me and. My family.” He looked up, glowered furtively at the audience, and returned to his script. “I vvv *will* speak. Briefly. About. My brother.”

Hermione tapped him on the knee. He glanced at her, and she tapped her lip curiously. He shook his head, and nodded at the coffin.

“My brother’s name was Viktor,” said Ivan, struggling on. “He liked to fly.”

His face crumpled, and he lowered the paper — but rallying, he lifted it and continued.

“Many people thought his flying was good. Some even called it beautiful. This made him happy.” He cleared his throat and brandished the paper like a shield. “He was fifteen when he was rec… rec… rec-ruited. But by then, he had been — flying — for many years. He would practice it. Here.” He pointed at the earth. “He would get up. Very early. To fly over this water. And would not come down until the sky looked like this.” He reversed his finger’s direction into the sky. “He always doing this. So he is. Never helping. With chores.”

He glared at the crowd. After a moment, Dumbledore gave a soft, obliging laugh, and Ivan visibly relaxed.

“But I ask him, sometime: Viktor. Why do you — do this? Why so much? There are many good f-flyers who do not do so much.” Ivan flipped a page, fumbled, and shuffled them together. “And he… he says to me: ‘you are asking a bad question.’”

Hermione’s breathing came short and raspy in her throat. He passed her his handkerchief.

“I am saying. Okay. Big brother. You are so smart. Tell me, then. What is the right question? And he says.” Ivan wet his lips. “‘I do not fly like this, ‘so much,’ or ‘so little.’ I fly until I have flown enough.’ I say: Okay, smart guy. So for big man you, there is never no enough? Is that point? He says, ‘No, beetroot.’ And he hits me on head, like this. Paf! And he says: ‘Of course there is enough. *Enough* means that today I fly farther than yesterday. *Enough* means I fly farther tomorrow than I have today. And though—” He wet his lips again, and he was struggling with it much, now: “And though each day, farther is only inches, in a week — in a year — in fifty years — I will look behind me, and see one thousand leagues of sky.”

He closed his eyes, and then he was crying, somehow, without ever having started.

“And I will see what no one has ever seen,” he said. “And the sky will know me, when I—”

He gasped, wrestled back some groundswell of emotion, and swallowed his breath. “‘And the sky will know me,’ he said, ‘when I come home.’”

Ivan crumpled up his pages and shoved them in his pocket. “The sky has never loved anyone like it did my brother,” he said, “and it never will again. He is gone home.”

He quickly sat back down. His father put his hand on the back of his neck, but Ivan shrugged him off.

Hermione was crying silently into his handkerchief. He could see the rigid lines of her shoulders as she tried to keep herself still.

A few minutes passed, and then Dumbledore stood up. He passed silently to the coffin, and placed his hand on the weathered wood.

“Good evening, friends,” he said. “There is much that I would like to say to you all tonight, all of it commemorating the loss of a fine young person, whom I did not have the pleasure of knowing half so

well as I would like. He should be here with us. He was a good and loyal son; a proud brother; an exceptional athlete, and one of the greatest wizards of his generation. All this, and much more, I could tell you; but I find that in times of grief, I can do no better than the poets, whose magic grants them an immortality so perfect even the greatest wizard cannot rival it."

Draco tilted his head, ears pricked. That couldn't have been accidental.

Dumbledore closed his eyes, and then spoke as if he were reading from something.

"They went with songs to the battle, they were young,

Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.

They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted;

They fell with their faces to the foe.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them."

He opened his eyes. "Thank you," he said softly. And he knelt again.

The ceremony came to a close when the light was almost gone. Viktor's parents came to the front, and his mother passed her wand over the coffin, murmuring a spell in Bulgarian. The coffin transformed from dark wood to a solid cask of pure white marble, veined with black and gold, and her husband's spell engraved an epitaph in Cyrilic over the front. It was seamless; the hinges and the crevice under the lid had disappeared in its transformation.

Another sweep of her wand gouged a cavity in the earth below the casket, and together, they levitated it deep into the ground. When it settled with a low thump into the bottom of the well. What came next was not dirt, but items: his mother emptied armfuls of what looked like baby toys, his father a collection of books, and Ivan came forward with a long, state-of-the-art racing broomstick — scuffed slightly at the back, because its former rider liked to sit low in the saddle — and tipped it into the grave.

Then they piled the dirt back on, folding the earth in with long sweeps of their wands, and the grave sat fresh like a wound upon the lawn.

By and by, one of the quidditch players at the back of the lawn raised her wand into the sky. She barked, “Viktor,” and lit her wand. *Lumos* flared into the fresh dark hole of the night sky.

Dumbledore followed her example. His blazed brightest of all, casting a fine white beam through the trees, like an inverted pillar of sunlight.

Draco pulled out his wand and lit it, too. He lifted it the way he hadn’t been able to for his father, and sent the light shining on the dark underbelly of the canopy.

Hermione dug hers out and murmured a watery *“Lumos.”* Harry and Ron lit theirs, too, and pointed them at the place Ivan’s brother had called home.

Viktor’s grave was still and cold, and a dozen wands shone softly in the dark glade, like a tiny constellation of earthbound stars.

Someone was playing music. Through the trees, there were sounds of strings and distant drums, a band of ghostly troubadours, and he didn’t know if that was part of the service or not. His father’s funeral had been silent. But this wasn’t his father’s country, and his father had died a long time ago.

Hermione held his hand like it was the last thing on earth she could touch. He laced their fingers. Maybe it was. He wouldn't have been able to tell. Nothing in the world was real, just then, except for her cold palm, and the lights dim and bleak over their heads.

When the lights started going out, one by one, he extinguished his wand and put it away. The grove faded to near-complete darkness, and the gold carpet dissipated under their feet. People started to move around and talk to each other, in the low respectful murmurs, and Viktor's mother led the party in from the lawn, a long train of black-and-gold figures floating toward the house.

Hermione spoke, and her voice was thick.

"Was that it?"

"That was it."

Harry and Ron came over, and Harry took Hermione's other hand.

"Dumbledore says we can stay as long as we like," said Harry. His voice was low and dull. "The Embassy won't send a Portkey for us until we're ready."

"I don't really want to stay," said Hermione. Then: "Sorry. That sounds awful."

"Nah. Me either." Ron gestured to the house. "Besides, they'll want a moment to themselves, I reckon."

Draco said, "Quite," and was surprised by his own vehemence.

"To be clear," he said, "that's what I wanted. At the time."

There was another lingering moment of appreciative silence. He wished he hadn't said that. There was no need to be weepy and insipid. It had been years; there was no dignified reason for him to be harboring anything but an appropriate amount of sober regret.

Hermione pressed her head against the side of his arm. He leaned away, deeply uncomfortable — not at her touch, but at the implication that he needed comforting.

“Time to go,” said Ron hoarsely.

“Yeah,” said Harry, staring at the mound of earth. “Yeah. Time to go.”

Ron wrapped his arm around Harry’s shoulder, and thus joined, the four of them trudged into the starless night.

In the morning, while the nation of Bulgaria flocked to the official state funeral being held in Sofia, Draco learned that he had passed Defense Against the Dark Arts, despite the fact that he had watched the professor be violently enucleated. He had scored 100% on the exam, tying Hermione’s perfect O, though because she had bested him in Transfiguration and History of Magic — he never could be damned to pay attention to Binns — and dropped only one point in Potions, he would get second rank in the year. It was expected. Under normal auspices he would gloat until hoarse, but with things as they were, nobody cared, and one couldn’t really blame them.

On the last day of fourth year, he woke up to a screech even stronger than Ron’s snoring. In the darkness of what must have been an ungodly distance from sunrise, an owl with sabled feathers was demanding entrance at his window, and through the fug of irritation, he nearly dropped the small brown parcel tied to its claws.

Inside was a black velvet box with a snakeshead clasp, and it nipped his finger when he tried to open it. When he was finished hopping around and hissing curses at it, the snake licked up the pinprick of blood, flickered its forked tongue, and pried open its jaws, unlocking the box.

A pair of silver cufflinks sat on a bed of green satin, inlaid with the letter ‘D,’ and a tiny diamond chip apiece. A strip of parchment nested between them.

Happy fifteenth. Not that you deserve it.

I’m s orry

He debated whether or not to pitch the things out the Tower window.

Ultimately, it was settled by Ron waking up and demanding to know why it was so bloody cold in the dorm, which led him to shut the window and wedge the cufflinks into his trunk. He could always hurl them into the Manor lake, if he changed his mind.

The four of them went down to Hogsmeade for the train. It rained that day: the kind of light summer rainstorm that left the forests damp and shuddering with green new life, the scent of wet fertile earth, fresh flowers, perfumed wind.

Rain followed them to the platform and drizzled from the eaves. Gray skies, condensation beading on the engine, umbrellas bobbing like black valves with the movements of the crowd. Students with their hoods turned up, hats turned low. No great boom of Hagrid’s voice, directing traffic; no shouts and panicked fumble for forgotten things. They lingered a while under the platform to say goodbye to Harry, who would be Flooing to Grimmauld Place with Remus and Sirius later.

Arthur and Molly took turns bruising him with hugs, and then Bill gave his nose a tweak, and told him to send a list of possible birthday presents. The idea of creating an entire list of things he wanted seemed to leave Harry flabbergasted; Draco offered to send him some templates and a spreadsheet.

Then, in the awkward, shoe-shuffling silence of deciding who would say goodbye first, someone’s voice floated over the din: “Arry! Eez that you?”

Through the crowd came Fleur Delacour, wearing a pale blue raincoat with matching heels and cloche, like some sort of fashion advert from the thirties. She tossed a sheaf of blonde hair over her

shoulder and extended her hand, fingers-down, to Harry, who — either gravely misunderstanding the request, or understanding it very well — grasped it, turned it right-way up, and shook it.

Fleur's lip curled; but then she broke into a surprising little charm of a laugh. She dabbed a kiss on his cheek, and then she turned to Ron.

"You," she said, "'ave saved my life."

"What?" said Ron, concussedly.

"In ze maze. You are 'elping me. I am not forgetting." She opened her cornflower pocketbook and withdrew an envelope. The envelope was heavy, and disgorged a large amount of glitter when opened. Ron looked mournfully at his freshly bedazzled feet.

"Eet eez from Gabrielle," Fleur added, pointing at the scrawl on the card. "She eez wanting to say thank-you. And my parents, as well, for ze service you 'ave done to my family. And zis! Zis eez from Madame Maxime, who sezz you may come to Beauxbatons and have ze honor and ze favor of ze Maxime family. Zey are very well connected, you know! Your name eez 'eard often in ze 'alls of Paris." She indicated a final signature.

"Yeah," said Ron softly. He looked at the card with spellbound wonder, as if it were a far shinier, far grander thing. "It's really good, Fleur."

"Yes! I know. Anyway. You are welcome always at our house, and at ze Beauxbatons Academy," she sniffed. "Gabrielle's friend is thinking she will marry you and 'ave many children, but do not fear, *mon ame:* I am warning her off."

Ron snapped his head up, betrayed.

"You're what?"

“You are disappointed. Do not be,” Fleur ordered. “You are not wanting to marry ’er. She cannot perform any of ze major blood curses, and she does not ’ave ze ’ips for children. She could never make ze wife of an ’ero. I ’ave protected you.”

“Thanks,” said Ron desolately.

“You ’are welcome.” Patting him on the shoulder, she returned to Harry.

“We will see each uzzer again, I ’ope,” she said. “I am ’oping to get a job at Gringotts.”

“Doing what?” said Hermione, not so much rude as curious.

“Curse-breaking. It will be easy, but *maman* wants me to go easy, for a while, now I am out of school.”

“Easy, is it?” said Bill, amused.

She sniffed. “ *Oui.* Ze curse breaking eez simple: you identify ze curse, and you find ze countercurse. *E voila.* At Beauxbatons, every student can do zis.”

He snorted.

“...And what eez it you find funny?”

“Well — not to be patronizing, but it’s a little different, in the real world.”

“Oh? And where is *zat?”*

“The Gringotts Bureau of Cursebreakers, for one,” he said easily, slipping his thumbs through his beltloops.

She scoffed.

“No? You don’t believe me?” He was smiling a little.

She scoffed again. “I believe zey ‘ired you. I do not know if zey should ‘ave; I do not know you. I only know ze kind of man who thinks cursebreaking eez difficult eez perhaps not ze man to lecture *me* about anyzing.”

“It’s not *lec*— sorry. Should’ve been clear,” said Bill calmly, holding up a hand. “I didn’t mean any offense. It’s just that some curses take months to even identify. And the thing is, they do atrophy—”

“Oh! And now ze man with ze ponytail eez going to explain curse erosion to *me.”*

Ron wheezed, and lurched into Harry, whose cheeks were ballooned with repressed sound.

“Curse erosion isn’t a simple concept,” explained Bill, with warm but dwindling patience. “There’s no shame in getting it wrong.”

“Getting eet wrong? You are saying I am stupid?”

“No. Obviously, I didn’t mean that—”

“Oh, *obviously!”* She brandished a finger at his nose. “Do not patronize me, tall Englishman! I will not be demeaned by a man ’oo does not even know ’ow to condition ’eez hair!”

Bill’s eyebrows took a long hike north.

“Alright,” he said. “Noted. My name’s Bill, by the way, though apparently I’ll answer to ‘Tall Englishman’ if asked.”

It was not exactly *levity* he felt, watching Bill get his arse handed to him by a petite Frenchwoman; but it was probably the closest thing to it he’d felt in a while.

A flashbulb detonated in the corner of his eye. He snarled and drew his wand on instinct, and had great plans to make use of the few remaining minutes of lawful use of magic before Colin Creevey threw

up his hands and yelped: “Wait! Wait! Not real! Hang on! I’ve got a good reason!”

Dropping his camera, he brandished a tiny lanyard that hung around his neck. The badge read: *Colin Creevey — Director of Photography, The Hogwarts Enquirer.*

“Isn’t it great, Hermione? McGonagall suggested it! She said I could work for the school *and* do photography *and* make people happy, but to be a *proper* photographer I had to get permission with a special form so *please,”* he stuck out a roll of parchment, “sign here if you want your picture in the paper, it’s a really good paper, we’re doing a feature on the summer holidays, also it’s a really good picture, and you guys look really, really good! Hi, Harry,” he added, gasped for breath, and then leaned over on his knees. “Oh and also by the way. I have — to — say — sorry. Hold on. Gotta breathe.”

“Oh,” said Harry uncomfortably. “You don’t have to… really, we can forget it…”

“No, it wasn’t right,” said Colin passionately. He sounded more than a little like Hermione; Draco’s mouth curved. “They were lying about you and I helped them and it was mean and wrong and Harry I’m really sorry but I didn’t know any better and now I DO know better and I won’t ever ever do it again. And I’m going to tell everyone how great you are and they’ll believe me because I,” he said, brandishing his lanyard, “am a *real journalist.* Not like *her.”*

His disdain was also strongly familiar. Perhaps S.C.R.U.M.B.Y. meetings were good for something, after all.

“What’s the difference?” ventured Harry.

“Journalistic integgity!”

“Integrity,” said Hermione quietly, smiling. “In-teg-rity.”

“Yes! *That!”*

Ron snickered. “Alright, sold,” he said, and signed the form. “Make sure you get my good side, alright, Colin?”

“Yeah! I will! Awesome! Thanks, Ron!!”

Harry and Draco pointedly declined the waivers, but Hermione shrugged and jotted out her own signature. “It’s good advertising for S.C.R.U.M.B.Y.,” she said, and Colin, wheezing with excitement, fumbled around in his bag.

“Oh! Also! Reminds me! Gosh, nearly forgot.” He rooted in his bag and produced an empty mason jar, which he offered to Hermione. “This came back today, too. In case you wanted it or something maybe I don’t know. *Dennis* said uhhh why would she want it back, but I was like *gosh* Dennis maybe she doesn’t have *a million* it’s not like jars grow on trees or something.” He snorted.

This was greatly sardonic, by Colin’s standards; perhaps his third year would mark a rebellious streak. Draco pictured it, and felt a twinge of genuine delight.

“Oh — thanks,” she said hastily, and stuffed it into her satchel. Draco watched her.

They loitered all morning on the drizzly platform. The train whistled smoke, and the porters began herding children more purposefully. Harry wrapped himself around first Ron, then Hermione, and then shook Draco’s hand while holding his shoulder, a compromise between his preference and Draco’s.

“Come visit,” he said, a little desperately. “It’s a big house. There’s plenty of room.”

“Sold,” said Ron. “Be there tomorrow.”

“Ron!”

“What? They can give my bed to Ginny, she wants a weight room.”

Hermione gave Harry a bit of parchment. “You remember my address,” she said, “and if you need anything — or if you want to see that doctor I told you about—”

“I remember.”

“And if you think you might want to then it’s best to book early, if you can, because these things fill up—”

“I’ll think about it.”

“—you don’t have to go, just make the appointment, is what I’m saying. Ask Remus, he’ll know. And you’ll want to get your health records from the Dursleys—”

“Hermione.”

She hugged him.

“You’ll be alright?” she muttered.

“Oh, yeah.” Harry smiled, a little roguish, a little bleak. “Me? Always.”

As they boarded the train, a black dog came trotting under the turnstile and came to sit by Harry’s side, its tail wagging powerfully. Through the rain-streaked glass, Draco could see it nose its head into Harry’s hand, licking him comfortingly, while Harry waved at them and pretended to have some sort of irritant in his eyes.

“He’s gonna be alright, you reckon?” mused Ron. “Without us?”

“He won’t be for long,” said Hermione firmly. “I’m going to come visit him in a week. My parents want me to apply for a provisional driver’s license, anyway, the drives will be good practice.”

“Blimey. You’re gonna get a car?”

“Next year, if I don’t wreck. Dad promised to teach me this summer.”

“There have been weaker cases made for child abuse,” said Draco.

“It’s not half as bad as a broomstick.”

They filed down the hallways of the Express, which had never seemed narrower than they did then, as if the train had shrunk since their last outing on it. Ron found a compartment near the caboose, away from where his family was sitting — “I’m seeing them all summer, they won’t miss me another few hours” — and Draco took advantage of their missing fourth to kick his feet up on the seat, taking one bench all to himself.

The train coasted through a gloomy highland. Draco watched upside-down through the window as the spires of Hogwarts receded behind the treeline, faded to pinpricks against a gray sky, and vanished.

By and by, Ron leaned forward on his knees. “I wanted to talk about something,” he said quietly. “Just us three. I just wanted to… yeah. I dunno. Touch base? Get us together on what’s going to happen next year.”

Hermione looked at Draco, a furtive thing.

“I don’t think we can do anything now,” said Ron, “that’s not what I’m saying, but — I just wanted to say — we’re in this, yeah? With this stuff, and the Ministry, and Voldemort being back, all of it — it’s only going to get harder. But we’re still in this.”

“‘In this’?”

“What do you mean?”

“Harry. We’re in it with him. Because we’re all he’s got, you know?” he said roughly. “We kept him alive this year, *we* did, and it’s like it’s going to get easier to do. But he needs us to. So we’ve got to decide, out front, if we’re in it. You know. Open-eyed, clear-headed, while

we've still got time to maneuver. I don't want us caught without our boots on."

"No," said Draco quietly. "Inexpedient."

"Right? Okay. Good. Don't answer now, if you don't want to, just think on it. And he doesn't ever need to hear about this, because I don't think he'd like it if he did, but I just want us to all understand — that if it comes to it, and it's… you know, if it's Death Eaters again, or something worse, and I don't like talking about this but we've got to because it already happened once — I just want you lot to know," he finished, thickly, swallowing, "that if it's him or me, you've got to — it's him. Okay?"

His voice was edged in panic. Draco wasn't sure what the panic was for: himself, or Harry.

"But I — I can't promise that," said Hermione. "I couldn't possibly promise that, Ron, I—"

"No, no! Don't, like, leave me to *die* or anything," he exclaimed, "Merlin, Mione—"

"Well what was I *supposed* to think you meant, honestly, you dramatic ponce, with your 'him or me'—"

"You might get creative about it first, all I'm saying— no. No! I meant, like. You can let me get hurt," he said, parceling his words carefully, "if it's for him. Alright? I… I'm the one who takes the hit. It's me. I'll live. Or I'll try to. But I'm saying, like, you can — you're authorized to make that decision. On your end. If you think you need to. Don't worry about me."

Draco stared at him. He felt as though he'd never met him before, this solemn, unflagging Ron, with a square jaw and a fire in his eyes, burning like the cornflower blue of Hermione's flames.

"Alright?" he said earnestly.

“Ron,” said Hermione intently. She reached out and touched the side of Ron’s face; he leaned into it like he needed it sorely. “You’re aware that he won’t let you, right?”

“What, Draco?” He jerked his head at Draco, half-smiling. “Nah. If the only thing between me and a jinx is Draco Malfoy’s sentimental feelings, I can kiss myself goodbye, mate.”

That stung. “Excuse me. I wouldn’t let you *perish,* thank you.”

“Don’t apologize, it’s what I like about you,” said Ron, surprising him. “One thing about you, it’s that you can get it done. You’re like a rook, you know? Shoot straight, kill ’em in the endgame.”

He didn’t know what to say to that, so he settled on a mild, vaguely approving: “Hm.”

“No, I don’t mean Draco,” she said firmly. “If something hurts you, it’ll have to go through Harry.” Then, pointedly: “And *me,* by the way.”

Ron smiled. “Yeah,” he said, turning to face the window. Gabrielle’s card glittered in his breast pocket like a badge of silver. “I know.”

Outside, green hills braided into thick wooded glens. Hermione ordered tea and did their summer Transfiguration reading. Ulysses and Thucydides were dozing with their heads tucked under their wings, and Crookshanks curled in the space between Hermione and Ron like a ginger pincushion. Rain laved on the sides of the carriage over the chitter of the wheels.

He woke to a tapping at the door.

He swiped sleep from his eye and sat up quickly, embarrassed. It was his first dreamless sleep in weeks.

Hermione was watching him from the other corner of the carriage, her expression clouded and soft. His cheeks felt warm.

He pulled a face at her, and she rolled her eyes away.

Fred stuck his head into the compartment. “There you are, Ron,” he said. “Family meeting in Car Thirteen. Be there or get disinherited.”

“Disinherited from what?” complained Ron, “I’m not getting so much as a knut,” but he grumbled to his feet. “You lot wait for me, yeah?”

“No, in fact, I thought I’d disembark at Peterborough.”

“Prat.” He flicked a Chocolate Frog card at Draco; Draco caught it and sent four ounces of Ulick Gamp hurtling back at his face. To his surprise, Ron caught it, too, though in the process crumpled poor Ulick past the point of identification. Practice with Harry might’ve done something for him, after all.

“Chop, chop, Ronnikins, Mummy’s waiting! We’ve *im-por-tant family business.”* Fred’s tone was jovial, but his posture wasn’t. There was a very clear difference between the twins in a good humor and the twins in any other, mostly because the latter occurred so rarely; in the second before Ron closed the door, Draco was treated to a rare glimpse of Fred Weasley’s serious face, and he didn’t like it one bit.

“What’s that about, do you think?” said Hermione, as their footsteps faded from the hallway.

“I imagine it’s a continuation of whatever conversation Molly Weasley was having with Dumbledore.” He sat upright, smoothing some wrinkles from his shirt, and wished for a Steaming Charm. “Or she’s seen Ronald’s grades, and they’re staging an intervention.”

“More likely Fred’s,” she said absently. “No. I expect they’re going to take precautions to guard the Burrow.”

“Speaking of which. Your parents—”

“Aren’t going to let me live anywhere else,” she said shortly. “It’s bad enough, boarding school, without me leaving home entirely.”

He considered this, and acknowledged it.

“It’s not safe.”

“It’s one muggle house in a million. There’s next to no chance.”

“I don’t like what ‘next to’ is doing in that sentence.”

“I don’t, either,” she said, “but they’re not going into hiding.”

“Are you going to tell them?”

Hermione took her lip between her teeth and worried it without answering.

“You ought to.”

“If I tell them, they might not let me come back,” she said, and that was such an awful shock he wondered if it wouldn’t be easier just to kidnap her altogether.

“Let you, nothing,” he said, with bravado that even he could hear was thin. “You could argue a fault line back together.”

“I’m serious. My mum has been looking at other boarding places, muggle schools—”

“You can’t leave,” he said shortly, sitting up straight. “That’s not acceptable.”

“I know that, but—”

“If they try to keep you, you’ll write to me.”

Her brows furrowed. “And you’ll do what, exactly?”

“Come and get you.”

“...To go where?”

“Anywhere. To the Manor. Or to wherever you’d like. Put you up in a hotel, if you’d like one. Else we’d find you a flat or something. Mother’s been meaning to break into London real estate.”

She was looking at him from the corner of her eye, almost warily. “That’s a ridiculous expense.”

“What you and I take for an ‘expense’ are two different planets in two different solar systems.”

“And you wouldn’t really want me at the Manor,” she added, frowning. “Not with your mother there.”

“It’s not my mother’s house. It’s mine. I’m Lord Malfoy, and I’ll have whatever guests I like.”

And then, to temper the note of whinging, he added: “And I’m sick of shipping you books. I’m not a rental service, you ought to just come and raid the bloody library for yourself.”

Hermione was looking at him so intensely that he feared he would soon sport holes from it.

“Is that a real invitation?”

“Of course it is.” He hadn’t thought of it, actually, to start — it had been more of a hazy plan of *don’t let your life get ruined, forever, again* — but now he thought of it, it was an exceptional idea. Part of the bother of a summer was having to wait two to three days every time he wanted to hear from her, and if she was in a room down the hall, she’d be there to irritate him whenever he liked.

An *on-demand* Granger. Coming down in the mornings with the wet hair and the sleepy eyes, in bathrobes or dressing gowns, complaining about his opinions on Runes. Or wearing those muggle things, the small shirts and the trousers that suggested some sort of great muggle fabric shortage, just lounging around in the library with tea and chocolates, pink and imperious and incidentally very difficult

for anyone to hex. “You could come straight from King’s Cross, if you liked.”

“Draco!”

“What?”

“Are you joking?”

“I’m not.”

She was in disbelief.

“If you’re serious,” she said, “then I’d love to come, of course. I’ll talk to my parents about it. When I could go.”

She was gauging his seriousness. He shrugged. “Go on, then. Or don’t. The warding on the Manor is excellent, they wouldn’t find you.”

“I’m not running away from home.”

“Yet.”

“At *all.”*

“Foreseeably.”

The wooded planes of England streaked through the window in a smear of emerald watercolor, dotted with the last flush of spring flowers. A service road passed along the train tracks, and cars scuttled alongside it, racing the train.

“How did you figure it out?” he said idly, watching one pull ahead and plow its headlights into the gloom.

“Hm?”

“About Skeeter.”

She startled. “What? I didn’t.”

“Granger.”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about. Who?”

He inclined his head at her.

“From Colin,” she admitted. “After he went to the Hospital Wing, I cornered him, and I … I applied a bit of pressure, let’s say. About how you’d stuck your neck out for him, even after he wrote all that, and how kind that was, and how he really owed it to us — I might’ve laid it on a bit thick—”

“You? Never.”

“Anyway,” she said pointedly, “he told me he always met her near the window of the Clock Tower, so I made him ask her for a meeting. Then I took the Invisibility Cloak and snuck out, waited in the cloisters with him, and I saw her.”

“Transforming.”

“Yes. After that, it was rather simple.”

“To seize a grown witch as your prisoner.”

“I prefer,” said the madwoman, “the term ‘citizen’s arrest.’ There was another bit to the story, too, after all; it turns out that Colin took a photograph of Cassius Warrington and Flora Carrow doing — something unmentionable — in one of the dungeon enclaves, so Cassius sent Flint and Goyle after him to make a point. Well, obviously Colin was horrified, so I suggested he should talk to McGonagall about less dangerous creative outlets, and apparently he found one.”

“Lovely. He’s credentialed. I’m still hung up on the part where you kept a human being hostage in a jam jar.”

“She wouldn't have ended up in a jam jar in the first place if she hadn’t broken the law.”

“We’ve broken laws.”

“Not the good ones,” she said stiffly, and he laughed, sort of helplessly, because he couldn’t think of anything to say to that.

She was mad, properly, and madly brilliant, and simply ruthless in just the best kind of ridiculous ways, which was a problem, because thinking about any of those things made him want to kiss her. But it was hard not to think about them, when she was right there, being herself without a clue what she was even doing, because it had never occurred to her that people didn’t usually go around kidnapping journalists and leveraging solitary confinement. It was even harder not to kiss her, but he couldn’t do that, not without risking a fracture in something very delicate and valuable and necessary for his survival, so he stuck to thinking about it instead.

Another problem: he had to work through this chain of thought all over again every time the impulse struck, and it was distracting. Hermione was staring.

“Are you alright?”

“No,” he informed the carriage ceiling. “Not remotely, and with no plans to be in the foreseeable future. Yourself?”

She drew her knees up onto the seat and folded them neatly under her. “Me either,” she said quietly. “I’m worried.”

“About…”

She rolled her hand: *The obvious.*

He had the bizarre sensation of wanting to tell her it would be alright, although it wouldn’t.

The train chimed. A porter announced that they were approaching King's Cross. Hermione stood up, and Crookshanks, with a tiny yowl, launched onto Draco's side of the compartment, scrabbling over his legs.

"I think we should talk about it," she said. "Since we might not get the chance. About your family, and — the situation."

"Did you, now."

"I mean, it could be important. Because whatever happens—"

"'Whatever' is an expansive category."

She took a bracing breath. "I know that your father—"

"Isn't going to join the Dark Lord's forces from the grave. Even he's not quite so loyal as that."

"Yes, but your mother—"

"Won't." His voice was flat.

"If she *does,"* Hermione said, intently, "you should know that it doesn't have to change anything. You can come stay with me—"

He could have laughed, but it would have sounded hysterical. "It wouldn't *change* anything?"

"No! That's my point, it wouldn't have to! She was desperate. "You're not your mother. You could be — I mean, you're different. If you needed somewhere to go—"

"You'll stick me in your basement?"

"You're not alone," she snapped. Her mouth was flat as a spearline and her face was all set and shining with the *come-take-me-with-an-army* sort of determination and it was awful, it was actually, acutely painful, to think of it ever being directed against a figure in a white

mask, and if she had any compassion for him she would stop.
“You’re not. Not while I’m here. I wouldn’t let you be.”

He stood up, and she followed him.

“Draco—”

“You really have no idea what you’re dealing with.”

“Don’t patronize me,” she said, sharp without being unkind. “I know what they are. I saw everything you did, in that maze, and I’m just saying—”

“I’m not the one they’ll be after.”

“That doesn’t make you safe! No one’s safe, you know that! But you aren’t alone, and you don’t— you don’t need them to protect you, there are lots of people — not just me — you wouldn’t be safe, but if nobody’s safe, then you might as well be with people, who — care about you. Because they do. So — so very much, Draco.”

She stumbled on the dismount, like she couldn’t quite say it. It was very earnest; it was almost pleading.

It struck him, with a disarming blaze of pain, that she wasn’t afraid they were going to hurt him. She was afraid of something worse.

He turned around and stepped into her space. His mind was empty, and there was a white high-pitched noise somewhere between his ears, a shriek of something between panic and anger.

“Do you think they’d take me?” he asked her, and relished her glimmer of guilt, fleeting as it was. He pressed. He was being mean, and he didn’t care, not in the slightest. “Actually, don’t answer that, it doesn’t matter. You think I’d *try?”*

“I think you’d do anything to protect your family.”

The pain of *that* otherwise blindingly unanswerable remark was dulled by her adding, “It’s not a bad thing. I’m just making a point, is all. That you don’t have to do — something you can’t take back.”

“Something I can’t take back?”

“You know what I mean. I’m not trying to be cruel, I know you wouldn’t *want* to, but—”

“Wouldn’t *want to?”*

“But you might feel — if you didn’t think that you had a choice, I mean—”

“Have you been worrying about this?” The white noise was piercing. “You’ve been lying there at night, wondering whether I’m going to run off and become a terrorist?”

“Oh, stop pretending to be offended,” she snapped. “I haven’t said a thing judging you, I’ve been nothing but understanding, I haven’t asked a *single* question about your mother’s plans even though frankly it’d be *highly relevant* for my own safety to know, and I’m only trying to give you information about your options so you don’t do something irreparably *stupid.”*

“Truly inconceivable how anyone could take offense at that, isn’t it.”

“Don’t be dense! Look at it my way! What am I supposed to think?”

“What are you *supposed* to think?”

“What am I supposed to think! You’re my friend, and I love you, but I can’t stand here and lie and say I don’t think you’ve ever thought about it, and I can’t pretend it doesn’t mat—”

He stepped forward and wrapped his hand around the back of her neck, forcing her head back up, to look at him. She went all still, strings lashed, volume cut.

He was struggling not to shout. It wasn't quite working.

"You monumental idiot," he said. Which wasn't what he meant to say, but fuck it, he'd work with what he had. "They wouldn't take me, you realize, even if I tried."

There was a pause.

"Is that supposed to be comforting?" she said scornfully. "You can't be a Death Eater because you aren't up to scratch?"

"Because they'd kill me."

She flinched.

"Do you want to know what would happen? Do you know what *I* see, Granger, when I think about joining up? The moment I offered up my wand, the Dark Lord would put me on my knees and crack open my skull, to make sure I wasn't a deserter or double-agent, and he'd find you, and I'd be dead in seconds if he was merciful."

She was staring at him, sort of dazed and pallid.

"What about — me?" she said, stilted.

"You. Any of you. All of you. This conversation, any conversation, me touching you, me *ever* touching you, any of it would be enough. And I've *known* that. That's the really stupid thing, you know, I've known for *years* that you'd be — that you'd keep me from that, if I let you. And I *let* you. I keep letting you."

She twitched. He cast around for something to say, abruptly frightened of what would happen when he started thinking clearly again.

"And maybe I — maybe that's what I wanted. To let you. Because I'm a coward. I'm a coward, and I knew on some level that if I kept going, I'd never have to think about doing what my father did. I'd never be *that,* I'd never have to do what he did. I'd foreclose that

future. And my life would be over — I mean actually fucking over, dead, done, gone, nothing — but I wouldn't have to *do it.* And I was right.

"So here I am. Until you or Potter or Dumbledore don't want me, I suppose, in which case I'll just go die or something. I don't know. It's up to you. This is your fault, really, if you think about it. You shouldn't have kept me. It would have been easier for both of us if you didn't."

She flinched at that, but he was distracted by the enormous and nauseating swell of regret at permitting himself to open his mouth. He had done it, him and his heinous stupidity, he had stood there and *told* her.

She ought to have been repelled by that. The nakedness of it. He was, a little.

Instead — because she was mad, he always forgot that, he should have remembered — she said, "Good."

"What?"

"Don't be stupid," she said, simply, almost irritably. "It's good. You're a good person, and I'm sorry that's made your life hard, but unfortunately, I don't really care. I *like* you as you are, and I — you have to know that I'm never going to turn away from you, *never,* right? Forget that dramatic nonsense about 'until you don't want me,' that isn't — that's stupid, utterly ridiculous. I won't. Not ever. So if you're worried about changing, just don't go." She paused, and when she spoke again, her voice was unsteady. "Just ple— just stay. I can do the rest. If you just stay."

On impulse, she grabbed his hand and held it tightly, like she was asking for something.

It was ridiculous, but he had the oddest temptation to cry.

Relief was a monstrous thing. It was a dangerous narcotic, the effervescent swell of relief, the fireworks of endorphins and adrenaline and a dizzy lightheadedness that reminded him of flying. Worse than grief, far worse than pain. Almost as bad as hope.

“Alright.”

“Yes? Alright?” She smiled wanly, teasing. “That’s it? The cause, the war, you’re sold?”

“No,” he said. “But you asked.”

She laughed wetly, and shuffled into his chest, not so much asking for a hug as insisting on one.

It had become instinctive to draw her in, one hand still braced on her head, the other wrapped around her waist, and hold her.

The problem wasn’t that he had never hugged her before. He’d suffered enough of Hermione’s embraces to write essays on the subject, and spent more of his life than he’d ever volunteer picking long brown hairs off his dress shirts, usually accompanied by full-throated threats to go after the culprit herself with a lint roller.

The problem was that she was older than she’d been for most of those times, and a lot softer in a lot of places, and her hands were fisted in his shirt in ways that dragged her nails across his skin, and there was an unfair temptation to take it personally, somehow, when an extraordinarily pretty girl pressed up against him like she was trying to perform meiosis. And breathing on his neck with short, nervous little flushes of hot air, like she didn’t think he could *feel* her doing that, like he could possibly fucking ignore it, when half of his spine was on fire and part of his brain was marking out portions of his dignity to auction off for a chance to feel more of it.

He commanded it, though. He wasn’t helpless. There were some things he could have, and some things he could — but *shouldn’t* — and the things he had were enough. There were some parts of

Hermione Granger that he had, and no one else did, and those parts were enough.

What he wanted, in the privacy of his own heart, was no one's business but his own.

Brakes whistled. The train was slowing, and London's dull lights were pressing through the inkstain of smog under clouds, and the wave of momentum canted them to the side. Hermione huffed in reproach and then she lifted her head and her face was *right* there and— fuck.

If she didn't move, he was going to kiss her. So much for *he wasn't helpless,* fucking hell.

But she did move, thank Merlin: she lowered herself back down onto her heels, revealing that she had been on her toes for some of the time, for some reason, maybe to have better access to that bit of his collarbone she liked to put her head on. He didn't know. He didn't know virtually anything except relief and the horrible, despairing sensation of his body digging his heels in and *wanting* something, wanting with every organ, which was an incredible amount of wanting to refuse. For a man whose self-restraint had never been his strong suit, or even a suit of any kind at all.

"Happy birthday," she said. It would occur to him at some point tomorrow morning, when he gathered the last of his wits, that this was a slightly irrelevant thing to say, and had been delivered without her usual sort of cheerful conviction. He was cognitively so far from this point that he accepted it without question.

"Don't get cross," she ordered. And he was about to inquire what on earth he had to be cross about when she kissed him on the cheek.

Which was the worst of *both* worlds, if anything, because now he had to sort out what to do with the knowledge of what her mouth on his skin felt like for the rest of his life. It ought to have been a war

crime, doing something like that. He should have been able to sue her for the sleep he was going to lose thinking about it.

“Granger,” he said, strangled.

“You’re such a prude,” she laughed, and stepped away to fetch her trunk from the rack. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to take liberties — Daphne did say it would fluster you, but I thought she’d exaggerated.”

Daphne Greengrass was a dead woman.

“Have a good laugh about it together, did you?” he said acidly.

“No,” she said, swinging her trunk down, “I just — actually, never mind.”

“What?”

“It isn’t important.”

Which was insulting on several levels, and obviously false on all.

The train chuffed to a halt. Doors rattled up and down the hallway. Through the steam fleeing past the window, the faces of waiting families swam into view. High-pitched cries of welcome and relief carried through the glass.

Hermione opened the door of the carriage, and turned back. “Well? Aren’t you coming?” she said, tilting her head, intractably bossy and unable to help it, and it occurred to him that it didn’t really matter that she only meant to the platform. She could stand on the edge of a cliff and say *aren’t you coming?* and it would be, *alright, Granger, tell us the plan,* because she was a fool but he was an idiot, and it was better to fall together than stand alone.

“After you,” he said. And then he followed her.

Holy shit. Well. Can't believe we're here, to be honest.

I'm going on hiatus while I finish writing book five. I don't know how long it will take — I wish I did, but unfortunately, since I'm going back to work in the fall, it might take longer than I'm planning. If I have updates on the schedule, I'll post them on my tumblr. Otherwise, thank you, thank you, thank you, and thank you again for good measure. If you're reading these words, then it's already a compliment beyond my words to express.

It's strangely fitting that this chapter marks the nearly one-year anniversary of starting this fic. In ten days, it will have been one whole year since I posted "The Last Malfoy," which is a kind of serendipity I couldn't plan if I tried. I am in such a wildly different place in my life that it's almost funny to look back over the chapters and remember what I was doing when I wrote them, all those months ago, in a different state. I'm moving to England in a month! And I'm starting school again! It's going to be so much fun! And I'm so excited for what comes next, both with this fic and in my real life. I couldn't say that a year ago. My luck is immeasurable and my gratitude is double its size.

Thank you so, so much to anyone still reading. You have my love and my best wishes, and all the luck I can send you.

Sincerely,

GT

Summer's End

Chapter 57: Summer's End

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

[img: https://i.postimg.cc/qMq98vqc/Book-5-1.png]

I can remember standing by the wall

And the guns shot above our heads

And we kissed, as though nothing could fall

—David Bowie, “Heroes”

The sun laid in patchwork on the Manor’s striped lawns, creating a chessboard of emerald and gold. The sky bubbled with champagne clouds, beyond which a spill of burgundy waited in the west. Pale peacocks came and went cooing among the trees like ghost brides, trailing their ever-fixed trains of vestal white, and in the cradle of the gardens, where a long ribbon of sand cut into the grasses by the lake, Draco practiced.

Heat had driven him out of his jacket, and the billows of pale Egyptian cotton around his elbows twisted like dove’s wings. Sweat veined white hair with lines of straw, the long coil of it descending from its coif to hang ragged in his face, and the nascent lines of fresh muscle laid faint shadows on the surface of his back. With each lash of his arm, a black garnet on his finger caught and held the fleeing sun.

He rolled his weight onto his left foot and executed a ducking feint that had taken him the better part of a month to learn — a month subsequent to the one he’d spent learning where to put his feet so a

sharp duelist couldn’t knock him squalling on his back in the first movement, and where to hold his useless offhand arm so that said duelist couldn’t hack it off in the second. These and other lessons were hard-won with time: how to flatten himself on the piste and somehow run *sideways,* as if that was a thing human legs were suited to gracefully do; how to diffuse a curse at speed; how to *take* a curse, if you knew you had to, and where to land it for least harm. On the few occasions that a human opponent condescended to spar with him he was rewarded with a new list of things he had failed at, and he knew it was a good day if it was a substantially different list than the last.

Other days, when the human opponent made herself scarce, he trained by himself, with only the peacocks for company. Each night he fell asleep before he could dress the blisters on his feet or the sunburns on his face, and he woke to a tinkling bell in his ear, a tray of eggs and coffee placed unobtrusively on his futon, and the retreating steps of their housemaid.

The last week of August came swimming out of these days like a brute awakening. The heat reached a peak and broke in a stream of sweaty, sleepless nights, in which green lights danced behind his eyelids, and he came to with shouts that brought lights stirring in opposite wings of the castle. He had stopped using Dreamless Sleep in July, when he realized how difficult it was becoming to sleep without it, and besides which it unnerved him to slip into the perfect oblivion it brought: no dreams, no thoughts, just a slow descent into nothing. Taken when wide awake, it felt dizzying and eerie, like something far more permanent than sleep.

A flutter graced the lawns in his periphery. A woman came striding out of the shade, her black skirts a fantail around her waist, her heels silent on the soft earth. A black summer robe of embroidered gossamer foamed behind her like a train of smoke.

He planted the tip of the dueling wand on the ground and inclined his head, resting his weight on one foot.

“Well done, my darling,” she called. “Your name shall live in infamy among the bulrushes.”

“Good evening, Mother.”

“It must be quite pleasant to spar with an opponent made of air and bullrushes.” She reached out and kissed his sweat-filmed cheek, smiling a wide guileless smile that put stars in her eyes, like he had done the very finest thing imaginable just now. It was pleasant; he preened. “Though it must be tedious to win every bout.”

“I would do better with Briselda, but certain authorities forbade me to engage the staff.”

“The help have responsibilities more important than serving as your whipping post. Besides which, I do worry that embarking on a train of abuse would alter the edibility of our food.”

“Dueling wands don’t leave injuries.”

“Mm.” She hummed noncommittally and cast around through the bullrushes. “Where’s the other one?”

He located the second dueling wand where it was buried in the sand, flipped it up with the toe of his boot, and caught it. He offered it to her, smirking.

“Formal challenge, Mother?”

She gave the instrument a flick. It came to life, spitting sparks.

Then she smiled at him again, the same guileless beam, and gestured widely. “Why don’t you call? It’s your practice, after all.”

He took several paces back and parted his feet, sideways, aligning the tip of the wand with his eyes. He shifted the grip to the western underhand. The dueling wand was slightly longer and heavier than the real thing; it was meant for older wizards. “To the wizard’s disarm?”

“Mm. I never did know what that meant,” she said idly, whisking the dueling wand back and forth, as if feeling for the weight. “What is a ‘wizard’s disarm’? It’s getting the wand out of your hand, isn’t it? In my day, the duels were always to the blood, or to the ground, rather. It was simpler.”

“Which carries all sorts of implications for why so few duelists of that generation remained to pass on their traditions, but for immediate purposes, I’d rather not shed any of your blood today, or ever, if I can help it.”

“I certainly share your preference, if not your concern.”

He swung the wand around in a loose circle, rolling out his wrist. “Are you saying I’m going to lose?”

“I would never bet against you,” she said mildly. “It is a lucky mother who lives to see herself surpassed by her children.”

He smirked at her. The corner of her mouth echoed the expression.

“Do you feel lucky, Mother?”

“Not today,” she laughed, and twisted sideways, her hand arched in a long overhand grip.

“Clavicle to navel. Wands only. C—”

The first curse nearly caught him in the stomach. It took him several seconds to realize that his mother had moved. While he came to that painfully slow realization, she moved again. It was three awfully fast-moving seconds before he came to the important judgment, however, which was that her speed was only the third or fourth thing that he needed to worry about.

She fought like rivers moved, seamlessly, inexorably, without any sort of hesitation or pause for thought. The economy of movement was faultless. By the time he had hauled his wand into place to

target her, her parry — a lateral cut that sawed down his own wand's red sparks with a blade of gold — could have eked as much applause from a ballerina as it would a soldier. Her advance was a movement so fluid that her feet seemed magnetically attached to the duelist's line.

He blocked the first curse, and in his surprise at having succeeded, forgot the second. Gold soared in a whirling braid for his face, piercing the sloppy uppercut of his dueling wand; the sparks clipped his shoulder and sent a hard pulse through his chest, like a tuning fork had whacked his spine. By training or miracle he kept hold of the dueling wand and sprang into what was an equally perfect lunge, darting a spell under the overhand guard — whose main defect, per the duelists' manuals, was the holes it opened in one's defense — and a radial sweep of her wrist snapped her point around to catch it, crackling, on the tip of her weapon. The opposite motion whipped it back at him. His riposte was the kind of thing that an auror might describe to get a laugh at a party.

Of the few opponents he'd ever raised his wand against, his mother was by far the least pleasant. Fighting Marcus Flint was at heart a question of two very simple tasks: remaining upright and not fucking up colossally. With his mother, in contrast, not fucking up colossally was a prerequisite to remaining upright at all, after which began the real task of exploiting holes in a guard that didn't have holes to begin with.

If he had his real wand, he would have thrown a Shield Charm and sprinted for the hills at the first suggestion he was fighting someone of her level. But he held a mechanical instrument designed to help train aurors to duel without Shields, so instead, he had to duck and jump and backpedal like he had some sort of palsy. At some points his mother returned to her starting position and fired jinxes at him in volley, dancing him up and down the piste for seemingly no tactical value but her pleasure.

The heat sapped energy from his limbs. He tasted metal in his throat from exertion and his hair hung in his eyes. His mother smoothed out

her skirt, idly, like she was fixing an unflattering fold.

“You’re toying with me.”

“I’d say you’re allowing yourself to be toyed with,” she said archly, pinching a bit of soot from the wand tip. Then she advanced again, and he slipped back into the fugue of parry and counterstroke, giving step after step on the piste until his heel staggered back and met grass.

He was hot and achy and sick of losing, and so it wasn’t altogether sporting, what he did next.

He advanced three rapid steps up the piste, swept his wand up the line of a chest strike. Her wand shifted unerringly into place for the most textbook parry of all time.

Which was when he took a hard sidestep off the duelist’s line, snapped his arm out, and whipped a curse sideways into her uncovered flank.

The parry missed — he was thrilled — but the curse never landed. When red sparks came scissoring at her left, his mother neatly folded herself sideways, pivoting her back foot around as if the piste itself had rotated ninety degrees, and her wand came arcing around to slice up the side of his guard — the wrong side for a parry — and with a sickening jolt he realized why duelists stayed on the piste in the first place. To parry from this position would require him to either Apparate or spontaneously manifest a new joint in his elbow, neither of which he could do, and so he opted instead for a clumsy lunge out of the curse’s path, planting his other foot soundly off the piste. The momentum threw him sideways and as he fought for footing she stepped into his guard, where he was so busy keeping his wand somewhere vaguely near proper position that he missed her left offhand coming around to smack him in the head.

He stumbled back with a yowl of indignation, more from shame than hurt.

Narcissa stepped back — with nothing more telling than a slow breath to signal her exertion — and put down her wand, smiling a wide and complacent grin. It was *his* grin, he realized, with a start. That was his smirk, the curl of his lip. No wonder it got a rise out of people; it was properly infuriating.

“You’re slow,” she said.

“You’re fast.”

“It’s not altogether your fault. Your clothes are too heavy.” She reached out and plucked at his collar. He grumbled and swatted her hands away. “You’re not Robespierre, darling, you can’t fight in a dress shirt.”

“You’re wearing a dress. And robes.”

“Which I certainly would not, if it gave me as much trouble as it does you, dear.”

He scoffed.

Bells crooned sweetly from the house. Five o’clock.

“I should change,” he said abruptly.

“Oh, yes,” she said, and there was a subtle closing-off in her: nothing so indiscreet as a change in expression, but a retraction of energy, a subtle drift in tone, as if her mind had been called away on urgent business. “I recall. You’re hosting.”

“If you’d like to voice an objection—”

“Why would I object?” And still there was that airiness, frustrating as anything, as she floated over the subject and out of the conversation, her skirts sailing over the lawn. “On what grounds? It is your house. As you remind me.”

It had been a bad row. He wished he hadn't said it, but that didn't make it untrue, and it didn't make her position any more reasonable.

"It's only a few days."

"I know how long a week is, Draco." Her voice floated over her retreating shoulder. He caught up with her. The summer had been kind to him, and given him height enough to close the distance without difficulty.

They reached the veranda and moved through bay doors into an airy sitting-room, past an ornamental piano that sprang to life with a tinkling Chopin when they passed by, and several portraits that burst into furtive whispering at their appearance. The hearth erupted in flames and then died down again when they left the room.

A hall of marble statues craned their necks to peer curiously as they stalked past.

"I've given you ample notice—"

"You mean you've given me time to make myself scarce."

"If *you* want to. This situation is only a problem because you think it is."

"The problem is not what *I* think," she said, with the first hint of tartness, and wheeled a corner. Several autonomous dustpans scampered out of the way, and a row of curtains snapped back, pouring sunlight into the freshly lit corridor. "I did not engineer society to my whim. *I* did not lay out the world's many orders according to personal preference. *I* am not the reason Miss Granger experiences certain political inconveniences, and I increasingly resent being treated as such by you."

"Attempted murder is a bit more than an 'inconvenience,' no?" His tone was thin. "Wouldn't you say?"

“Not for some of us,” she muttered, and swept up the staircase. A carpet unfurled at her feet, hastily beating out clouds of dust.

“And that’s another thing, thank you. Why won’t you tell me—”

“Not now.”

“—where you went last week? You promised you would, and you never did. I understand you have secrets—”

“Draco.”

“—you can’t say it *all,* but a man has a right to know where his mother’s disappearing off to, especially when she comes back—”

“You’re retaliating.”

“—with *blood* on her clothes — did you expect me not to notice? Do you think I’m entirely dull?”

She turned around at the entrance to the master suite, which unfolded its oaken doors at her approach.

“Draco, when I inform you that something is unsuitable for you to know, it is not a remark on your intelligence, but a solicitation of your trust. It means there is no conceivable way in which having that information could make you safer.”

“Which might be easier to believe if you explained why it’s dangerous. Or don’t you trust me, either?”

Her lips thinned. A shutter slammed somewhere in the room behind her.

“If you would like to *be* trusted, then I advise you conduct yourself more— did you do that?”

“The window? Didn’t you?”

“Never mind. We can discuss this at leisure,” she said, “after you have received your guest. In the meantime, I must dress for company.”

“Oh, please—”

The doors closed over her retreating silhouette.

“Well done,” he snapped. “Now who’s retaliating?”

This was not exactly a decisive blow, and its whinging delivery failed to elevate the material. The doors, being doors, took it on the chin.

He arrived in his chambers in bad humor, and punted his shirt somewhere vaguely in the direction of the laundry bin. The wardrobe unfolded its wares in anticipation of his arrival, unveiling a balustrade of freshly laundered shirts in all shades of white from bone to beige, black sport coats embroidered with gold, tunics of leather striped with purple velvet, and a caravanserai of jewel-tone robes cut wide at the shoulders, because his father had been a broad man.

It was a decision of convenience, not sentiment. He’d grown that summer, and he hadn’t been in the mood to shop. And they were his clothes, anyway, from a legal point of view.

He stripped down another dress shirt and, with some consideration, a black waistcoat with shiny little onyx beads for buttons. It drew taut around his lower back, the fabric supple, and cut a stark V across his chest. The white shirt plumed like a sort of crest over his shoulders, a touch broad but no matter, it made for a dramatic silhouette — he hadn’t figured out the thing to do about his hair, which had grown too long for gelling and liked to loiter in the neighborhood of his eyes, vaguely disheveled, but not yet long enough to bind with ribbon or ties. Ordinarily the thing would be to cut it, but his mother’s hairwitch in Diagon Alley had lost her license under the new regulations, and the last time he’d let Dobby at it, he’d worn hats for six months.

A rake of his fingers made it flop over in a plausibly intentional sort of way. It would do.

He arrived at the gates in the fashionably late vicinity of five thirty, and found to no particular amount of surprise that there was a carriage idling in the drive, drawn by a quartet of thestrals, shaking their reptilian wings out in somber repose. And disembarking from the carriage, sweeping her eyes around the vista as if she harbored devious cartographical impulses, was a girl — a sharp, neatly dressed, lovely girl, with hair the size of Saturn, and eyes somewhere thereabouts, dark and warm and full of cleverness and gold, her tongue a pink slip held thoughtfully between her teeth. She wore a short-sleeved blouse of dusty pink linen and a pair of sensible brown boots, suitable for walking.

The wind blew her hair in her face. Hermione drew it back, a bit like a veil; and then saw him, and she smiled with her whole face, thirty-two teeth and two cheeks and a wrinkled-up nose.

He had been concerned about this.

Anxiety was an ordinary element of anticipation in seeing one's friends after some time apart. Anxiety was why the road from the Manor steps to the gates had never quite seemed so short, nor the hours of the day preceding so swift, as they did knowing what laid at the end of them. This wasn't anxiety. What happened was some rebellious and desperately fond part of his head made a violent leap for freedom, and several aurors of his better judgment had to be dispatched to cudgel it.

The distraction meant he almost missed what she said.

"You're alive," she remarked, in the same way one might say, *Mild evening.*

He had been prepared for a dozen opening volleys, including the dangling threads of at least four arguments left hanging in their letters. This had not been one of them.

“Pardon?”

“Oh, you suggested— I don’t suppose you remember— in your letter, your invitation, you said I ought to make good time, or you might manifest an aneurysm from boredom.” She tucked her hair around her ear. “But you haven’t.”

“Right. Sorry to disappoint.”

“I’ll recover.” She was still touching her hair, twisting it. “Your hair’s longer.”

“My hairwitch is out of service.”

“On strike?” Her mouth curved.

“Why, yes. Didn’t you hear? Yours started a union.”

The curve split into a wide, sunny crescent. She laughed, and then said, hesitantly: “I missed you.”

He inclined his head at her. He opened his hand and extended it, palm-out, and she took it hesitantly. A sharp tug brought her stumbling through the gates, and against him, where she was wrapped, yelping, in the sort of embrace one might expect from a perfectly well-adjusted friend with nothing to hide.

She wriggled around and got in control of the situation, making her arms free, and then hauled him in for a proper bone-cracker of a hug. Just so. He put his head against hers and the scent of her hair was there, the same as it always was, flowers and citrus. The world was warm and sweet and soft.

Probably a little while after he should have, he disengaged and put his hands in his pockets. She put her hand over her eyes to inspect the house behind them, which from outside the gate was invisible; it was some bespoke variation of a Notice-Me-Not, layered so thickly

and for so long that he would be surprised if it hadn't warped into something else altogether.

"You *live* here?"

"No, there's a shed out back we kip in. *Ow*— yes, Granger, we live here. Welcome to Malfoy Manor."

She gave him a serious glance, snorted, and began hauling her trunk up the drive. He liberated her of it, because *manners,* but his pace obligated her to trot to keep up, because *turnabout.*

"Cozy, isn't it?"

"A nice starter home, one thinks," she deadpanned.

He didn't know what a *starter home* was, but context made it sound suspiciously middle-class, so he ignored it. He pointed at the facade. "My suite is right up there in the east wing. Of course, the master's is on the other side, that's for the head of house. My mother uses those rooms herself, and probably will even after I'm of age. Mine are quite comfortable enough, for the time being."

"What do you mean, your 'suite'?"

"My rooms. What? Don't look like that. There's only three or four of them, it isn't obscene."

"What on earth do you do with 'three or four' rooms?"

"I live there," he said, truly and genuinely bemused. "I've a bedroom, an office, and an en-suite. You'll see."

"You have your own office?"

"It doubles as a sitting room."

"Oh, good. Wouldn't want to waste space."

“I’m quite economical,” he agreed pleasantly, and she marched on with a dogged shake of her head.

Instead of cutting straight up to the front door, he took a course that arched sideways around the west wing, which rotated the whole face of the building into the light of the setting sun. With some eagerness he pointed to this or that element of the Neoclassical silhouette against the lavender sky, admiring the Venetian windows that glinted like diamonds in settings of bone, flush against the bloodred layers of brick, the relief where sea dragons braided their bodies in fashionable torment, the buttery scent of jasmines and the unctuous scent of pine and fern and the eternal perfect scent of roses, twined in thick locks over the walls and the gates. It was strange to reach the veranda, overlooking a small acropolis of gardens and courtyards, and not find a garden party waiting for them there, no chorus of girls in white dresses watching men in shirtsleeves play croquet, no welcoming cries but the croon of the peacocks sounding invisibly through the trees.

Inside they went through the sitting room and into the entrance hall from the back, emerging from between the curved white arms of twin staircases to the marble vault beyond. Two stories of shining granite lifted from the chequered marble floor and unfolded overhead into a wide gallery of balconies, through which the ghostly eyes of a hundred statues leered or swooned or fountained water into small basins. Somewhere a piano was trilling faintly at them, and its mate crooned back to it from another room, sweet broken chords that flowed in and out of the hallways like the echoes were waltzing.

Hermione stepped into the hall slowly, revolving on her heel.

“What do you think?” he said impatiently.

With some palpable effort, she drew her eyes down from the crystal ziggurat of the chandelier.

“It’s so… grand. It feels like a museum.”

“You like museums.”

“I don’t *live* in one.” She seemed apprehensive.

He set down her trunk and stepped into the entrance hall, examining it again for himself. He hadn’t thought it was so grand, really; presentable, of course, but they hadn’t even laid out the welcoming banners.

“Yes, but it’s good, isn’t it? It’s quite nice, and everything.”

“Nice — it’s absurd. People have been guillotined for less than this.”

“Don’t get ideas.”

“Don’t tempt me, then,” she suggested, with an amused look over her shoulder. She ambled around the room, peering into paintings and marble carvings of achaean men in contrapposto, their wands arched gently over their thighs.

“I’d delay judgment until you see the library.”

“Please,” she laughed, “I’m not that shallow — I’m not going to swoon just because you have books—”

“It’s three floors.”

“Three?”

“Ah, we’ll make an elitist of you, yet.”

She was prevented from answering by the click of heels somewhere in the gallery overhead.

His mother came in. He suppressed a sigh.

She wore a formal gown of sleeveless, lightless indigo, draped in layers of intricate and vocal beading that whispered against the gauze, crowned with a velvet choker and an emerald like a wide

sightless eye. Her hair gathered in an intricate staircase of curls ascending to the diamond circlet that glittered atop the peak, a few white hairs feathering the rest like snowfall, and the overall effect was the sort of extraordinary artistic beauty that required at least three pairs of hands. Black gloves plunged up to her elbow, and on each hand gleamed a different ring, one black, one diamond. It was really quite old-fashioned, even for her. There was little about her silhouette that couldn't have been said of her grandmother's, in a different hallway, fifty years ago.

"Hello, darling," she said. "I see that you've found your friend."

Her voice was flat and airy and dry as desert wind. It expressed no interest but the presumptive fulfillment of the obligation to speak.

"Hello, Mother."

He fought the temptation to say: *Really?* and instead gave her a knowing glare as she descended, her heels marking each step. She ignored this, and tilted her head inquisitively at Hermione. Hermione offered a thin, flagging smile and cut him a sideways stare, obviously — as any reasonable person would be — at a loss for what to do with this. He felt trapped.

"Hello, Mrs. Malfoy," said Hermione quietly.

At *Mrs.,* Narcissa's cheek twitched.

"The exceptional Miss Granger," she said.

Hermione said, uncomfortably, "Well—"

"The revolutionary Miss Granger," she continued, drawing up the sleeve of her glove. "The groundbreaking Miss Granger."

"I don't know what Draco's told you," she said, "but there's nothing revolutionary about getting good marks. And he does very well for himself." She smiled thinly.

“I didn’t mean your marks,” said Narcissa, leaning against the banister.

There was a long beat.

She arched her eyebrows and sauntered away, lingering under the great arch where the staircases clasped hands. “Dinner is served at seven o’clock,” she said. “Don’t delay on my account; I may be late.”

“Fine,” he said.

They stood there for a moment, on opposite sides of the hall, like chess pieces stationed on the starting lines of a chequered terrain. Then he spun on his heel and clipped off, “Come. Give you the tour.”

A full tour of the Manor would have taken several years and an archeological dig. He fashioned an abbreviation. The Cole Room, named for a five-panel series of vast oil paintings hung on the walls, received a brief visit to store her trunk, and then back out again, through parquet hallways and marbled music rooms, Gilded Age salons, and galleries of portraits that burst into whispering at the sight of a visitor. He walked close to her shoulder and sent them narrow looks, which silenced them, but the susurrus followed them through sunny terraces and halls filled with mirrors and westward windows that seemed to blaze with an interior sun. Doors opened at his approach and shuttered behind him, giving the impression of a train of poltergeist footmen racing ahead of him at every corner, his steps a herald of moving drapes and unfurling carpets in every room.

Downstairs, they disembarked from the curl of a wrought-iron staircase and moved through sitting rooms tanned in pastel silks, blooming roses and jasmines from vases the size of house-elves, and bathrooms with sunken baths the size of wading pools. In one smoking room a candelabra guttered sweet-smelling smoke that changed color, and a liquor cabinet unfolded itself from the wall, offering up a treasure of arcane and bejeweled bottles with glasses of Swarovski crystal. It decanted a glass of something frosted and

pale green, which tasted of mint and sugar, with a bright pepper of rosemary.

From the corner of his eye, he could register how Hermione was reacting, and she seemed to have settled down. The initial burst of wonder had cooled off, and now she stepped into each room with a slightly wary anticipation, as if prepared to jump out of the way of a moving suit of armor, or duck a swinging candelabra. She tried to talk to the portraits, who were so bewildered by this effort, after years of being ignored, that some of them simply lost composure and ran away; she interrogated him about the age and pedigree of the furniture, quizzed him on the enchantments that animated the curtains and the cabinets, and had to be dragged bodily away from every bookshelf.

It was, all in all, a great time.

“I’m cross at you for lying, you know,” she said, her voice skittering down a row of antique watercolors. “You told me there wasn’t a dress code. I could’ve brought white tie.”

“No, that’s just Mother. And it’s a good thing you didn’t. If you’d come in silks, she’d have had to up the ante, and she’d have been parading around in her wedding dress by dinner.”

“She made me feel downright bohemian for wearing a skirt that showed my kneecaps.”

“The dress requirements are exactly as you like them to be. Or as *I* like them to be, rather, and I say that kneecaps will fly.”

A bit more than that could fly, if she felt like it; but he didn’t mention it.

“I hope it’s not going to bother your mother, my being here,” she said. It was a laden suggestion, though not in the least apologetic: the implication, made very clear, was that she did not have much sympathy for any bother caused.

He considered this, weighing his words carefully, and when he spoke he did so with measured lightness.

“My mother is an intelligent, mannered, and capable grand lady of the old school. She has a pain tolerance that would cripple hippogriffs. I have seen her flay men from the waist down with a well-placed excuse about powdering her nose. She walks away, and five minutes later, their unmentionables shrivel up like desiccated figs while bleeding copiously about the nose and ears. Things she dislikes have a habit of vanishing mysteriously. She will,” he said, “get over it.”

Hermione cleared her throat.

“Well,” she said, “for a moment there I thought she was going to eat me, so desiccated unmentionables has to be an improvement.”

“Tosh. She’d never, too pedestrian. Come here, I want to show you something.”

Having heard this a dozen times since she arrived, she followed without any particular urgency. They went out to the lake, with its punts and the summer wildflowers and the deep bullrushes where pixies and moths swam dreamily through the glowing air. Hermione yelped when one floated up and tried to yank on a strand of her hair, and he batted it away, laughing.

“It’s a fairy!”

“Pixie, Granger, come on. We haven’t been out of Magical Creatures for that long.”

“It didn’t look like a pixie!”

“That’s because it’s not Cornish, it’s Welsh.”

“What did it want with my hair?”

“For its nest, I expect.” He pinched a stray bit of dust from her hair and tossed it out, glittering, on the breeze. “We get infestations every summer. They lay their eggs in the trees, and then there’s no getting rid of them, you just have to wait for the dugbogs to come out of hibernation and eat them.”

“It’s interesting that you’d see that much genetic drift — oh!”

A group of peacocks had crept out of the fir trees, their feathers queer and silvery in the dim light. Crests foamed from their backs like the bustles of an evening gowns, and they drifted, faintly warbling, around the edge of the lake.

“They’re mutants,” said Hermione curiously, which was not exactly the sort of poetic epithet he’d have chosen. But she never did have the sense of atmosphere that Merlin gave a rock. “There’s rather a lot of them. Are they inbred?”

“My grandfather reared them, and I think the term is ‘purebred.’”

“They mean the same thing,” she said absently, and shaded her eyes to watch them.

“Do you want to touch one?”

“Oh, love to. I have too many fingers as it is.” She paused. “You’re serious?”

“A good deal less so than before you were all cheeky about it.”

“You’re not, are you? They’re wild animals. And they *do* bite, I’ve seen documentaries.”

“They’re bred not to attack us,” he sniffed. “Anyway, they’re used to me. Come along.”

He caught her arm and led her — ‘led’ was probably not the word she’d use, considering the amount of friction her heels were generating with the ground — around the side of the lake, to the

base of a vast elm tree where the birds hid their nests. The peacocks held court on the roots, and though a few scattered at his approach, the others flicked out their tails and examined him with a cool, judicious eye, as if considering a guest who had turned up to tea uninvited.

“I don’t have to do this. We really don’t have to do this.”

“We’re Gryffindors. Have a little mettle.”

“I have *plenty* of mettle. I like to keep it right here, inside my body, with as few perforations as possible. *Don’t—!”*

He held out his hand, clucking his tongue, and one of the peacocks arched its neck at him. Another step brought his fingers into contact with the soft white feathers of its head, and it trilled warningly, but permitted him to stroke its crest with his thumb.

“See?” He flashed her a smirk. “Well-bred.”

“Clearly,” she said flatly, her hands on her hips. Concern for his safety was warring with her disapproval, and nobody was winning. Except him. He was winning, always, because the expression on her face was lovely and ridiculous and a rich temptation to laugh. “Very good. Well done! I hope you don’t get rabies. For Ulysses’s sake.”

“Come here.”

“Tempting! No,” she said brightly.

“Yes. Or aren’t you scared?”

“I’m not scared.”

“Hark at her,” he told the peacock, “she thinks you’re terrifying.”

The peacock croaked judgmentally.

“I’m not scared of the *bird.”*

“What, then?”

“Zoonotic diseases!”

“Tosh.”

“It’s not! There are studies!”

“Tosh, I say. I never took you for a timid witch.”

With the helpless irritation of the hopelessly predictable, she shouldered past him. “Fine. I’ll show you *timid.”*

“I wish you would.”

She flashed him a narrow look and edged closer to the bird. He grew tired of waiting, and caught her wrist, which immediately stiffened.

“Come along, Granger,” he said. Her pulse was an arpeggio on his fingers. Her skin was smooth and thin and he could feel the veins under it, the shape of her joints, the thin clefts between her fingers. He’d held her hand before. He knew what it felt like. He hadn’t forgotten; it had just been a while.

Hermione was staring at him like he’d gone mad. He didn’t blame her. He had no idea, whatsoever, what he was doing.

He slipped her hand into his other, and placed both palm-down on the peacock’s neck. The bird crooned and fluttered its wings. The fan of its tail sprouted and fanned lazily on the breeze. Hermione’s eyes were wide.

He was standing close to her. A shift in posture could bring his chest flush to her back, and the outer range of her hair brushed his face. Her hand was small and soft, pressed between his hand and the animal. In his chest there was a kettledrum about to split from the force of each beat. She smelled very nice.

She always had, he’d known that. It had just — been a while.

Hermione said, quietly: “It’s tame.”

“I told you,” he said, “it knows me.”

She turned her head, abortively, and seemed to realize that she had to look distinctly *up* in order to see him. They weren’t so very far apart in height, but being close together made it obvious. He looked down. There were her eyes, the absolute weapons, the train of summer freckles like a smile from cheek to cheek, the heart-shaped thing of her mouth. There was sweat on her face, that felt indecent. Her skin was shiny and — flushed, and — *sticky.* There was nothing intrinsically appealing about that, so it didn’t make sense that he wanted to — touch it.

It was a primeval sort of want, like thirst. It was a need whose name he knew without ever having learned, and wasn’t *that* an eerie thing, like waking up with a brand new limb.

“I missed you, too,” he said, like an idiot. And abruptly felt as though he’d given away far more than he meant to, because the skin beneath her freckles colored brilliantly, almost blotting them out.

“I meant to come earlier, but my parents wanted me to stay,” she said. “They know it’s getting bad.”

This was how they talked about it in their letters, obliquely, with phrases roomy enough for the truth and deniability. *It’s getting bad. It’s getting worse. It’s been a bad week, a bad month, a bad year.*

Because they both knew what *bad* and *worse* meant, and no amount of detailing would make it better. Ministry regulations. Dementor sightings in the streets of London, three in the last month. Muggle kidnappings in Surrey and North Ireland, and Harry’s letters, coming every week: *P and M said I couldn’t go flying today… or tomorrow… M had to use the Cloak to go to the shops…*

A door slammed on the veranda. Birds erupted from the trees, and through the coursing shadows on the lawn he turned to see his

mother emerge from the house, in clear view of the lake.

Narcissa stopped at the end of the veranda. As he watched, she adjusted herself, visibly, and turned her head across the landscape, as if taking in the evening view. Then she looked at him, and lifted her chin; in her stare there was a command he couldn't parse, from a woman he barely knew.

Hermione snatched back her hand and stepped away. He glanced down at her and withdrew his own, twisting his signet ring back into place, but spared another look behind him at the veranda, where his mother stood with jaw uplifted, her silhouette foregrounded against the immense and ornate frame of the Manor, which glowed in sunset behind her like the palace of Versailles. Then she went back into the house and out of the light, leaving them together in the cooling dusk.

The last week of August swelled into hazy detail like a watercolor by Watteau. Having her there was an opportunity to inspect the house as he had rarely done before, to preen while she failed to feign unimpressment at its gaudy architectures, to relish long-winded answers to her questions about the magic and the decor and the art. They went spelunking in the dusty ghost parlors of rooms covered in white sheets and attics filmed in cobwebs like snow, climbing long ladders into airy gables long abandoned, edging around the vertiginous sides of a widow's walk to rooms that only opened from balcony doors, and wading through the forests of enchanted objects inside. Hermione simply didn't accept the premise of a locked door; if a room refused to offer up its secrets, she eked them out by wriggling through a servant's passage, hunting down the caretaker's keys, or once — memorably — cracking a window, shimmying around on a balcony, and slipping in through a shutter left ajar. In the library he lost her twice around the reference section and had to haul her out of a book on eighteenth-century conjurers with promises of a first-edition Bagshot, which she was terribly irked to find were false, though by then he had found the good sense not to let her back inside unless he wanted a few hours of quiet. She could read

anywhere, and did, and he began keeping a mental list of all the amusing places he found her curled up with a volume of something rare and deathly old: window-seats and staircases, perched on banisters, balanced on the bathroom sink, and once, memorably, just standing in the middle of a hallway, lost in thought, as if she'd cracked the book on her way to some other task and stalled in her tracks. He mocked her for it. She mocked him for falling asleep on any piece of furniture that could bear his body weight, as if it wasn't *his* house, and he didn't deserve to nap where he damn well pleased without being *harried* for it by impertinent guests.

It was nicer with her there. Louder, also. Much more bothersome — he woke several times from a truly magnificent nap to a witch badgering him to get up and locate where he kept the stationery — but not intolerable, for the benefits it afforded. One of which was having someone to bother about his ideas on cauldron plating when his mother was gone on business — and to boot, the kind of person who would turn right around and have a full-throated opinion on the subject, complete with subpoints and footnotes.

Sound carried in the Manor. One could hear her echo whole rooms away. Sometimes, when he heard her from afar, it was like the house itself was murmuring.

Usually, during August's blistering worst, Draco preferred to retreat to his room with a bucket of ice and ask the nearest amendable adult to enchant a fan for his comfort, but Hermione refused to bother anyone about it — "They're called the *help* for a reason, it's what they're paid for," was met with a blunt and irrefutable: "Don't be a prat," — and so they went down to the lake, where the proximity to water created the impression of coolness, if perhaps not the thing itself.

Reflecting on the incident, this was his first mistake.

A silver tray of lemonade and tonic sat on a divan by the water. Hermione was folded neatly into a white lawn chair, reading under the shade of an enormous straw-brimmed hat, and wearing a long

white dress shirt over what was, in his own wholly uncritical view, a set of undergarments with pretensions. He had swum for a while in the cool green waters of the lake, tearing white rifts in the scalloped surface of the water with a front crawl, and then waded out of the water to fetch a towel.

There was a small cough. Through the curtain of his fringe, he caught Hermione with her head decidedly *out* of her book on pagan magics, idly staring.

There was a pulse of feeling, like some stone tenet in his abdomen had melted, and the whole structure verged on collapse.

The lemonade pitcher tipped over. She hadn't touched it.

Hermione snapped her book shut and stood up. "I'll take it up."

"Don't bother. We'll take it in when we go."

"No, I can. I need more sunblock, anyway. Do you want anything from the house? A towel? A shirt, perhaps?"

"Is that a suggestion?"

"No," she said heatedly, and then: "Actually, yes. You're pale as wax, you're going to burn. And then you'll get melanoma, and you'll be sorry you didn't listen to me."

"Is that a kind of curse?" He hiked out of the water and dusted a towel indifferently over his arms. She wrinkled her face and turned away from the splatter of droplets when he shook it out.

"Yes, actually. It's a special curse for wizards with shirt allergies."

"Mm. 'And if unfit for tombs and hearse, our legend be, it will be fit for verse.'"

She glanced at him curiously, pleased. "John Donne?"

“Who’s that?” he said, and flicked up the tip of her hat, which the wind obliged to catch and whisk away. It was like the world’s least fair game of mugwump-in-the-middle: she snatched for it, missed, and with a burst of exasperated laughter, went chasing it barefoot over the sand and the rolling green lawns, her hand always a grasping inch shy of the hat’s flapping brim. The wind flattened her shirt against her body, and through the white billows he caught fleeting glimpses of a shape underneath it — the arch of a waist, the hip, a white and full bandeau — and then she leapt up and caught the hat, and turned around, laughing, as the wind shook out her hair in dark coils over the white bed of her shoulders. Laughter making her loose and free. And himself, the very opposite, standing there tense as a board and shifting uncomfortably against his briefs, sort of dizzy with the heat and the image and his mouth open and his face probably doing something he couldn’t even think about, having been outplayed by nature.

The wind was blowing cool, but it didn’t matter. He felt the heat throughout that afternoon and well into the night, while he lay in bed hot and sleepless, holding very still, trying to ignore the friction of his pants against the mattress.

He should have been asleep when the owl came.

Wasn’t his fault he wasn’t. He would’ve been asleep, for preference, instead of spread-eagle on the bed, waiting for the heat to go away. Thinking about distances. It wasn’t his fault he could hear the creak of floorboards when someone moved on the other side of the house. Wasn’t his fault he knew where her room was. Her room, and its bed, and the girl in it, whose pyjamas he’d seen on the route back from the kitchen for a glass of ice. A look for which he took no blame, in looking. He’d only wanted a glass of ice. It was hot. He wanted something cool — something to deal with the heat — not a flash of a girl in the door to her suite wearing a long boatneck shirt that was not remotely pretending to be about its business on her shoulders, really

reprehensible, it was, stupid girl, stupid *not*- stupid girl with pretty eyes and a pretty face and soft pretty—

Wasn't his fault, being the point.

The owl alighted on his window almost silently, deposited a small parcel in the sill, and alighted again before he could even sit up.

It was wrapped in brown paper, and the envelope bore the Hogwarts crest. He padded barefoot into his sitting room and found a letter-opener to slit the crest, settling down in a pool of moonlight to read.

Dear Mr. Malfoy,

I am pleased to inform you that you have been selected to serve as Prefect for Gryffindor House. Please find enclosed your Prefect badge, which should be worn on all occasions in which your Hogwarts uniform is required, and report to the Prefect Carriage of the Hogwarts Express on September 1, 1995, for a full accounting of your responsibilities.

I am certain that you will take your new duties seriously.

Congratulations.

Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Head of Gryffindor House

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Draco sat back, the letter in one hand, the parcel held slack in his other.

He’d never given particular thought to making prefect. For one thing, it was hard and thankless work, which wasn’t his forte. Gryffindor prefects were also something of a joke, by and large; with few exceptions, like Percy, they were ineffectual at best and enablers at worst, with less interest in discipline than protecting group morale and making sure none of the firsties perished on accident. Which was a meatier job in Gryffindor than in other houses.

He also hadn’t thought McGonagall would choose him.

Harry was her favorite. That wasn’t a resentful suspicion, it was a fact. Nobody else received so many of her thin-lipped not-quite smiles, nor was so often the target of her reminders to tuck in his shirt and fix his tie. He had been certain that Harry would take the prefect badge and any other bauble it lay in her power to bestow. If he’d been in Slytherin, he’d have expected no less of Snape.

Then again, maybe the old goat had a bit of a taste for mischief, herself.

He slit the twine with the letter-opener and shred the paper in eagerness.

The prefect’s badge was a little crest of scarlet and gold, a banner twined around the letter ‘P.’ He rolled it over in his fingers, and watched his reflection race and disappear in the lacquer.

Gryffindor prefect. There was something the Manor hadn’t seen before. Another first.

Come to think of it, there were two firsts in the Manor, at present. He stood up and was halfway to the door before he realized that it was a quarter to four, and the owl had come soundlessly to his window — the only way she’d be up was if she’d been awake, too. But there was simply no way that a second letter wasn’t waiting on her windowsill. There was only one possible candidate for the other prefect, or they’d have to have poor McGonagall committed.

No sooner had he touched the handle than a soft tap came through the wood. He jumped, badly jarred, and took a moment to calm his racing heart — *green light green light green light* — mad fucking idiot, it was a knock, it wasn't a fucking spell — and then, setting his teeth, he cracked it open and peered through.

Hermione stood in the hallway, her face halved by shade and moonlight. It was flushed and her hair was high with excitement. One hand fisted a crumpled letter and the other pressed something small and golden to her breast.

"Did you—" She was breathing quickly; she'd run. "Did you— *did* you?"

He let her vibrate in anticipation for a moment, mostly enjoying how she bounced on her heels; then he lifted his badge between two fingers.

"I knew it!"

His door banged open. The pretense of tranquility was punted into the doorjamb. She leapt into him — *into* was the right word, socked right into his stomach, nearly bowled him over — and he stumbled with her into his room, laughing. "I knew it! I knew it'd be you if they went by marks, I only worried she might choose Harry for preference! No offense, obviously."

"Obviously."

"I'm so glad it's you. I mean I would've been glad if it was Harry, too — but I secretly wanted it to be you, though *don't* tell him that, please. You really do deserve it. And this means we'll get to work together— I hope this won't spoil anything in seventh year, though," she said, with passing pensiveness, and he looked at her inquiringly, dangling from the rear carriage of her train of thought by a finger. "They don't like to choose a Head Boy and a Head Girl from the same house, if they can avoid it. McGonagall said it looks too much like favoritism and it makes the other houses jealous. Usually. Of

course, there have been cases — but I don't suppose we have to worry about that for two years."

"No, so I say we start on it next week."

"Rather," she said, glowingly.

He tired of holding her up, and sat down on his divan. She tumbled down next to him, a happy universe of bare skin and hair.

"I wonder who else made prefect," she said, fingering the badge like an Order of Merlin. "I'd guess it's Padma, from Ravenclaw, she's very clever… and Ernie, even though I don't like him much, unfortunately has the best grades in his house."

"It's not all grades."

"That's true," she said. "It's also a judgment of character."

This came with a furtive, meaningful look in his direction. He hummed noncommittally. The wind swelled the curtains like a pair of ladies' skirts, whispering softly.

"I didn't wake you up, did I?" she said suddenly, as if she'd only just noticed what time it was.

"My owl came at the same time as yours. I was awake anyway."

"No. I meant before." She was picking at her fingernail. "When… actually, never mind, it seems I didn't, so that's that."

He tilted his head. The pieces slotted together without much difficulty.

"Trouble sleeping?"

"Sometimes."

"Loud trouble?"

“Not when I’m here, so much,” she said, fidgeting with her hands.

He wished he knew what to do with that. If he had figured out anything better than ‘get on a broomstick and remain there until barely conscious,’ he would have gladly told her.

“What do your parents recommend?”

“They sent me to a sleep doctor. Who referred me immediately to a general therapist, when I told them a bit of what happened.”

“...Which was?”

“That there was a very tragic accident at my elite, unnamed boarding school,” she said carefully, “which cost a friend of mine his life.”

“Do they have something for that?”

“Well, it helps. But it doesn’t feel like I’ve gotten very far. I still scream at night, I still flinch at odd things, I still don’t…” She broke off, scowling. “One doctor said that wasn’t even the goal, ultimately, to be ‘over’ it, because it wasn’t something that would just go away, but I don’t know. I don’t like that idea at all. I mean — so what, right? I’m stuck like this?”

“That’s absurd.”

“Well, it’s not, according to them—”

“I’m sure the lawyers only make them say so for insurance purposes. ‘We make no promises of X and Y,’ et cetera, it’s a classic. Of course you’re going to get better,” he said, annoyed. “What’s the point of a healer if they can’t eliminate the problem?”

“That’s what I thought,” she said, slightly relieved.

The moonlight lay in floral shapes over her clothes, interpolated with shadow. She leaned her head back on the sofa and exhaled a long note.

“Are you afraid?”

Her voice was very quiet.

“Of what.”

“Anything. School. The Ministry. What happens when we leave your house. I have a list, if you want suggestions.”

He extended his legs, settled his head on the sofa beside hers, and inspected the ceiling. It was easier to speak this way.

Of course he was afraid. The Dark Lord was immortal, his mother was hunting pieces of his soul, and he had no idea how to save anyone. The last time he’d tried, a boy was killed. Only by raw luck did it turn out the dead one wasn’t the one he tried to save.

There was no winning the war that was coming for them. There was fighting, and there was surviving. He was a survivor. He was the last scion of a House that had lasted longer than the ruling family by *being* survivors, and not fighters. He wasn’t ashamed of that. The people who died for causes were noble folk, but he wasn’t one of them. There was nothing worth dying for. On the other hand, there were some things worth living for, and he had several: to (1) continue the name of Malfoy, in perpetuity, by not dying young and beautiful; (2) to keep alive all those persons whose end he considered unthinkable, the most important of whom was holding her prefect badge and talking about fear as if, by miracle, she might just be developing a sense of self-preservation. Which meant that so far, he was succeeding gorgeously.

He refused to envision the bloody crucible of the world where he was not.

“My father once said there was only one thing worth a Malfoy’s fear,” he told the ceiling, “and it was death. Nothing else should have the reach.”

Her expression was thoughtful. “Do you believe that?”

“I’m attempting to.”

“I think there’s a lot of things worse than dying.”

“You have an unusually athletic imagination.”

She smiled slightly and curled her legs up underneath her, wrapping her arms around her knees. “I keep thinking about Viktor’s mother. At the funeral, how she… And at least, for him… Harry said it was quick.”

“I never understood how that was supposed to be a comfort,” he said, counting whorls of crown molding.

“What do you mean?”

“‘It was quick.’ I should prefer the option that lets you live longer, really.”

“Well, if you know you’re going to die anyway,” she said quietly, “it’s better not to spend your last moments… suffering. I suppose.”

“For someone who’s consigned themselves to dying, maybe. Which I certainly hope I never do.”

“I mean, no one *hopes* they’re going to die.” She laced her fingers over her stomach and lolled her neck over the sofa-back. “They just do.”

He lifted his head and arched his eyebrows at her.

“Oh, really?”

“I— shut up.”

“‘People die.’ A pearl without *price* from Hermione Granger, please *do* tell me you’ve more—”

“I didn’t sleep! I’m exhausted!”

“Never. You’re going to tell me nargles aren’t real, next.”

“As if you’ve never had a slip of the tongue—”

“My tongue’s not quite so clumsy.”

“Yes, I’m sure it’s *quite* dextrous,” she muttered. His sideways look intercepted the back of her head as she crawled over to pillow her head on the arm of the sofa. “That’s why those… those…” She yawned. “French girls. Were so chatty.”

“What French girls?”

“You don’t remember?” She was mumbling now into the upholstery. “Three Broomsticks. Had a spirited conversation.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Then: “That was a *year* ago.”

“I’m sure they haven’t forgotten.”

“I don’t take your point,” he informed her, but she didn’t reply.

Her side rose and fell deeply. The moonlight fell on her legs, which were splayed sideways on the sofa, like some sort of Elgin nymph.

He looked at them. He warded off the guilt with spite: if she didn’t want him to witness her in states of dress inapt for polite society, she oughtn’t have fallen asleep on his furniture.

“I don’t want things to change,” she mumbled. “Whenever I think about things changing, I get… anxious.”

“What things?”

She wriggled around on the sofa. “Nothing,” she murmured. Her foot stretched out and connected with his leg— a plausible accident, until

she left it there.

If she had a tenth of the guile Merlin gave a manticore, he'd suspect her of doing it on purpose — parking herself on his sofa in the middle of the night and accosting him with about a country mile of naked skin. If she hadn't passed out cold in the middle of it, she'd have the makings of a not wholly unsuccessful seduction.

Dispiritingly, however, he doubted the idea had even occurred to her. It was too subtle. Hermione Granger's efforts at seduction would probably be unmistakable, like a lace set of lingerie nailed to the front of a locomotive.

Although it was late, it was a long time before he found his way to sleep that night.

In the morning he woke up to an ache in his back like someone had stolen all his vertebrae and replaced them with sea urchins.

Light filtered cool and pale through the blinds, still too dim to be later than five or six o'clock. Birds crooned obtrusively at the window, and he fumbled blindly for his wand before remembering where he was and why he couldn't, and sat up, mildly bewildered, on the floor of his sitting-room.

Hermione was sprawled on his sofa, her face buried in the utter nest of her hair. She slept on her side, with her knees crooked, but her hand spilled off the side of one cushion, and the light caught it in a strange, interesting way, illuminating the soft planes of her palm, the narrow silhouettes of her fingers.

Her shirt had also ridden up considerably, and there was more than one rib visible. The arch of her waist was soft and steep and hidden by precisely nothing.

Some amount of time probably passed, but with a wand to his head, he could not have said how much.

She stirred, mumbling, and drew her hand underneath her face. Her lips parted and a soft little sigh escaped them.

He hauled himself upright and staggered, somewhat wildly, out of the room.

Broomstick. He needed a broomstick. He needed to be in the air. He was in his sleep clothes, and that was fine.

The Nimbus vibrated under his touch. He slung his leg over it — ignored a twinge of pain somewhere south of the waistline, that probably wasn't supposed to happen, but whatever — and kicked off from the veranda, rocketing high, banking right, cutting through a tuffet of rose-white clouds, and the cold slap of water vapor left him doused and chilled and brutally awake, soaring deep into the heart of the morning.

There were three problems, as he understood it.

Problem the first. Hermione Granger was the sort of person without whom the rest of his life, all else being equal, quite simply didn't work. He did not contemplate the ways in which it could be made to work, either, because it was quite simply not a pleasant way to spend his time.

Problem the second. If he muddled things up for no reason, then he had lost something irretrievable and necessary. And she was busy, and stressed, and grieving, and heavily preoccupied with large portions of the world wanting her dead; and even if not, he doubted someone as brilliantly, ruthlessly tough as Hermione Granger allowed nonsense like *feelings* or *boys* to break the first hundred things that she thought about on a given day. If she did, she certainly hadn't let a fellow know about it.

Problem the third. Problems the first and second tended to disappear from memory the moment she took off any of her clothes, or showed an inch of skin above the knee, or touched his back when she was passing behind him in the library, or — any number of other things,

comprehensiveness being unnecessary for the point — and remembering them was harder every time.

Friendship was valuable. Friendship was also, crucially, *sustainable.* The alternative was not. The alternative was a steep drop with darkness waiting at the bottom, and he had no clue how long the fall was. The alternative ran the risk of discouraging her from speaking to him, or sharing his space and his confidences, and generally dampening their friendship with awkwardness and humiliation. Which was apocalyptic, naturally, because it had already been established that their friendship wasn't a sustainable loss. There was a balance to be preserved.

He could be patient. He would wait for — something. A sign, one way or another.

Or she would fall in love with someone else, and he would just kill himself or something.

By the time he came down again the sun was full and hot on his back, and his whole body was tired and too wrung-out to do anything except on explicit command, which was exactly as it ought to be.

He landed, wobbled hard on the dismount, and was contemplating his gratitude that Hermione wasn't around to see that when Briselda came hurrying out onto the terrace, visibly disheveled.

"Young master! You *must* receive your owls!"

"My owls? What—"

"It is not acceptable! It cannot be borne! I *cannot* prepare the breakfast table in such conditions! One," she said, with quivering gravitas, "has *eaten the lox."*

"Merlin forbid. Hang them all."

Letters of congratulations, perhaps, on making prefect? But only McGonagall and Dumbledore could have known about it, and Hermione couldn't possibly have owled someone already.

He picked up the first. It was cream-white stationery with his name fashioned in a colonnade of dramatic loops. The crest on the back was mint green wax, and bore the emblem of a stag and two G's, entwined.

Dear Draco,

If you make another joke about my not being able to find a quill if it signed my arse then I will simply not bother finding it again. NO TIME TO WRITE so forgive all this. Am well but Tori not so much. Daddy and Mummy think may need transfusion. Healers have poked me all over doing tests trying to see if yrs. truly has blood OK for T. I say yes yes yes try please but D. says run more tests and healer says "not sure." What!! Hell do we pay you for if not SURE?? Likely a fraud I fear.

Other news must wait for school for am in dreadful crunch. Have stolen owl from T. to impart news urgently. As you know I am masterful snoop of 1st caliber and I have overheard Daddy remark something big is happening at the M.O.M. involving a "Mr. Potter." Perhaps it is too much to hope it is not our own? I would not risk letter if I did not fear for him. Situation in Bulgaria makes all things very dangerous for him also.

Also PSPS did you hear Parkinson announcement?? Am horrified. P in great distress. But now I suppose this is what happens when Teddy is gone.

Please write back and tell me how you plan to solve these problems. If impossible then please solve Harry's as they seem most serious.

Love or what you will,

Daphne I. Greengrass

The other letter was addressed with a brusque "MALFOY MANOR" in handwriting that was unmistakably Ron’s. He ripped the unmarked blob of wax and withdrew what appeared to be a *Sportswizard Illustrated* clipping with some ink scrawled on the back. Before he could read it, however, his eyes fell on the day’s *Prophet* headline. Beneath an article about brewing civil unrest in Bulgaria was a single sentence bearing a familiar name:

HARRY POTTER WILL BE CHARGED IN MAGICAL MURDER OF VICTOR KRUM

In contrast, Ron’s letter was the soul of brevity.

Draco,

Harry arrested come to London NOW bring your lawyer

Ron

Merry Chrysler, everyone.

Back, and it feels so good. Thanks to everyone who read, commented, kudos'd even in my absence, for keeping the home fires burning. You're the reason this exists, naturally, if it even needs saying — and I'll say so even if it doesn't, because it still astounds me just to think about it. All the love in the world, plus half.

—GT

The Ministry of Magic

Chapter 58: The Ministry of Magic

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Once, as a boy, Draco's father had taken him to work. He hadn't a clue why; he couldn't see what use a child would be in an office, but he'd been happy enough to tag along at the time, making himself a botherance to the secretary, demanding pumpkin juice and lemon scones, and being suitably solemn whenever his father introduced him to somebody, as if any amount of scowling could hide the fact that he was six.

The Ministry had been bigger then. He had fit snugly against his father's legs in the telephone box, which sank slowly into the ground beneath the London street, the pavement rising like a black curtain over the glass. The slow, grinding descent into the earth had seemed like a passage to another world.

When he stepped into the Atrium, the deja vu turned his mind crooked, and he half-turned, expecting his father — who would now have to be eight feet tall in order for his head to be in the place Draco's mind seemed to expect — and finding only Hermione Granger. She clasped a binder stuffed to bursting with papers she'd razed from the Manor library on a crazed all-nighter. He hadn't helped — he'd been busy trying to haul Gatz out of a corporate merger in Australia — and so he didn't know what combination of information, rhetoric, and threats she'd wrangled together, but it was likely fearsome.

He wore a silver-blue suit with a white silk waistcoat and an attached ice-blue cloak, hung jauntily over one shoulder, with his wandsheath displayed in a line of rich mahogany at his hip. The fact that he couldn't use it didn't matter; it was his father's going-out suit, the suit

he wore to meetings with the people he *didn't* sneer at. It was a suit to be taken seriously. Or so he hoped.

Hieronymous Gatz, emerging from the lift behind them, wore an electric pink suit and a tie patterned with what appeared to be human skulls. Someone recognized him at once, and hurried over to shake his hand, whereon he exchanged a smile of no less than four gold teeth.

Down the hall from the lifts and the Floo hearths there was a vast antechamber, filtering sun through a sunlight of frosted white glass. Gleaming black tile unrolled under his feet, ushering crowds of witches and wizards into the Atrium, where a gold statue of a witch, a centaur, a goblin, and a house-elf spurted water from various orifices into a wishing-basin, roughly three times life size.

Through the Atrium, past flocks of wizards in purple robes who thronged and read newspapers and hurried their briefcases with performative haste from doorway to doorway, a pair of golden gates warded off the far lifts. Queues obligingly formed at each security station, where wizards with busboy caps swept golden rods over and around each incomer's body. As Draco watched, one rod let off a shrill whistle, and the security agent ushered the wizard into a sideroom while he complained loudly.

He sidestepped the end of the queue and walked briskly up the line, ignoring the dirty stares of dozens on his back. Hermione made an aggrieved sound and followed him.

"We're cutting," she muttered.

"I prefer 'expedited ingress.'"

"I prefer not to cut."

"Well, then, you can sit there by the fountain and make wishes, and I'll go see to Potter's hearing—"

“Don’t get huffy, I’m not objecting, I just don’t like getting nasty looks.”

“Give them nastier ones,” he suggested, and demonstrated. The witch scowling at him ducked her head.

The agent turned inquiringly as they approached.

“We’ve urgent business,” he drawled. His father always spoke as if any movement of the lips was an insufferable demand on his time. “I’ve a room to be in at nine o’clock.”

“Name?”

“Draco Malfoy.”

“Right. Sorry, sir. Know you next time, sir. Step here.”

The rod passed harmlessly over his front and back, and then he passed his wand into the agent’s meekly extended fingers, where it was settled on a small brass scale. A strip of parchment rattled out of the scale’s base.

“Ten inches, hawthorn, unicorn-hair core, four years in use...”

The wizard impaled the parchment on a brass spike and waved him through, sweating. Hermione was next, and Draco said sharply: “She’s with me,” which visibly hastened the agent’s security sweep, and he nearly fumbled her wand on its way to the scale.

“Ten and three-quarter inches, vine, dragon heartstring. Four years’ use. Thank you, madam. You may keep this. Wizarding line?”

Hermione stopped. “What?” she said quietly.

“Wizarding line?” said the attendant, flashing nervous looks at Draco. “The, er… the name, ma’am. The name of the closest wizarding relative. For record-keeping purposes.”

Hermione pressed her lips together. “And am I to assume,” she said, in a very light, very dangerous voice, “that I can’t enter, if I don’t produce one? Hypothetically.”

“No, ma’am, of course you’ll be let in, but we’re to track who goes in and out. For security. It’s just policy—”

“It’s policy,” she said, even lighter. “Of course it is.”

“She’s my guest,” Draco said curtly. “Put her through. Or would you like to hear me recite *my* pedigree?”

“B-B-But— never mind, sir. Yes, sir.”

“Thanks,” she muttered, and snatched her wand back. Then it was Gatz, who flashed some sort of pass at the agent, and was waved through without a screen.

The queues to get into the lifts were monstrous, so he ignored them. He grasped Hermione’s hand and hauled her into the first one that arrived. Gatz manifested behind them like a shadow attached at the heel, and the golden grill ratcheted shut.

No sooner:

“That’s absolutely *barbaric—”*

“Steady.”

“—patently obvious pretext, my God; ‘record keeping’—”

“Settle.”

“—should go back there and burn the whole bloody stack of them,” she spat.

“It wouldn’t help,” he said.

The tension went out of her. That was even worse.

“You don’t think I know that?” she said quietly, and there was more sadness than anger in it.

The lift lurched, and the next level brought with it a fleet of paper airplanes in pastel colors, which hovered above their heads on the slow crawl to the next. Hermione gave a coo, abruptly liberated of her administrative scorn, and caught one overeager memo that zoomed into the wall, crumpling its nose.

“Memos?”

“Cleaner than owls.”

“Hm,” she said, thoughtful. “I suppose you can’t use email.”

“Who the hell is Emile?”

The lift lurched sideways. Draco, who had been expecting this, leaned gracefully on the railing; Gatz, who had too, squared his stance and folded his hands; but Hermione, who had not, went soaring into Draco and flattened him against the wall.

“Ow!”

“Ow *yourself,* witch, the hell—”

“It moved sideways!”

“Well spotted!”

“Why?”

“Why shouldn’t it?”

“Because you can *walk!”*

“I can climb stairs, too, but it’s not always convenient,” he said, nonplussed, as she furiously gathered up the scattered pages of her binder, which had burst open on impact with his kidney. Gatz cleared

his throat and pointed his wand, and they went shuffling neatly into her waiting arms. He rubbed his chest where she'd collided with it and dourly reflected that it was the most she'd touched him in days, which was alarming chiefly because it revealed he'd counted.

Then the lift shuddered again, and they were plummeting, air whistling through the holes in the grate, floors rushing past in a blur of hanging lights. When it finally slowed, the doors parted over a bare black hallway with walls in the same glossy tile as the floor, and a single black door at the end of the corridor.

"Level zero. The Department of Mysteries."

He led them out of the lift, turned right, and descended a short flight of steps. The black door passed out of sight.

"What's that?"

"It told you." They cut through a narrow hall with walls of lightless gray, lit only by bars of dangling fluorescents overhead. "The Department of—"

"Yes, I heard that bit, actually. I meant: What do they do there?"

"If we knew, they'd have to name the department something else, wouldn't they?"

He turned a corner, and a passel of men in double-breasted black uniforms swept past, one of them bearing a familiar coif of oilslick hair. He paused, following the man over his shoulder, and recognized him: it was Prescott Parkinson. He was chatting with the other men, and someone must have said something funny, because they erupted in a bray of laughter.

"...ugly it'll scare him into retirement…"

"...stand her personally… ruthless bitch, but you have to admit…"

"...sweet on you, Scottie."

Did you hear Parkinson announcement? P in great distress.

He turned around, but Hermione caught his arm.

“What are you doing?”

“That’s Prescott Parkinson. Pansy’s father. Daphne said something happened to her, but didn’t say what.”

“Ah,” said Hermione. “Pansy. Well, I do hope she endures.”

“You know, she did us a favor by giving us that warning from Theodore, last year.”

“Which is to her credit,” Hermione agreed lightly. “If you look past the fact that it didn’t work, I suppose. Nor was it her idea. Nor did she know, in fact, that she was helping us—”

“Point taken.”

They rounded another corner and found a wide set of black double doors, before which gathered a large collection of people out of uniform, and one of them had a shag of black hair that would shame porcupines.

“Harry!”

He spun around at once at the sound of Hermione’s voice, then melted with relief at the sight of them. He tripped forward and hugged her.

“I can’t *believe* they would do this,” she hissed, her voice harsh and furious against her teeth. She was rapidly escalating to the levels of anger she’d reached when he’d told her — accidental magic crackling in her hair, fists balled, she’d shattered a teapot from the Ming dynasty at a distance of thirty feet, it would’ve been a magnificent thing to see under any other auspices — and it did not seem to comfort Harry, who was saggy and gray with woe. “It’s cruel and downright goddamn heartless to do this after what you went

through, it's ludicrous, it's *obscene,* to say nothing of how disrespectful it is to V— to his memory. Did they even say what they thought had happened? Don't answer, it's not even worth talking about."

The Weasleys were there already. They had put Harry in his school uniform — a suit would have been more appropriate, but the uniform made him seem younger, which was probably the intention. Ron stood off to the side, also in uniform, though in his case merely because he lacked anything more suitable. He slouched upright and clapped Draco's hand, then hugged Hermione, who returned it and then immediately set about rifling through her binder, whispering in Harry's ear.

"Draco," said Arthur hoarsely. He was tired, no surprises there, and he was holding a set of Ministry summons. "Good to see you. Who's… er, who's this?" He eyed Gatz uneasily. Gatz shook his hand, politely, and then Molly's.

"This is Potter's lawyer. Don't mind him, he's furniture. Have you obtained anyone else?"

"Haven't had time," rasped Harry. "They said I could represent myself—"

Gatz snorted.

"—or they'd find someone for me."

Gatz snorted again.

"Potter, what happened? Were you in custody?"

"No — I mean, not technically, I guess. I was at — er — 'the Dursley's,'" he crooked his fingers, "and then Dumbledore showed up saying I had to report to the Ministry by tomorrow for an arraignment, or the Aurors would come and try to find me at the *actual* Dursley's, which would've been…"

“Problematic,” said Arthur succinctly. Draco considered that Grimmauld Place was home to one escaped convict and an unregistered werewolf, and agreed.

“But Moony and Padfoot couldn’t come, obviously, so I wrote Ron, and then Molly and Arthur came to take me.” Harry tugged at his collar. He’d grown again over the summer, still trailing Ron and Draco, but there were new stripes of skin under his cuffs and hems. “Padfoot’s going mental, I think. He threatened to break in if things went wrong.”

He could only imagine.

“Right. They won’t. Potter, listen. It’s a preliminary hearing, not a trial. This is essentially a question of paperwork—”

“Oh, good,” retorted Harry, reddening unpleasantly, “that makes me feel better, doesn’t it, knowing my future’s a question of paperwork.”

“It bloody well should, because I happen to be very good at it. Anyway, you remember Gatz.”

“I do, actually. Hello,” said Harry. “You got new teeth.”

“There will be no need for you to speak,” said Gatz.

“Oh. That’s good.”

Gatz handed Harry a roll of parchment. “I have prepared words,” he rasped, “if you feel inclined to speak anyway.”

“Ah.” Harry scanned it and frowned. “This just says ‘I invoke my lawful privilege against self-incrimination.’”

“It is useful in a variety of contexts.”

The courtroom doors creaked. An assistant poked her head out and cried: “Harry Potter! Docket number one-two-one-four-seven-three-three, Harry Potter?”

Harry turned. “That’s m—”

He broke off, wheezing; Gatz had hit him on the back.

“My client is present,” said Gatz.

The assistant eyed him up, then shook her head. “Merlin keep him,” she muttered, “but bring him in.”

Molly wrapped her arm around Harry’s shoulder, gave Gatz a frigid side-eye, and made to enter, but the assistant stopped her.

“Only family, ma’am.”

Harry, still wheezing, swatted at Gatz’s arm and made a thumbs-up.

“My client’s guests qualify for that status,” said Gatz smoothly.

“Close family, sir. I’m sorry, but we don’t allow visitors. It’s a courtroom, not a playhouse.”

“You expect to send him in alone?” demanded Molly. “With only — *that* for company?”

She pointed at Gatz, who seemed bothered not at all.

The assistant sighed and pinched her nose. The door creaked again.

“Mafalda, honestly, you had *one* job— Mum?”

The newcomer was a very harried Percy. “What are you doing here?” he demanded. “Never mind, there’s no time. *You,* Mr. Potter! Come quickly! You’re late for your trial! Everyone’s here, they’re waiting!”

“Hello, Perce,” said Arthur roughly.

There was a beat like a dropped plate. Ron cleared his throat. Molly made some sort of cross between a sniff and a whimper.

“Hello, Father,” said Percy, at length. “I suppose I might have expected you to drop by.”

“Why, because Harry’s been charged of murder?” said Ron rudely. “I dunno, it’s the kind of thing a family might do for a bloke.”

Percy eyed him with distaste. Draco felt strains of a previous, unwitnessed conversation running under this one, tangled and thorny.

Then Percy sniffed at Harry. “You’ve been at the Burrow, have you?”

Which meant Percy hadn’t been. Interesting.

“I invoke my lawful privilege against self-incrimination,” said Harry.

There was another beat.

“We’re here for support,” said Molly, in a much smaller voice than Draco had ever heard before. “It’s a hard day.”

“I imagine it was a much harder day for Viktor Krum,” said Percy crisply, and Hermione went stiff as glass. “Anyway. Come along, Mr. Potter. The rest of you — well, come on in,” he added, with an awkward glance at his mother, “but sit in the back. And do it quietly.”

“Gee, thanks,” said Ron sourly, but they filed inside.

Courtroom 10 was a vault of black stone, walled in benches, shaped in a hemisphere around a single stone chair and a podium beside it. Harry was ushered, with some difficulty, out of Molly’s arms and into the center of the room. When he sat in the chair, blue runes blazed to life all over the stone. Draco made out one for ‘truth,’ and ‘holding,’ though the others were too small to make out. The chains dangling from the sides, however, were perfectly unmistakable.

The Weasleys filed into a row near the back, and squeezed in. Hermione sat next to Ron and squeezed his arm, reassuringly; with her other, she reached for Draco, perhaps seeking a bit of

reassurance herself. He drummed his fingers on his knee and watched Gatz stroll forward to take the podium, exchanging some words with Harry that he couldn't hear.

It was a small hearing; most of the benches were empty. A set of eleven wizards in robes of plum silk and sky-high miters sat along one row, while the presiding officer was a waxen-faced man with long brown hair and a short stump of a goatee, altogether unimpressive, and something about him gave Draco vague confidence.

"The accused being present," he said, in sepulchral tones, "let us begin. Are you ready, Mr. Weasley?"

Percy bobbed up to his side and plopped himself down to his right. " Yes, Lord Selwyn."

"Selwyn?" hissed Ron. "He's buggered, absolutely buggered."

"Don't be hasty."

"That's a Death Eater!"

"Former," said Draco, tightly, "mind you, and a member of the Wizengamot."

Selwyn cleared his throat. "The matter before the Court at this time: the case of *R v. Potte r .* Interrogators: Salazar Selwyn, senior member of the Wizengamot; Lemarcus Gibbon, Crown Prosecutor for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister; and, to my left, the Judiciary Committee of the Wizengamot. And my assistant, acting temporarily as Court Scribe, Percy Ignatius Weasley."

A man rose from the bench and buttoned his jacket, descending to stand opposite Gatz. He had a craggy face and a long, elaborate beard, and a pair of dark red glasses that sat jauntily on the tip of his bulbous nose.

“Lemarcus Gibbon, on behalf of the government,” he called. “Good morning, Lord Selwyn.”

“Good morning.”

Gatz placed a gnarled hand on the podium, his battery of gold rings flashing. “Good morning, Lord Selwyn. Hieronymous Gatz, on behalf of Mr. Potter.”

“Good morning,” said Selwyn mildly, peering up from his papers. “Hello, Hero. Didn’t think I’d be seeing you today.”

Gatz shrugged.

“Very well. We will begin presently. The charges against the accused are as follows: that between the hours of eight o’clock and eleven o’clock P.M. on the evening of May 24th, 1995, Harry James Potter committed manslaughter in the second degree against Viktor Iliev Krum. He stands before us today, this twenty-seventh of August, 1995, in order to hear the charges and make a response to them. Mr. Potter, how do you plead?”

Harry opened his mouth. Gatz interrupted.

“He pleads not guilty, sire.”

“Fine. It is so noted. Now we will hear from the prosecution. Mr. Gibbon?”

Gibbon stepped forward and cleared his throat.

“On the twenty-fourth of May,” he began, in a snide drawl, “Mr. Potter and Mr. Krum both vanished from the Hogwarts grounds, pursuant to the completion of the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament. When the Task collapsed, neither were to be found. One hour later, Mr. Potter returned to the grounds by way of Portkey, holding Mr. Krum’s deceased body — which bore no traces of any accident, misfortune, or otherwise natural cause that could serve as evidence against the

use of the Killing Curse. Unlike Mr. Krum," he said significantly, "Mr. Potter returned *in* possession of his wand."

The committee members mumbled auspiciously.

"He went on to claim," cried Gibbon, "that Mr. Krum had been killed by none other than He Who Must Not Be Named, risen again from the grave — miraculously, after fourteen long years. A likely possibility!"

"Objection, sire, speculation."

"Upheld," said Selwyn drolly. "Mr. Gibbon, please refrain from opining on the plausibility of Mr. Potter's account."

Gibbon sniffed and kept speaking. "Mr. Potter was subsequently given medical treatment for wounds sustained during the Triwizard Tournament," he said, "into which he was entered, against his will, by known criminal Ludo Bagman — a degenerate gambler who placed Mr. Potter in peril so that he might line his own pockets—"

"No mention of Nott," she muttered. "Who's currently in Azkaban, not that they care, I suppose."

"For murdering Crouch," he muttered back. "Not the second coming of the Dark Lord. No one saw what happened in the graveyard except Potter and the other Death Eaters."

"Not true. Theo knows," she said suddenly. "He could testify. He had a deal with Moody and Crouch — why isn't *he* here?"

"Because the truth incriminates his father on charges of conspiracy to the Dark Lord. And we're the only ones who knew his part in it, besides Moody, who—"

"Who resigned as an auror, I know, Harry wrote me, too. But t here is this thing," she muttered tautly, "called Veritaserum."

"Ruthless, Granger."

“It’s not like I’m suggesting torture,” she muttered, defensive. *“Torture* is unreliable. It’s cruel, and it doesn’t work. Veritaserum is painless, it’s temporary, it’s reliable, it lacks long-term side effects—”

“All true.”

“And with certain procedures in place, it could be administered in a way that’s minimally invasive.”

“You’re aware that the same could be said of the Imperius Curse.”

“That’s — different.”

“So different that you’d let the Ministry use one, but not the other?”

She opened her mouth and then closed it, frowning.

“I didn’t say I disapproved, by the way.”

“Well, you wouldn't,” she muttered, but without venom. She turned back to the trial, arms folded tightly over her chest.

“...indicating serious degrees of mental and physical trauma,” Gibbon was saying, “consistent with the typical signs of a psychotic break; mental hardship being nothing new to Mr. Potter, of course, second year, he was witness to a series of brutally violent attacks…”

“Objection, sire. The prosecution cannot possibly speak to the defendant’s mental state years before the incidents of the case,” Gatz snapped. This was a well-timed interjection; Harry was turning shades of red heretofore known only to fruits.

But as it turned out, Selwyn never had the chance to reply. A jangling bell pierced the air. Several members of the Judiciary Committee leapt to their feet, hurrying to the door. An aide hurtled into the room, his robes a ridicule made by haste.

“Lord Selwyn!” he cried. “Emergency vote on the floor — all hands —”

“We are somewhat preoccupied!”

“Yes, sir, but— but— Dumbledore’s flipped—”

“What?”

Committee members raced past the aide in a battery of bureaucrats, jostling him back and forth. “Yes, sir! Come quick, we’ve got a lift waiting—”

“What am I to do with Potter?” Selwyn bellowed. “I cannot simply leave him here, Anderson!”

“Not to worry, sir — here, Mr. Gibbon, sir — I have communications — a note—”

Gibbon snatched it up. Whatever he read curled his lip like a rind of lemon. He tossed it away.

“The government withdraws its case,” he snapped, and raced out of the room after the Judiciary Committee.

“What!” Selwyn was white and veiny with anger. His eyes bulged. “You cannot — Gibbon! If you withdraw, Potter cannot be charged! ”

“He knows that, I believe, Lord Selwyn,” said Gatz, and offered the judge the very humblest of grins.

“Fine,” spat Selwyn. He stamped something on the paper in front of him and shoved it gracelessly at Percy. “The hearing is terminated for want of grounds. In consequence of this profoundly, irresponsibly, disgracefully *unorthodox* abdication of prosecutorial duty, I dismiss the case.”

He stood up, slammed a book shut, and stalked out of the room. Harry leapt up and gave a thoroughly confused, half-wild little cheer; Molly whimpered, and sagged heavily onto Arthur’s shoulder. Ron and Arthur stumbled over themselves in a hurry to embrace him, but

Hermione was frozen, caught between happiness, bemusement, and worry. She turned to Draco, frowning, and he intercepted her.

“Dumbledore—”

“Just did something unwise? Yes, I gathered.”

“But it’s *Dumbledore.* Wouldn’t he know what he’s doing?”

“I don’t know that he had any wise choices left,” he said tautly, and stood. “He bought Potter’s freedom. How much do you think it cost?”

The call bell kept clanging, even as they emerged into the hallway, harried and clustered together, while aides and legislative assistants raced back and forth in a flurry of fruitless shouting. Arrowhead formations of memoranda soared overhead. At the far end of the hubbub a man in midnight blue robes was cutting effortlessly through the flock, and there was a long current of white hair. Dumbledore hastened down the stairs from the Department of Mysteries, walking at the greatest speed possible without losing decorum, and zeroed in on Harry in an instant.

“Harry! Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, bewildered, “sort of — they let me off! Did you do —”

“Cleared of all charges?”

“Yes, sir—”

“You were not asked to appear again? There was no suggestion of ‘reduce’ or ‘delay’?”

“He’s cleared,” said Arthur, “but even so—”

“Professor, where did you just come from?” said Hermione intently.

Dumbledore paused, looking at her with rare and almost disarmed intensity. He placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Excellent to see you, Miss Granger,” he said. “Please accept my fondest congratulations on your new post. Gryffindor is lucky to have such a worthy prefect. And you as well, Mr. Malfoy.”

Draco startled; so did Ron, whose jaw dropped.

“Prefect?” Harry demanded. “You prats! You never said anything! When were you gonna tell us?”

“Oh, Harry, I’m sorry, we weren’t trying to keep secrets, but there just never seemed a moment—”

“When, in the time between ‘trial’ and ‘now,’ would I have *possibly* occasioned—”

“—thought it’d be a nice way to celebrate, if you got off, and of course it wouldn’t be apropos if you didn’t—”

“—‘sorry about the prison, old chap, but did you hear *I* made prefect?’ Merlin’s bones. Buy an etiquette manual.”

“With my sincere regrets, I must leave you,” said Dumbledore, over the din. “I apologize for the opprobrious exit, but I am being summoned, quite insistently, and by people who have severe opinions on tardiness. Arthur, will you escort him home?”

“Yes — of course — but Albus, what the devil is going on?”

Dumbledore smiled. It was, as usual, completely opaque.

“Something that would have happened anyway,” he said. “Good day. I will see you all soon.”

In a whirl of velvet, he spun and swept up the stairs.

There was a festival air about the party as they returned to the Atrium. Harry's newfound freedom put a spring in his step, and concern about Dumbledore's potentially auctioning off the institution of democracy for his benefit failed to stop him from upending his coinpurse into the Fountain of Magical Brethren, as a gesture of goodwill. Whatever act the vote had been for, it was not announced before they left, nor did Arthur permit them to contemplate "wandering up" to the Wizengamot and checking. He steered them all sternly and directly to the exit, which for once required him to wrangle Hermione more than Harry or Ron, because she kept trying to sneak off into offices and find out what was going on. Draco, who found this both useful and endearing, assisted her by providing distractions to Arthur and Molly — "I say, Mr. Weasley, I'm just desperate to hear what you're doing on that car" — and finally they had to be separated by Molly, who stuffed Hermione's arm firmly in her own and ushered her ahead of the group, muttering about automobiles.

Next to him Harry floated with a dazed expression and sometimes laughed at nothing at all, cutting himself off when he heard it, as if his brain and his lungs were in disagreement about whether he should be happy.

When the lift creaked open over the Atrium, their paths collided with a pair of wizards in dress robes. One was a gnarled man with a bowler hat and a deep facial scar that included a shudder-inducing scratch on his right cornea. The other was a woman in dark duelist's leathers and a long black duster that flourished in her wake. A mass of black hair tumbled free from the back of her head like she had just alighted from the deck of a ship, wind-battered and salt-stiff, and when she glanced down the hallway, the lovely diamond shape of her face made a pale frame for a pair of searingly dark eyes, wild and bright as boiling tar, to match the black paint on her smirk. His mother's smirk.

It was Bellatrix Lestrange.

His wand was out and up before anyone could move. He had shoved past Arthur and Ron and Harry and with absolutely *pristine* footwork had advanced three long steps up the hallway, a curse on his tongue, before the woman turned, and he saw her face in full, and it was — wrong. It wasn't right. It wasn't her. The nose was wrong, or — or not the nose, but the mouth, or the position of it, or something, it was — it wasn't his aunt.

Hermione skidded up beside him, wand drawn, and gave him a quick once-over. He could have kissed her for that, for her short nod of affirmation, which seemed to buttress the newly unstable pillars of reality.

The woman blinked at him, quizzically, and then cocked her head, which was an expression so unlike his mother or anyone she'd ever shared blood with that the resemblance almost fully disappeared. And then the other woman stepped out from behind her, and his stomach gave a seizure.

It was his aunt. But it wasn't Bellatrix.

Andromeda Black pressed her small white fingers to her mouth, her small round face a wide rictus of something beyond horror, beyond fear, beyond any way that any person had ever looked at him at all. She looked at him as if she had just watched him kick open his own casket, sit up, and stroll out of the funeral parlor.

He stared back at her in just the same way.

"Davis," greeted Arthur, stepping in front of Draco. He and the auror greeted each other with cool nods. "And Nymphadora. Good to see you. What brings you to the Ministry?"

"Wotcher, Artie," said the woman in a chipper Brummie, dispelling the last hint of Bellatrix. "And just Tonks, wouldja? Job interview. Wish me luck."

Andromeda was still staring. Her head moved soundlessly from left to right. She clutched the other woman's arm.

"Mum?" The woman turned, frowning. "Eh? You alright?"

Mum?

His mouth drifted open, and he was aware that he looked affected, but his dignity was off somewhere in the waiting room with his sense.

"Er. Okay." Nymphadora raised her eyebrows at Arthur, who shrugged, and then stepped forward, sticking her hand out gamely. "Well, nice to meet you, whoever you are. And you're Harry Potter, right? Artie mentioned you were in for a hearing this week. Bad luck with that Tournament business, but, er..." She caught Davis's eye, and shrugged. "Rules are important, you know?"

Draco couldn't parse this for a knut, but he didn't have time to, because Harry objected.

"Tonks, what are you talking ab—"

He grunted. Ron had stepped on his foot.

"Sorry," he said thinly, massaging it under his robes. "Thinking of someone else."

"Must've been," she agreed blithely. She stepped away and snapped a lazy salute. "Well. Seeya never, kid."

Nymphadora was a Black name. That had to mean something, it couldn't not.

"Draco Malfoy."

Tonks lurched to a stop. Andromeda touched her parted lips.

Did his mother know about her? That she existed? Did she know that her niece had a Black name, and the Black eyes, and the face of a

woman seven years gone?

There was a moment in which he swore Andromeda was going to speak, and then commotion erupted behind him. He spun: it was Ron, caught in the middle of an intense finger-pointing competition with Percy, who was squashed against the wall by Ron's looming.

"Say it! Say you think he did it, go on—"

"I never said that!" screeched Percy. "I said he wasn't proven innocent, which he *wasn't,* because Lord Selwyn dropped the charges—"

"Big bloody difference! You think you're so smart, don't you, with your fancy job and your Cavalier boss— hey, by the way, have you changed party yet? Better clear that up before you're up for promotion, wouldn't want anybody *doubting your loyalties!"*

"Unhand me! Now! Or I'll call security!"

"Yeah? Report your own brother, would you?"

"You're the one harassing your own brother," Percy shouted, "and it's not my fault that you're sore; and I'm sorry you're jealous—"

"Jealous! *Jealous?"*

"Yes, jealous!" Percy wrenched himself free and then immediately wasted said freedom by shoving his finger right back in Ron's face. "None of you — not you, not Mum, not Bill, Merlin *knows* not the twins — none of you cared what I did at work before! It didn't matter! So long as I was striving, you were perfectly content, because that's Percy! Dull, boring, silly old Percy, why, he's no fun, he might be Head Boy but Bill did it first , so who even cares! He's not some exciting bastard, like the rest of us! Let's go have an adventure without him, let's all talk about how much we hate him when we *know* he might hear— well, I heard! You hear me? *I heard!"*

“Get over yourself, would you please,” Ron snarled. It was impressive, if not faintly frightening. Draco had been the subject of Ron’s anger before, his disappointment and his disgust, but this was a new dark, boiling species of anger — betrayal. “Are you sad nobody invited you to parties? You’re upset we didn’t kiss your boots for making Head Boy? What did you want, a biscuit? Welcome to the Weasleys, tosser! Nobody puts themselves out telling *me* I’m special! I didn’t make the quidditch team, either, but you don’t see me stabbing my family in the back—”

“You all thought I was *nothing* until I had this job! And once I did, it was all no, Percy, don’t , Percy, we all *care what you think,* now, Percy! But you don’t! You never cared what my opinions were until they were inconvenient for you!”

“Yes we did!”

“Like hell!” The two of them were identical shades of red; it clashed identically with their hair. “Like hell you did!” shouted Percy. “You never asked about my politics — you never read my reports—”

“So you became a fascist?” roared Ron. “Because no one talked to you about bloody cauldron bottoms?”

“PERCY! RON!”

Arthur came rushing down the hallway, followed by Molly. They were trailed by a pair of men in robes similar to Arthur’s; they had drifted off to chat together, but came running at the sound of their sons’ altercation. “Stop it,” snapped Arthur. “Ron, let go.”

Ron threw up his hands and stepped back, panting visibly, but giving every gesture of good-faith surrender. Arthur seized his arm and hauled him even further away.

“Apologize to your brother!”

Ron jerked his head. “Sorry,” he muttered, in the universal tone of a child executing a parental order.

“Now you, Percy,” said Arthur.

Percy sneered at him. Ron cleared his throat.

“Percy,” said Molly, her voice broken. “Percy, please, dear. Apologize to Ron.”

He worked his mouth.

“Speak up, prat,” snapped Ron, “Mum’s talking to you,” and Percy flinched so hard it knocked his coiffure out of place.

“I’m sorry,” he said icily, in a tone Draco knew very well, and he was already bracing himself for the rest of the sentence when it landed: “I’m sorry that you can’t handle my success.”

“Percy!”

“Stop it, son.”

“But it isn’t my fault that you’re not *as good as I am* at this.”

Harry gave a furious hiss.

“And it isn’t my fault,” said Percy, spittle flying like acid, “that you’re angry at me for it. You, too, Father. With your judgmental looks, and your letters — I’m sick of it! I’m sick of you trying to make me feel guilty for not wanting to be *weak* and *poor.”*

Ron tore free of Arthur’s grasp.

There was a wet crunch, and then Percy bellowed, clutching his eye. Shouts erupted. Bedlam asserted itself. Arthur shouted and wrestled Ron away, but Ron went willingly, easily, letting himself be hauled across the Atrium with a stone-faced refusal to look back at his brother, who was bleeding from the rosy crest of a fresh black eye.

Wizards swarmed Percy, helping him to his feet. He was gasping as if he didn’t quite know what to do with himself; Draco thought it more than probable that he’d never been hit before. His expression wasn’t pain so much as it was juvenile shock. It was the poignant terror of a child skinning their knee for the first time— a realization that the world could hurt, very badly, and that right of the bottom of said ruthlessly hurtful world was you, stuck in a small, tender body that was abundantly vulnerable to pain.

Harry raced after Ron, and so did Hermione. The Weasleys bundled themselves out of the Atrium in varying levels of shame. But Draco paused in the Atrium before leaving, watching Percy blubber and bleed into his handkerchief. He noted how all the people around him stood awkwardly by, with empty hands and empty words, shuffling their feet in uncertainty of what to say; and how, when they touched Percy, it was a tough pat on the shoulder, a brisk slap on the arm, or an elbow to the ribs, the tentative violence of men trying to comfort each other. That was how Draco left him: sniffling and mopping his face in that big room under the ground, alone with the bruising, loveless kindness of strangers.

Oh my God. The reception for the last chapter has been incredible, astounding, jaw-dropping, I really don't know what to say except that old inadequate cry: thank you! And I hope not to disappoint. Polishing off a few notes that cropped up in the comments:

-Updates will be at the same time for this book as the previous! Every Friday.

-I want to thank several people who went through and commented on *every chapter,* especially, because — holy shit. I spent about three hours this morning just sitting at my computer and giggling like a hysterical clown. The stuff that dreams are made of, you are.

-Some have expressed concern that this may not be a "kissing book." I cannot promise anything except that I will do my best to

make everyone happy, and I know that some people have been waiting for a very, very long time.

-Simultaneously: philosophically, it is my stance that pining should feel like someone is rattling your heart around like a maraca. When i think “pining” i think about myself being so strung-out and brain-wormed that i would start hooting like a lunatic whenever the characters so much as look at each other. i went to the Long Game school of setup and payoff. I shipped Draco and Hermione since I read Prisoner of Azkaban, friends. I can live in delusion for as long as it takes. I’ve been here for a million years. i'll be here for a million more. and all along I believed I would find you—

-ANYWAY. Profuse kisses to you each who commented, individually, with as much intimacy or passion as you desire. Or, failing that, a very solid muggle fist-bump, complete with a really cool handshake.

-Next chapter's up in a week: "The Old London Place."

The Old London Place

Chapter 59: The Old London Place

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

In a wealthy neighborhood perhaps an hour’s walk from the Ministry, there laid a row of aged brownstones, bearded with ivy. As they passed under a street sign, the little black letters rearranged themselves from ‘PAGET STREET’ to ‘GRIMMAULD PLACE.’

They stopped at the gate between Eleven and Thirteen, waiting for something, and just when Hermione’s impatient fidgeting suggested she was about to bite the bullet and order someone to explain something, a towering black door swelled out of the brick.

A wall followed it, studded with deep wide windows and ribbed ornaments of sandstone, crested with a flotilla of chimneys, and a shabby cloak of dark shingle. The door sat lofted on a porch four or five stairs over the street, hooded by a pillar and a balcony, and as Arthur hurried them up the stairs, a silver knocker shimmered into place on the door.

Arthur tapped his wand on the door, and several deadbolts shuddered out of place at once. The door creaked open a very small fraction, and Arthur had to muscle it aside, as if it weighed several tons.

“Damn thing’s sticky,” he murmured. “Sirius’s doing his best — he can force it to let me in, but he can’t force it to like me.”

“It’s alive?” said Hermione, fascinated.

“Every house is alive,” said Arthur, panting, “that’s what — people living in it will — do for you — but this one — is rather more alive — than perhaps we’d — *eughr*— like.”

Draco sighed.

“Excuse me,” he muttered, and steered Arthur aside. He pressed on the door, lightly, with his fingertips.

The door glided open as if it were made of air. A small welcome mat flung itself hastily at his feet.

“Well!” exclaimed Arthur, mopping sweat from his brow. “Well! That’ll do it, I suppose! Thank you, Draco!”

The interior of Grimmauld Place was like someone had taken a set of luscious Victorian architecture photographs and desaturated them. Everything was handsomely rendered and furnished, a veritable catalog of brocade wallpaper, wood paneling, silk upholstery, tasseled curtains and Turkish rugs, but age and dust had stained the portrait, leaving it a sepia echo of splendor in blacks and grays and cool browns. The chandelier above him sputtered to life, their light dappled by an infestation of moths that took up buzzing around the bulbs when they turned on.

He shrugged off his transfigured cloak and held it out; the coatrack lunged forward and lifted it obligingly from his finger.

“Blimey, it’s never done that for me,” said Harry, wriggling out of his robe, as the Weasleys piled in.

“You’re not a Black,” he said idly, adjusting his cuff.

“Oi. Neither are you.”

“The house disagrees,” he said, with a self-satisfied shrug.

There were hurried footsteps and Remus emerged from a door at the end of the hall, followed by Sirius. At the sight of Harry, he broke into a beam and shoved ahead of Remus on the stairs.

“He’s off! He’s off, look at the smirk, you know he’s off! That’s my boy!”

He seized Harry and waltzed him around, evoking many vocal sounds of teenaged embarrassment.

Remus started forward, smiling, but then he noticed Ron, who was still scowling as his mother hissed inaudibly at him. He also saw Draco and Hermione, who couldn't have been looking altogether pleased. Draco's brain was still a record struck on *Nymphadora*, and Hermione was fretfully nibbling her thumbnail.

"Er… mixed news, is it?"

"Percy's a rat bastard," spat Ron.

"Bad luck," said Sirius at once. "Bound to happen, in a big family. Mine had eight."

"Ron!" Molly snapped. "Language! You, too, Sirius!"

"He's not wrong, though," said a voice from above. Fred and George braced their arms on the banister overlooking the parlor. Ginny leaned on George's shoulder, grinning. "It's a medical condition. Our dear brother's got chronic *rattus bastardia,* and we fear it's terminal."

"Hello, you lot," Fred added, thumbing his nose. "Welcome to the hidey-hole. Mind the troll leg, you'll wake the portrait."

Hermione frowned. "Is that some kind of code?"

"Yes."

"No."

"You'll see," said Ginny.

Arthur and Sirius drifted into a debrief in the sitting-room. Remus shut the door behind them. "Will you all be staying with us for long?" he inquired. "We can have rooms made up."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to make everyone squeeze—"

“Won’t, trust us. This place is honking big, it takes up the whole row,” said Ginny. “We’ve got our own rooms. It’s aces.”

“Even Fred and I, and we didn’t even want them.”

“There’s enough to sleep the whole Order, come to that! Plus more we think nobody’s seen, because the house keeps shuffling them around. Our theory is it wants to hide them from the blood traitors—”

“So we figured we’d strap Draco to a metal detector and wheel him around a bit,” said Fred.

Draco lazily flipped him off. Fred and George fired back a double.

“The Order?” he inquired. “Is that what you’re calling your family now?”

“No, tosser, ‘of the Phoenix,’” said Ginny. She wiggled her eyebrows. “Cool, innit? We’re soldiers.”

“You’re a fourth year,” corrected Remus, and she pouted. “Of all of you, only Fred and George—”

“Are seventeen! Right you are, Remus!”

CRACK. Fred Apparated into the parlor and draped an arm on Harry’s shoulder. “But enough about us. Let’s hear from Britain’s Most Wanted. Folks, I’m here today with Harry James Potter, sexiest seeker in a century, current enemy of the state, and holding a *very* respectable third place for ‘most points lost by a current member of Gryffindor House,’ widely expected to inherit the title; but today, the question on everyone’s mind is, simply: ‘prison??’ Let’s hear it in his own words.” He held his fist in front of Harry’s mouth like a microphone.

Harry leaned in.

“Not prison.”

Fred punched the air. “NOT PRISON!”

“NOT PRISON!” bellowed George and Ginny.

“Everyone, quiet,” cried Molly, “you’re going to wake her!”

“Who’s ‘her’?” said Hermione, but was cut off by a bloodcurdling screech.

“Filth! Scum! Byproducts of dirt and vileness! Half-breeds, mutants, freaks…”

Remus sighed. “There’s a portrait of Sirius’s mother on the second-floor landing,” he said, “and she is as opinionated in death as she was in life.”

“Can’t you shut it up?” Hermione complained, plugging one ear.

“We usually cover it with tarp, but when there’s a lot of noise…”

“Bint wakes up,” said Ron.

“Bint wakes up,” agreed Remus. “And it’s quite something. Anyway, you’re all welcome to stay.”

“Thank you, but we’ll be heading back to the Manor,” said Draco coolly. “My mother will wonder where I am.”

“‘We’ll’ be heading back?” said Ron.

Draco would have thought better of himself if he enjoyed the ensuing awkwardness less. That being said, there was something to watching Hermione, of all people, try to scramble her words together.

“Well, yes,” she said, “I only meant — I’ve been visiting.”

“Oh,” said Ron, like he’d been clubbed. “Since…?”

Fred broke into quiet snickering. Ginny smacked him.

“His mother’s there,” broke in Hermione, hotly, folding her arms. “It’s not an empty house. And… the maids.”

“Right,” said Ron. “Must get pretty tight, I reckon, with all those maids running around.”

Draco snickered. Hermione looked at him like she wished him to die a swift death by eye lasers. Walburga Black howled herself hoarse.

“Well,” said Remus, clapping his hands, “if you’d like to stay for dinner, Molly’s cooking, and it’s no trouble at all to set another two places. Just say the word.”

“Thank you, that would be lovely,” said Hermione emphatically. Ron said nothing. Harry also said nothing, but did it less loudly.

Ginny took pity on them, flipped her leg over the banister, and slid downstairs, landing with a hop.

“C’mon,” she announced, taking Hermione’s arm. “Show you around. We’ve been cleaning for our keep, these few weeks; you’d think Mum meant to host the Queen for Christmas.”

With dismay, Draco realized that he had made the grave error of accepting the hospitality of Molly Weasley, which obligated him to at least twelve hours of hard labor. Bugger him for a fool.

They scaled the stairs in a squadron of rolled sleeves and muttered excuses. Past the veiled tapestry on the second landing, past the dank corridors that sprawled out seemingly forever under the sickly glow of dusty-clad chandeliers, up through vaulted rooms dressed in green and black, around the top of the landing, where large boxes and crates and rubbish-bags gave evidence of the considerable work invested to make the place livable again. Fred and George skived off at once to go draw mustaches on the oil portraits, which left Harry, Ron, and Ginny to give Draco and Hermione the tour: a dawdling circuit of the house that involved rather more “And here’s this place, bit of cool stuff in it,” or “this one’s got a piano,” than helpful trivia

about the architecture. Many of the rooms had been cleared out and resettled as operational spaces for the Order; one had a wide, flat table engraved with a map of Britain; another, a glass case of antique melee weaponry, which Harry resentfully reported they were forbidden from touching.

One had several double-beds shoved together in rows, like barracks, which he found to be a perplexing choice in a house with so many rooms until he noticed the apothecary cart.

“Medical wing,” said Ginny quietly, and closed the door on it.

It was a military headquarters. It was hard to keep that in his head, because the rooms were so ornate and evidently lived-in; but every now and then they’d stumble on a fallen chandelier or a blast-hole in the staircase, and he’d remember that the last time anyone lived here, there had been a war on.

Ginny cleared her throat. “C’mon! There’s a room back here with a bunch of fancy old stuff, and Sirius ordered us to steal anything we like.”

They ensconced themselves in a gabled bedroom near the top of the house. Dusty furniture encircled a four-poster bed, and a bookshelf boasted some long-lost tenant’s personal library: Milton, Keats, a selection of Romantic poets, and one or two satirical novels. Not much furniture, compared to the rest of the house; there was only a bed and a desk and a wardrobe, and a single sofa, wedged aside of the window, beyond which a short and probably non-functional balcony jutted over the street below.

Ginny flung open the doors of the wardrobe and began flinging out lavish waistcoats and silk shirts in floral variety, gilded belts, silk stockings, giant shearling coats. Hermione withdrew a book from the desk’s attached shelf and cracked the spine with a small exclamation of dust. Draco migrated to the bed, and traced the lettering etched into the post: *R.A.B.*

It wasn’t Sirius’s room. He’d suspected, but it still felt odd to be sure.

Harry hopped onto the desk and took out a pocket snitch, fiddling with it. Ron fell gracefully onto the sofa, kicked up his legs, and caught the silk necktie Ginny tossed him, which he tied around his forehead like a sweatband.

“So,” drawled Ron, lacing his fingers behind his head. “Prefects.”

Hermione’s hand stilled while turning a page. She closed the book, which he noticed was a very old, annotation-besieged copy of *Paradise Lost.*

“Congratulations,” he added, gamely. “Not gonna turn into narcs, now, will you?”

“Of course not!”

“Only for you, Ronald.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m just saying, it’s pretty good it’s not Harry or me,” he added, “because then the twins might stop inviting us to stuff. Kill our social life stone-dead, and everyone knows fifth year is the party year.”

“Alicia was a prefect, and they always invited her to everything,” Hermione said, slightly sullen. “And Roger Davies still managed to have quite the social life, if you believe Cho.”

“Oh, ’course. But I dunno if people would look at us the same way, right? Sort of makes you less approachable. That’s what Charlie said, anyway. So Draco, mate — seriously, I’m glad it’s you. Curse dodged.”

“You’re too kind,” said Draco testily, leaning against the bookshelf. “I do hope you didn’t lose sleep over it.”

Hermione sent him a Look. Harry made a tricky catch behind his back and knocked over an inkwell.

“Hey, Ron, tell them what you told me yesterday,” he announced. “About the quidditch team.”

Ron sat up, somewhat mollified. “Oh. Right,” he said, turning pink. “I’m, er… well, I thought I might try out.”

“Really!” Hermione’s cry landed between exasperation and despair. “Quidditch! All three of you!”

Draco caught her eye and lifted an eyebrow.

“Fantastic,” she said, stilted. She sat down in the desk chair and gripped her book like a bludgeon. “What a good, safe, healthy activity. I’m sure you’ll be wonderful, and that you will definitely avoid most major injuries.”

Ron was smiling at her crookedly. “It’s alright, Mione. Let her rip.”

“No, I’m happy! I am! Just because it happens to be the *one* club at the school that’s sent multiple people in this room to the Hospital Wing doesn’t mean that it’s not, you know, a perfectly serviceable way to make friends, or induce blunt force trauma to any part of your body that you please—”

“And I’d do it again,” announced Harry grandly.

“Fine! Go ahead! Enjoy your cognitive faculties while they last, because believe me, you are all going to have *so* much brain damage from having anything to do with that nightmarish invention. Each one of you will get CTE before age twenty, and I am going to say ‘I told you so,’ every. Single. Time.”

“And you’ll even pretend not to enjoy it.”

“Shut up, Draco.”

“So,” said Ginny, pointing her toes at the ceiling. “Who’s the new Defense professor, d’you think?”

“Isn’t Moody staying?” said Hermione curiously. “He’s easily the most qualified yet.”

“Can’t, he’s working full-time for the Order,” reported Harry, kicking his foot up on the desk. He had some sort of pathological aversion to sitting in chairs normally. “I voted to bring back Lupin, but he’s still wanted by the Ministry.”

“Hard to find good’uns who aren’t, these days,” added Ron.

“I’m worried about that,” Hermione said seriously. “We can’t afford a second-rate professor with the O.W.L.s are this year. Speaking of which: I was thinking about a study club—”

“No, no, and no,” said Ron, jabbing his finger at her, “and not until I set *foot* on the Hogwarts Express, Hermione, we have a policy for a reason.”

“Honestly—”

“Policy! Eep! Zip!”

Ginny peered at him. “What d’you care, Ronniekins? You don’t want to take most of the N.E.W.T.s, anyway.”

He groaned. “See, Hermione, and now we’re talking about it. This is what happens we don’t stick to the policy, is I have to go in and think about—”

“It’s a *test,* not a dementor!”

“—how hard I’ll get reamed when Mum sees my O.W.L.s. She’s counting on me to bring the family average up, after the twins. She’ll have to disinherit me to keep us over an E-median.”

“You’ll do fine in Defense, at least,” said Harry helpfully. “I think we went through most of the fifth year Defense curriculum, anyway, for the Tournament.”

Draco snorted. In point of fact, they'd gone through what Hermione Granger personally deemed the most useful parts of the fifth year Defense curriculum, because she'd known damn well Harry wouldn't read the textbook; but the claim was still fair.

An owl clattered at the window. Harry hurried to let it in. For reasons unclear, Ron broke out sniggering. Draco watched with some amusement as Harry tried to both shield his postage from view and throw the owl out at the same time, though it kept battering him for a treat.

"Harry, who's writing to you?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Nobody." His face was rosy. He stuffed the letter into his back pocket. The envelope was wondrous thick. His correspondent was apparently something of a novelist. "Friend from school."

"Friend from school?" crooned Ron. "Special friend?"

"You know what, Weasley, I reckon you're gonna get what's coming to you one of these days—"

"Bring it on, loverboy, I'm getting old!"

Hermione sighed. She turned to address Draco directly, as if her attention had a maturity threshold.

"It's Cho?"

"Obviously."

"I suppose it's nice of her to write, although, Harry, you really should be trying to limit your correspondence with people outside of the Order; you don't want to give away where you're staying, and if anyone has her owls followed, they could find you."

Harry broke off a bout of mild slap-boxing with Ron and sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck. "C'mon, it's Cho," he said defensively.

“She’s really cool, and she gets it, and everything. She doesn’t ask me to tell her anything that’s a secret. She’s not, you know, nosy.”

“Love is real, ladies and gents,” said Ginny dryly. “‘She’s not nosy.’ Potter, you casanova.”

She was oddly calm. From the quick interplay of nonverbal signals among the four that followed, it became clear that no one had expected this.

“Tell you one thing, though,” she said suddenly. “Go easy on her on the pitch, and you’re a dead man.”

Harry laughed in relief. “You’d better try out, to keep me straight.”

“Yeah? Deal.” She gave him a sunny smile, all teeth and freckles. “Better go practice, then. Don’t want anyone saying I got in off nepotism.”

She rolled to her feet and sauntered to the door, flicking a wave goodbye over her shoulder. “Catch you later, olds!”

“Bye,” Harry called, while Ron blew a raspberry at her.

Hermione discreetly put her hand to her temple, bracing her head on it, and slid her eyes to Draco. A twinge happened on his spine when she caught him staring. He flicked his gaze away, but soon returned it, because it seemed like she’d meant to tell him something, and it just felt — horrendously pedestrian, to care about *looking* or *not* looking, which meant precisely fat nothing, it was pedantry, it was soppy, it was jejune. But she was in front of the sun from the window, and it came around her like it was trying to take its time touching her, running its fingers through her hair, tracing the soft blade of skin under her jaw.

Then he caught *her* staring, probably because he’d started acting like he had the palsy. He scowled at her, and she recoiled. Turned

back to Ron and Harry. That was great. Grand. Allowed him to rekindle his composure, that was something.

He was losing his mind. He wished she'd give it back already, it wasn't like she didn't have her own.

The dining room of Grimmauld Place was a lavish, gilded Fabergé egg of a thing. Bathed in natural light, stocked with buffet tables and candelabras and two fireplaces, tablecloths wholly spun from black Spanish lace, a table that sat forty, plus six chairs by the door for footmen, and crowning it all, over the hearth, a twelve-foot family portrait of the Blacks done by Hyacinthe Rigaud; at one time, it had been the thriving nexus of London social life, and engineered with the intention of leaving out absolutely nothing that one could want in a dining room; so naturally, the Order didn't use it.

What they did use was the servants' dining hall, a floor down and one flight of stairs closer to the kitchen, so that miscellaneous Weasleys could ferry trays of Molly's cooking out to the long shabby table between lanes of brown hutches, navigating by candlelight.

They were instructed to laden their plates in the steamy, copper-lined kitchen, where the more-than-slightly stressed Molly Weasley directed them to sample from various bubbling pots directly instead of waiting. "There isn't quite the room for it," she said apologetically, "with everyone coming, Mad-Eye's dropping in with Tonks, and your father's invited Kingsley and Bill—"

"Shacklebolt?" said Draco.

"No, dear, Bill Weasley," said Molly blithely, patting him on the shoulder, contributing to a growing suspicion that perhaps the twins hadn't gotten it from their father, after all.

A burst of voices heralded some newcomers, and then Sirius, Remus, and Mad-Eye Moody squeezed into the kitchen. Molly squeaked and hurried to hug Moody, who grumbled a plaintive:

“Constant vigilance, Molly,” but permitted her to kiss his cheek. Then he turned to Draco and demanded: “What were the names of the two Slytherins I brought with you to visit Albus Dumbledore?”

“Theodore Nott and Pansy Parkinson.”

Mad-Eye grunted and tucked away his wand. “Right you are. Good to see you alive, boy,” he said. “Still checking your corners?”

“Religiously, sir.”

The auror had recovered admirably from his bout with Sibelius Nott, with the exception of a silver eyepatch. It was unclear whether he retained the eye behind it, because he barked a greeting at the twins before they were remotely in view of the kitchen, and scared George into upsetting the soup tureen.

“Wotcher, Molly!”

And Draco went still.

But the woman who came in was so different he almost mistook her for someone else. Her cheekbones had softened, her jaw rounded out, and her hair was no longer Bellatrix’s wild snarl, but a pixie-cut shock of electric pink. When she spoke, a silver piercing flashed in the center of her tongue.

“Oh! Harry! Sorry about the confusion earlier. Couldn’t let on I’d met you, not in front of that Davis git. Had to make it seem like I drank the punch. And you lot! Glad to meet you! Here— do it properly, now —” She went around pumping everyone’s hands. “Nymphadora Tonks, pleasure! Friends call me Tonks, some call me Dora, only my mum uses the other. And you—” She turned to Draco, and hesitated. “Well, you call me what friends do. If it suits you.”

A faint challenge in it. He nodded stiffly.

“I’d heard about you,” she said. “Molly says you’re a Gryffindor, is that right?”

“Yes,” said Hermione, once his silence waxed awkward. “And you?”

“Nope! Hufflepuff,” she said, popping the -P. “But Gryffindor’s almost as good. Hey, you were almost the first Black not to make Slytherin! Save me and Lassie back here—”

“OI!”

“We’re a happy little club of trailblazers! Course, if you’d got Ravenclaw, we’d have a full set. Would’ve been dread boring, though.” She stuck her tongue out, good-naturedly.

Draco wet his lips. He kept hearing his mother’s voice flicker out of Tonks’s thick accent: a slightly heightened lift of a vowel, or a relish in the trill of a consonant.

“He speak English?” Tonks muttered to Hermione.

“Yeah, unfortunately,” said Ron. “Don’t tempt him. OW!”

“Enough!” cried Molly. “Everyone, *out!* Out there, there’s a perfectly good table!”

“Ah, but you’re in here, Molly,” said Arthur warmly, and came over to kiss her. Ginny bent and pretended to hurl.

“Alright! Well! Alright!” She was very red. “I’ll be out in a minute, you can all bother me then! Go!”

“Yes, ma’am. Oh, and I’ve brought Mundungus.”

“He’s very welcome, but tell him I counted the silverware *before* he arrived, thank you.”

The conversation moved away from them, and Tonks sucked air through her teeth, evaluating Draco with perhaps understandable

concern.

“You’re Narcissa’s son, aren’t you?”

The obvious mistrust on Draco’s face must have been mistaken for an invitation to *yes, please, keep talking.* Tonks planted her arms akimbo and rocked on her heels in tense, restless movement. “Knew that, dunno why I asked. Mum, uh… She said she was sorry she didn’t go to the funeral.”

“Which?” he asked, frowning, because for a moment he’d forgotten. Then he twitched and went silent again.

“Your, uh...”

“My father.”

“Yup.”

“I understand.”

Her heels bounced. He tapped his foot.

“Was she really?”

“No,” Tonks admitted. “I don’t think so. Well. I think she was sorry she couldn’t see your mum, but she wasn’t sorry she wasn’t invited. I don’t think she… she never had much nice to say about Lord Malfoy.”

He couldn’t imagine what his father would have said about Andromeda Black, and still less about her half-blood daughter. Likely nothing. He wouldn’t have been caught in the same room to begin with.

“How much were you told about my family?”

“More than you were told about mine, I’ll bet,” she said. “Still not much. I didn’t know how old you were until I heard it from Molly you

were in Ron’s year. It was a right shock to hear what happened with your Sorting. My mum didn’t believe it.”

“She knows about me?”

“Course she does. You’re a Malfoy, she’d know even if you weren’t her nephew. She still does read things, even if she doesn’t live with wizards anymore… And Sirius writes. I think they send letters sometimes, since he’s been out of Azkaban. Plus, earlier, at the Ministry, she, er…”

“She wasn’t pleased to see me.”

“No, but you can’t expect her to be, can you? She doesn’t know you from — anyway, she was sorry she couldn’t come tonight, but she wasn’t quite up to a party. Too many people, she said. And she doesn’t go into the Wizarding World very much anymore—”

“I imagine not.”

“—and it kind of freaked her out, seeing you. But she said if I saw you again, I should tell you—”

“Yes?”

“‘Blue isn’t your color.’”

He recoiled.

“Blue isn’t my color?”

“Yep. Washes you out.”

He stared at her in annoyed stupefaction. “Have you perhaps forgotten the part of the message including a greeting,” he said, “a courtesy, or any sort of account for the past fifteen years? A kind word, possibly? A notice of regret for a multi-decade length of absence?”

“Nope,” said Tonks. “Just to burn anything blue in your closet. Trust me, if you knew my mum, this wouldn’t be surprising.”

“But I don’t,” he said frostily. “I haven’t, you see. And being that I don’t often take counsel from people who are, in fact, strangers—”

“Yeah, but that’s not her fault. It’s not like she’s the one who wanted to leave.”

“She made a choice.”

“So did you!” Tonks said, incredulous. “The same choice, by the way —”

“Then she and I might understand each other better than you and I do,” he snapped. “Though we aren’t to know, because the idea of meeting me appears to exhaust her.”

“Mate. Cut her a break. This has stakes for her that it doesn’t for you.”

“Do not lecture *me* on stakes,” he said, with a tone the likes of which even his father might have admired. “My mother and I have risked everything—”

“I didn’t mean that. Not existential stakes, personal ones. There’s history here you don’t even know the beginning of.”

“What history? What happened between her and my mother? Tell me.”

Tonks shrugged.

“Tell me. It’s my birthright as much as yours.”

“Yeah?” she said, eyes glittering with mischief. “Riddle me this, brainiac: if the story’s your birthright, wouldn’t your mum have told you already?”

“Maybe she has,” he replied coolly. “Maybe I’m giving you the chance to correct the account. Maybe I’m interested in a second perspective.”

Tonks shrugged again. “Yeah, that’s fair,” she said. “Wish I could tell you, too. But you’d have to ask Mum, and from someone who’s tried it: good fucking luck.”

“You don’t *know?”*

“No, I don’t know what all went down between Baby Mum and her bitch sisters. You think that’s the kind of thing she loves to talk about? You couldn’t get my mum’s favorite flower out with the Cruciatus, if she’d made up her mind not to tell you. Course, you could say the same thing about me. And Sirius. You can’t get a secret out of a Black on pain of death, they’ll just keel over and die from pure spite.”

He let out a small, commiserating exhale through his teeth, because — well, there was a thought he’d had before.

“It’s not mine, either.”

“My mum doesn’t look back.”

“Neither does mine.”

Tonks’ mouth twitched. “See, I think we’re both lying,” she said. “I think your mum bluffs just like mine does, and it doesn’t fool her kid worth a damn.”

He resisted the questions that he wanted to ask, and would have asked, if he had the time and trust to pose them: *What did our mothers do to each other? Do you know? Do they?*

“An interesting counterfactual,” he said stiffly. “Tell Andromeda that my mother happens to like me in blue. And that I take my mother’s word in all things quite seriously.”

He moved past her into the dining room.

Cross-currents of conversation all drifted overhead, and he could rotate through them, like flipping channels on a radio:

“...interesting that you say so,” Kingsley was saying to Hermione, “because there’s been a bill for house-elf regulation stuck in committee for years, we just haven’t had the chance…”

“But can’t the Department of Magical Creatures do anything without the Wizengamot? Do you really need legislative oversight for every little thing?”

He laughed deeply. “Democracies tend to.”

“...dreadfully sorry, Bill, I’m sure it must be frustrating to be stuck with a novice on your team,” Molly said, heaping another baked potato on his plate. Bill gave an uncomfortable laugh.

“I mean, she’s not… she’s really talented, you have to give her that. It’s not her fault she drives me mental, she…”

“—so *rude* to you the last time we met, you should ask to transfer—”

“No… I’m sure she’ll get bored and leave by the end of the year, and then it’ll be the same again…”

Dinner was wiry coils of fusilli pasta with sautéed prawns the size of mice, roasted cherry tomatoes with their skins blackened and split like raisins, kalamata olives, and a thick, smooth, basil pomodoro sauce, potato skins fried to sunflower brown with liquid snowcaps of cheddar cheese, smoked bacon, and diced green onions, and baked potatoes crested with sour cream, fat rounds of rustic bread the color of coffee grounds, and frosted bottles of butterbeer that clinked pleasantly amongst the chattering and the laughter and the scrape of plates.

“...never a prefect myself… my Head of House said I lacked certain necessary qualities.”

“Like what?”

“Decorum,” said Tonks, “and a sense for when to keep my clothes on. Exact words.”

“Really!”

“Genetic problem,” said Sirius. “Really serious. And I would have made a wretched prefect, I spent too much time in detention with James. Lupin was our good boy.”

“Do stop. If Dumbledore hoped I would be able to control my friends, I need scarcely say that I failed dismally.”

“Thank God. Anyway, Ron, that’s all to say you shouldn’t feel down about it, and besides, I never would’ve made First Beater if I’d been prefect.”

“And I would have put years back on my life,” Remus murmured.

“You were on the team?” said Ron. “What did you fly?”

Sirius sat up, preening. “Nimbus Seven. Naught to seventy in ten seconds, snappy as hell. Problem is, the Nimbus model had this issue with countersteering, which is fine for a beater but won’t be for you, a keeper needs to be nailing his hairpins. Here’s what the Comet does better…”

Draco would have liked to know what it was the Comet did better, but as he reached for his glass, he caught a snare of Arthur’s conversation from the end of the table.

“...real shame, I’m sorry, but I think we killed it for you, Tonks.”

“Nah. He didn’t like me off the bat,” said Tonks, in low and unusually sober tones. “He could tell I wasn’t one of them… he asked a bunch

of questions about my pedigree, and I couldn't answer them."

"What about Andromeda's contact?" grunted Mad-Eye.

"That's the only reason I got as far as an interview."

"So it's Plan B?"

"Later," whispered Tonks, and then tipped her head down the table. Then she turned to Draco, and winked at him.

Draco stiffened, ears warm, and swept his attention back to the other end, where Sirius and Remus were describing a mythically grand fifteenth birthday party. Before he could catch the thread of conversation, however, there came a tap on his shoulder.

It was Molly. As he turned she slid a pair of dessert plates in front of himself and Hermione.

"For you two," she whispered. "I'm sorry we didn't have a proper celebration — I thought it might make the other boys feel bad — but I didn't want either of you to think I'd forgotten."

Each plate held an enormous red velvet cupcake frosted with a dollop the size of a turnip. The letter 'P' was iced atop in swirling red buttercream and gold sprinkles.

"Congratulations, dears," she whispered.

"Thank you, Molly," said Hermione, all wobbly.

Speaking soon would be essential to avoiding unforgivable rudeness, but he simply couldn't find the words.

It occurred to him, with awful, cringing clarity, that he wasn't Molly's son. He was a random child who kept turning up on her doorstep, at her dinner table as one more hungry mouth among dozens. Not only that, but the fact *he'd* made prefect had taken a laurel away from her real son, who had no great richness of his own laurels to begin with

— but if that had occurred to her, it was the furthest thing from her mind now, as she hurried to cut everyone rounds of lemon gateau.

“Rude,” said Hermione, elbowing him. He elbowed her back, but his mind was elsewhere.

“Pot, cauldron.”

“She was only trying to be nice. I’ll eat it, if you don’t want to.”

“No,” he said immediately, pulling his plate away. Given an inch, her sweet tooth would take continents. “It’s mine. You have your own.”

“Mine’s smaller than yours.”

“No, it isn’t!”

“It is. Yours has a hair in it, actually, I think. Let’s swap—”

Her spoon dive-bombed, and met the flat of his fork, a spar that devolved into a discreet wrestling match under the table. She ended up smudging frosting on his blue silk suit, and his cry of outrage was muffled by her yelp when he pinched her waist. She was wriggling around against his side and in the intense heat of combat he lost track of what anyone else was doing.

It seemed to be many a skirmish later that the plates were emptied, and the scrape of chairs declared the end of the meal. While wax sank from stubby candles, and the last dregs of butterbeer wine dwindled in their glasses, it was hard to miss Sirius rising from the end of the table and slipping out of the dining room, especially when he was soon followed by Arthur, Mad-Eye, Kingsley, and Tonks. Remus stayed, but as soon as he left the table to take his plate in, Ginny checked that the kitchen door was closed and then lurched over the table.

“C’mon,” she whispered. “I want to hear the news.”

“What?” said Hermione distractedly, licking a stripe of frosting from her hand. He lost the ability to hear what Ginny was saying.

“...catch them at it, but we’ve got to do it before Lupin comes back. Run!”

And then everyone *was* running, Ginny and Harry and Ron and Hermione, in a great quake of chairs and scrambling footsteps, for reasons unfathomable, but he wasn’t about to be sat there languishing his own idiocy while they did, so he threw back his chair and stalked after them. At the foot of the staircase Ginny mashed her finger to her lips and crept up the side on tiptoe to avoid creaking, sneaking past the veiled Walburga, and on the second floor she beckoned Harry to help her shove aside a large cabinet of expensive porcelain. Two pieces of Draco’s birthright tipped over and cracked.

Behind it hid a thin door, too narrow to fit any of them front-on, and it swung forth to reveal an equally narrow servant’s passage running between rooms. The walls were unfinished wood and snowy with what was probably asbestos. Ginny plunged in without reservation, followed by Harry, Ron, and Hermione, while Draco took a moment of silence for his father’s suit. Then he clambered in and closed the door behind him.

In the creaking, drafty darkness, it smelled thickly of sawdust and varnish. Voices wobbled through the thin walls, growing louder the farther they plunged into the passage, resolving gradually into full sentences:

“...ask Dumbledore, first.”

“That isn’t wise.” Kingsley’s voice was unmistakably deep. “We’re to minimize contact, remember? He’s under Ministry surveillance.”

“He’s also our leader.” That was Bill. “You have to admit, some help would be nice.”

“Information makes you dangerous.” It was Mad-Eye’s hushed growl. “No one can compromise everyone. That’s Dumbledore’s way, and it’s for our safety.”

“Fine. My point is, Dumbledore is on the Wizengamot, so he must have permissions—”

“Not for long.”

“What do you mean?” Sirius demanded. “What’s happening to him?”

“Polls say we’re going to lose about ten seats in the next election,” said Kingsley. “We aren’t going to put him up.”

Exclamations abounded. Hermione hitched a breath, though Draco didn’t consider this half as grim as some of the other things he’d heard today.

“Do you think it was my idea?” Kingsley was measured, but firm. “He flipped on the Umbridge bill. I’m glad he did it, if it helped Potter, and I understand that he’s never been playing for the same reasons as the rest of us, but there are a lot of people in my party he didn’t consult, and who wouldn’t have agreed to it if he did. He’s not a politician, he’s a chessmaster.”

“Make your point,” said Bill.

“Fine. Is it not obvious? He’s not a team player. My party doesn’t like him. And I’m tired of running around apologizing for him every time he sneaks off and strikes a deal without asking us.”

“Respectfully, fuck your party,” said Sirius pleasantly. “For one, the Wizengamot’s been a joke since Runcorn’s election. For two, Dumbledore represents the Order. He represents everything that stands against the Ministry. Boot him and it’s a declaration against us. Boot him and he looks weak, unsupported. Here’s an idea: why don’t you do *your* job, and get *your* party in order, instead of firing the one man who might be able to prevent another war?”

“Much as I appreciate instruction on how to run an office I’ve had for ten years from a man who spent seven of that in prison,” said Kingsley, with a glassy, pleasant baritone that conjured images of interminable committee meetings, “I would ask for some grace. Do you really imagine I’d do this if Dumbledore hadn’t already told me to?”

There was a beat.

“Well, there’s the second piece of shit news in two hours,” said Tonks, bleakly. “Because I botched the interview. So I can’t get us into the Department. Sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

“Happens to the best of us.”

“Besides, I couldn’t swing it, either.”

“Yeah, but you’re in Muggle Artifacts. It’s not your fault you don’t have platinum clearance.”

Hermione mouthed something more insistently.

“Doesn’t matter. We all knew we’d probably end up at Plan B, we said so when we started.”

“I’m still not convinced we’re out of luck on Plan A,” remarked Bill. “Seven grown wizards at a table, and none of us know someone with a badge? Mum, Dad, I can’t believe Mad-Eye’s the only auror you know.”

“They cleaned us out after the war.” Mad-Eye was gravelly. “That department’s a ghost town for Order members, lad, you don’t want to know the kind of people they’ve got in it.”

“What about admins, then? Not everyone with clearance is a cowboy or a spy.”

“Arthur,” said Sirius, “didn’t you say one of your sons was at the Ministry? What’s his name — the one who’s not around much? Peter? Perry?”

“Percy,” said Molly.

“Percy! Can we try Percy?”

“No,” said Arthur.

“...No?”

“No.”

A long beat. Draco shifted. His muscles burned from bracing himself up against the wall.

“Alright,” said Sirius. “Er — seriously, who here is friends with nerds? Does no one know a single bureaucrat?”

“That Malfoy boy probably does.”

Surprise forked up his spine at the sound of his name.

Mad-Eye croaked, “Putting it out there. If we’re talking freely.”

“Not that freely,” Arthur snapped. “We’ve had this argument. I’m sick of it, to tell you the truth.”

“They’ve already faced Death Eaters—”

“And you’ll go through me before you send them to do it again. They’re my children.”

“Not all of them.”

“Yes, all of them!” cried Arthur. “Those children came to us in the faith that they would be protected, that they would be taken care of —”

“They have fathers, Arthur! Mind your own children, they’re your lookout—”

“Their fathers can’t be here to fight for them, so you’ll deal with me!” roared Arthur. “Every child that needs me is my lookout! Every one! A father has a duty of care!”

There was a creak of furniture, a rearrangement of chairs.

“Let’s table the question of fighting,” said Sirius. “For now. I agree, fifteen is… fifteen’s quite young. But that’s not the only thing they can do. For instance, I think Harry should be let in on these meetings.” He cleared his throat. “As Harry’s godfather, I know that’s what James would have wanted.”

Molly gave a loud snort.

“I — sorry. Molly?”

“Nothing,” she said tartly. “I’m sorry, but it’s just— if you think for one moment that James would have let his son within a league of the Order, then you’ve forgotten him.”

Hermione winced. Harry was scowling.

“I’ve forgotten nothing,” said Sirius, with soft venom. “Harry brought it up with me the other day. Actually.”

“Of course he did.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing!”

“It’s not nothing, spit it out. You think I’m lying?”

“No! But honestly, of course *he’s* asking about the Order; I’m surprised it took him this long, with you carting him around everywhere like a pet—”

“I do not *cart—”*

“You do, you hardly let the boy alone! He’s not had a minute all summer without you filling his head with stories about the Marauders’ glory days! Half of which involve you all almost getting yourselves killed! What is he supposed to take away from that?”

“Because those were the only days his father had!” Sirius bellowed. “The glory days! That was his life, and Harry has a right to know about it! He has a right to know who his father was! And James has — had — *would have had* a right to tell him those stories!”

“Don’t pretend this is about James!”

“Of course it’s about James! Who the hell else would it be about?”

“Harry!”

“Both of you, pipe down. The boy is James Potter’s son,” said Mad-Eye. “If he’s got a savior complex, we all know damn well it doesn’t come from Black.”

“Thank you,” snapped Sirius.

There was a pause.

“Maybe not!” said Molly brightly. “Maybe not. But I happen to remember both James *and* Lily voted against recruiting children.”

“They were hardly more than children themselves. Sixteen years old, was Evans, when she signed on with me.”

“And I hope Harry can forgive you for that, Alastor, I really do.”

What ensued was like the moment before a falling glass struck the ground: that taut, quivering heartbeat before cacophony.

Hermione took a sharp breath. Draco’s stomach was trying to pulverize itself, and he was only eavesdropping. He couldn’t imagine

what it must have felt like inside the room.

He couldn’t see Harry’s face. He didn’t want to.

There was a screech of chairs.

“Molly—”

“None of you have children. None,” she said. “None of you understand what you’re asking.”

A flurry of footsteps.

“Mum.”

“Molly, dear, it’s alright.”

Hermione stared at Draco in consternation. Her knuckles pressed tight to her mouth.

She whispered, “Do you—”

The door opened.

Light flooded the servants’ passage, followed by a man’s long shadow. Draco slowly stood up, blinking away blindness.

“My goodness,” said Remus. “And here I was worried I’d bored you.”

After three unconvincing denials, two suspiciously intricate excuses, and one beast of a chewing-out in tones paternal and length unbearable, they withdrew downstairs to make their goodbyes.

“So,” said Ron, “they’re up to something, for sure, then.”

“It’s something at the Ministry,” murmured Harry, leaning in and glancing over his shoulder, to check for Remus. “I’ve heard them

talking about it before. Tonks was just the last part of it, they're trying to break in. Can't tell what they want or why, though."

"Might be the auror office? Doesn't make sense, though, Mad-Eye worked there for years… why break in now…"

"Or the Department of Mysteries," said Hermione, nibbling her thumb. Ron broke off.

"Well — cheers," he said, bemused. "How'd you come up with that?"

"Whatever they want requires platinum clearance," she murmured. "That's the highest level. Reserved for high-ranking aurors, political leaders, and Unspeakables. And Tonks said she was sorry she couldn't get them 'into the Department,' so it's either the Department of Mysteries, or another one that's *very* classified."

"That's correct," said Draco, mildly impressed. "Of course, it could be something else, you know. Information, or something from the Minister's desk. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement, for example."

"But you don't need platinum clearance to get into the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Some branches."

"That still doesn't explain—"

"Found it!" Remus called, strolling back in with a gilded goblet. He found them in a state of suspicious silence and attentiveness. His eyes narrowed.

"To refresh your memory, I grew up sleeping two beds down from Sirius Black and James Potter," he said. "You must understand that I know what it sounds like when people are scheming."

"We're not scheming," said Harry, which was a promising start that he ruined with: "We're talking about— stuff."

“Yes,” said Hermione fatalistically.

“Yeah,” said Ron loyally, with heart.

Remus’s eyebrows entreated them to stop digging. He folded his arms and pressed his lips together, losing pathetically in his wrestle with a smile.

The scorch of paternal exasperation was starting to leave a char on Draco’s pride. It called for diversionary measures. There came a time in every man’s life when it became necessary to make hard calls, and do what must be done.

He pointed at Harry.

“Potter has a girlfriend.”

“Fuck OFF!” exclaimed Harry, as Remus burst into laughter that shook the whole house.

“You’re getting to that age, I s’pose — *ha* — I’m sorry you didn’t feel you could tell us—”

“I didn’t feel like telling ANYBODY,” said Harry, loudly, “and I still don’t! Because my life is full of GITS and RATS!”

It was, and Draco was amused that it had taken this long to notice; but it also successfully distracted Remus. He deposited the Floo pot and wandered off, chuckling to himself.

“Great,” Harry snapped, once he was gone. “Now I’ve got to go tell Sirius, because if he hears it from Remus, I’ll never live it down. Thanks a lot.”

“You’re welcome,” said Draco, quite sincerely pleased with himself. Remus’s laughter was still echoing from the foyer.

After allowing him a bit more disconsolate muttering, Hermione cleared her throat, and conscripted Harry into a bruising hug

goodbye. Harry acquiesced with grace and a softened expression.

She stepped back, brushing herself off, and gave him a small smirk. “Try not to get arrested again, Harry. I know it’s just a few days, but you can do it.”

“Thanks, Hermione. And thanks, Draco, for the lawyer. And for coming.”

“See Granger,” he said. “Except for the bit about believing in you; my over-under is forty-eight hours.”

“You know, from you, that’s really sweet.”

They retreated to the Floo grate, stacking wood together to make a fire — doing it the muggle way, by necessity, and so involving several heated debates between Harry and Hermione about kindling formation — and in the middle of their work, someone hollered Harry’s name. Grumbling at Draco in particular, he left in a hurry, and Draco, Hermione, and Ron finished preparing the grate.

Ron muttered, “Are you lot… alright, you know? With… everything?”

Draco, who had been massaging his temple in anticipation of another threat to Harry’s life, was pleasantly surprised and flattered by Ron’s question. Hermione picked at her fingers, apparently unable to answer it.

“What?” she said, in a steady, if high-pitched voice. “Me? I’m fine.”

“Yeah,” he said, “but with Viktor, and the summer, and everything. That muggle doctor. He help any?”

She gave an unconvincing smile. “I’m fine,” she said. “I’ll be fine. Don’t you worry about me.”

“Fat chance of that.” Ron turned to Draco. “What about you?”

“Exhausted, thanks for asking,” he said immediately. “Besides which, my knees hurt, I’ve a stress headache, two blisters, and a splinter.”

“Don’t care, take it like a man,” said Ron. Then, lower: “But seriously.”

He contemplated what to say to this. Finally, he settled on: “I’ve been worse.”

Ron nodded and brushed himself off, adopting a tone of brittle confidence. “Great,” he announced. “None of us can lie for shit. Good to know.”

-Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.

-Okay. If I told you, you wouldn't believe me, so... thanks for the well-wishes. I really appreciated them. You are the sweetest, kindest people, and I can't tell you how many times over I would have lost faith if not for your support. This is a group project, seriously.

-I'm alive(!), more so than I have been, and I'm back in a place where I can post. I, uh, would like to promise that it won't happen again? But for health reasons I can't necessarily do that, so instead I'll say: I'm not dead! And I have invested simply way too much time into this story to abandon it. Can't keep a bad dog down, and all that.

-This version of the Wizengamot is a representative body that’s roughly adapted from the way proportional representation works in the U.K. Basically, the Wizengamot system is that each party runs on a single ticket, and then gets a number of seats proportionate to their vote. Because wizards are so geographically diffuse, it didn’t make sense to me for them to have single-member districts, since nowhere would be concentrated enough to really have common interests; instead, I think they’d run a full vote for the country, and just have representatives from the party choose amongst themselves who sits the Wizengamot. This also explains why someone with a lot of

notoriety, like Dumbledore, could maintain a seat for a long time (the duration of the original series) while other members come and go.

-Thank you, Gatz Nation, for continuing to make me happy.

-All you fans of Kreacher out there, don’t worry: I haven’t forgotten him.

-Hey. Don’t worry about it.

-Next chapter: "Rumors on the Hogwarts Express."

Rumors on the Hogwarts Express

Chapter 60: Rumors on the Hogwarts Express

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

There were patrolmen at King’s Cross that year.

They nodded subtly to Narcissa as she swept past with Draco; Hermione had disappeared somewhere to bid her parents goodbye and pick up Crookshanks and Thucydides.

The patrolmen rankled in the same way it might to find a new lock on the door of a childhood bedroom. He touched his wand and thought with tense anticipation of the moment when he would be permitted to use it again. It wasn’t right, depriving people of magic. He wasn’t safe without it. He couldn’t conceive of how muggles ever felt safe at all.

“It was a good summer.”

She daubed her cheek. He averted his face.

“Don’t say that,” she said. “It makes it sound so final. It’s so hot out today. Doesn’t it feel like summer still?”

It was the first of September; it did not. There were students flocking to the train, and the trundle of trunks over flagstones, and the screech of owls less well-bred than Ulysses rattling their cages. That was the sound of autumn, for him. It was the start of something, not an end.

“It’s hot,” he admitted, stiffly.

“No, then. That’s alright. Did you have a good time, at least? Being home?”

“I did.”

“And you’ll remember what you learned this summer? Your form? Try to practice, while you’re there. Hogwarts has a Dueling Club, or at least it used to. Not sure if it’s worth anything, now.”

“I doubt I’ll find many opponents like what I’m used to, but I’ll do my best.”

She kissed his cheeks and scraped her tears off with her handkerchief, with ungentle dignity.

“In truth,” she said, “I hate this dismal train station. I always did.” Then: “I’m very silly today. Forgive me, it’s the smoke inhalation.”

“That’s alright.”

Who is Nymphadora Tonks? Did you know Andromeda had children? Are there others? How many people have you hidden from me? What is the nature of your problem with Hermione Granger?

He held the words heavily on his tongue. The engine screeched, and they melted away, timed out, conceived too late, held back too long. They tasted like smoke in the back of his throat.

“Goodbye, darling.”

“See you at Christmas.”

He kissed her cheek and boarded the train.

Each year it became a greater relief to board the Express, which brought with it the permission to use magic, and he drew his robes over his jumper with the satisfaction of one donning a crown. Here, as nowhere else, he was in control, and the trivialities of patrolmen and aurors and Ministry intrigues faded with the squeal of the train’s wheels, slipping into the corner of the windows, and then, gratefully, out of sight. With the rushing motion of the train he could imagine he

was headed towards anything; so long as he was moving, he was safe.

He straightened the cuff of his robe and adjusted his prefect badge. It gleamed subtly on his breast pocket, several inches starboard of a perfect red Windsor, like the swell of a rosebud. His collar folded like a bit of ivory stationery, almost glowing against the layers of his black cashmere jumper and silk robe. In a rare groundswell of partisan spirit, he had indulged in a dark crimson pocket square. One had to set an example for the firsties.

He drew his wand and cast *Verdimillious.* Red sparks fountained. Magic ran up his arm like the waters of a warm bath.

Much settled, he replaced it at his hip, and went to find the prefect carriage.

Children raced up and down the aisles, screaming. They were much smaller than they had been last year; it was concerning that Britain's eleven-year-olds were growing so short. One of Fred and George's trademark fireworks went up in a carriage near the caboose, and screams of delight mingled with the harried bellowing of the trolley woman. Neville hurtled past, holding a bulbous plant that sneezed ink in his face when jostled, and Draco sidestepped him neatly to avoid receiving an ink relief of Neville's features on the front of his shirt. He beamed.

"Hullo, Malfoy! Congrats on making prefect, I always knew you'd get it!"

"Afternoon, Longbottom. Cheers. Watch that plant."

"Trying to!" called Neville, backpedaling down the aisle, only to promptly trip over Colin Creevey, stumble, fumble for the pot, and pitch it forthwith into the face of the poor Ravenclaw who'd opened her carriage door, mistaking the commotion for the trolley.

Further down, Seamus Finnigan was blasting music from his compartment at a volume that could only be described as antagonistic to the eardrum-wielding community, smeary guitars that rattled the windows, drums that sounded like someone broadcasting their pulse during a heart attack. Seamus himself had shaved his head and procured an earring, which gave him a daring edge, especially sitting with the bookish Dean Thomas, though he fit right in with the silver-studded and undercut-sporting Katie Bell. All of them seemed to be enjoying their acute hearing loss.

“AY! MALFOY! LOOKING FIT! WHAT’S THE CRAIC? GOOD BREAK?”

Draco opened his mouth, reconsidered, and nodded.

“LEEFS. HAVE YOU HEARD THESE GUYS, RAGE? GREAT, AREN’T THEY?”

He extended a hand, palm-down, and lowered it an inch.

“AW, PISS! SOMEONE COMPLAINED?”

He tapped his badge.

“NAW! REALLY, MATE? HAVE A HEART— ALRIGHT, ALRIGHT,” said Seamus hastily, when Draco raised an eyebrow. “WE’RE TURNING IT DOWN.”

He nodded and continued on his way, though the music resumed once he was far enough that it wasn’t worth the bother to return. Fair enough.

Lavender and Parvati shared a compartment with Romilda Vane and a few Ravenclaw girls near the front, their uniforms offering all sorts of pleasant reasons for citation. Parvati had tied her shirt under her ribs like a bandeau, Romilda sported a pair of knee-high boots instead of flats, and Lavender appeared to be experimenting with the definition of ‘skirt.’

They all stopped talking when he came into the doorway. Lavender seized Parvati's arm.

"Hello, Draco," she said. Her voice had dropped over the summer, and was slightly raspy. Perhaps she'd had a head cold.

"Brown. Patil. Vane." He inclined his head. "I presume you're going to change before we get to school."

"You don't like it? I thought it was fetching." Lavender beamed and plucked at her skirt, which was a dangerous game and he respected her nerve for it, but he still straightened up and lifted his eyes to the window.

"No comment. Regulation is knee length. You've got until we arrive, and then it's house points."

"Dra- *cooooo.* C'mooooooon."

"Put those vowels back where you found them. Points or a detention, all of you. It's your call."

"Oh, I wouldn't mind a detention," said Parvati. Lavender smacked her thigh, and she giggled.

"You're such a tyrant," said Romilda, flopping sideways on the seat. Her black hair spilled lazily across the tartan. "So *Draco* -nian. Be nice!"

"Not my forte," he told her. "You, too, with the boots. I'll be checking when we disembark."

"Promise?" she called after him. He walked away from their compartment, feeling somewhat embarrassed for no particular reason, especially when a rash of giggling broke out in his wake.

The prefect carriage was actually had no compartments at all, but was a long, cheerful, well-lit room like a dining car, paneled in rich mahogany, with frilled lace curtains, white tablecloths, and deep,

plush seats, like someone had welded together several deep armchairs. A flotilla of glasses and silverware decorated each table, with tea settings and candles, and in general it was much more suitable for transport than the compartments had been; Draco would've liked to travel this way every year.

And at the head of the car, fiddling with a stack of index cards, was the svelte, tall, and ungraciously handsome Cedric Diggory, whose prefect badge was missing: it had been replaced by a shiny brass square that read 'HEAD BOY.'

"Afternoon, Malfoy," he called brightly. That he remembered Draco's name was a small marvel, since they'd interacted perhaps once, and it hadn't quite been the summit of his conversational career. "Help finding your place? I, er… took the liberty of a seating arrangement. Not mandatory, of course."

Cedric was very nervous. Anyone less familiar with the immense social weight of a seating arrangement might have failed to sympathize, but Draco, who had seen more than one party dissolve into bedlam for a failure to consider table placement, thought his fears were well-merited. He contributed his share to peace and tranquility by finding his seat at a table with Hannah Abbott — round face, dirt blond, fidgety — and two boys. One had a pouf of dust-brown curls and eyebrows thick as quills. He was opposite a dark, willowy boy with particularly striking hazel eyes, ringed with kohl, veins of glitter on his cheekbones, and a Slytherin tie.

"Blaise?"

"Draco," he said cheerfully, extending his hand, palm-down, like a queen sanctioning tribute. "I say, you *have* grown up."

He sat down, relief commingled with frustration. Theo was the clearer candidate for Slytherin prefect, by marks; but of course, he hadn't been seen since June, and of course, there was the matter of his participation in the events of last spring.

He didn’t even know if Theo meant to return to Hogwarts. He hadn’t been arraigned for anything, but with his father in Azkaban, what did he stand to gain from being at school? It might serve his purposes to pursue another kind of education.

“Congratulations on surprising nobody, dear chap,” drawled Blaise. “I think my own accomplishment is much more remarkable; I think Snape forgot to pick prefects, and circled the last name on the roster at random. Still! Take the money and run, as is my family motto, and so here I am. Tracey’s thrilled; she’s my counterpart from Venus. We’ve made a bet for who can sleep with Diggory before the year’s out. Buy-in’s fifteen galleons, if you’re interested.”

Hannah squeaked.

Draco, who was rather flustered by all of this, wordlessly began fixing himself a cup of tea.

“Like you’d have a chance,” laughed the other boy. He turned to Draco and stuck out his hand, which Draco shook with some reluctance, considering the volume of ink on it. “Anthony Goldstein. Ravenclaw.”

“Draco Malfoy.”

“Oh, I know that,” he said, grinning. “Ernie’s in conniptions about your Potions final, you know. How’d you even score over one hundred? Did you bribe him?”

The suggestion was issued mildly, in jest, but Draco still prickled at the faint probing underneath it.

“There are two versions of a Calming Draught. I had extra time, so I wrote it in.”

“You had extra time?” Hannah repeated faintly. “On Snape’s final? I didn’t even finish it.”

“Most people didn’t,” said Anthony. “The cutoff for an O was eighty-five percent.”

He disliked the boy’s knowing smile; Ravenclaws were such insufferably smug twits, each to each.

The door rattled. Hermione came in with Ernie Macmillan and Padma Patil, who joined her at what must have been the most concentrated swot-per-table arrangement since the Hogwarts Founding Committee.

“Now we’re all here, we can get started,” said Cedric. The girl to his right, a Ravenclaw seventh year with a chocolate brown bob, clinked her spoon against her glass. “I’ll try to be quick, I know you’ve all got lots of better things to do than listen to me go on. Er — welcome! Hello!” He spread his hands, beaming. “I’m Cedric Diggory—”

There was a hearty commotion of applause from the Hufflepuffs; Hannah Abbott applauded like it was live Puccini. Draco tapped his finger on the tablecloth.

Hermione politely applauded and then returned to her journal, annotating busily. Draco’s mouth quirked.

Cedric flicked through to another card, cleared his throat, and began again.

“Er… curfews! Yes! All of you have a curfew extension to midnight—”

One of the older Gryffindors gave a hearty *whoop.* Several others joined in, jeering.

“—which is — John, *please,”* said Cedric, helplessly smiling. “In exchange for that, you’ll be spending several nights a week helping Filch enforce the curfew. This year, Fidelia and I have decided you’ll be patrolling in pairs, both for your safety and the students’. We’ve drawn up a tentative schedule giving everyone two rounds a week; if

you don’t like your partner, or don’t feel comfortable patrolling with them, please do come see me, and I’ll make arrangements for you.”

Draco didn’t listen to the following lecture from Fidelia Jones, which was dry and formalistic and interrupted by periodic rowdiness from the older students, who seemed to find the whole ordeal childishly entertaining.

There was a lunch of bresse duck in a red wine sauce, an apple pecan salad, and baked marigold tarts with fresh cherries. Afternoon shadows lengthened on the floor. Blaise and Hannah fell into a wide-ranging discussion of their families’ occupations, Hannah’s being well-respected philanthropists with considerable money in broomstick making, and Blaise’s fortune coming largely from his late father’s Italian dukedom.

Hermione was chatting with Ernie Macmillan, apparently with great vigor, and from the few snippets he overheard it was about O.W.L. study regimens. Ernie’s nods grew increasingly fervent as she kept speaking. Someone really ought to separate them, or they would forget to disembark from the train.

“...Malfoy? Malfoy. I’m a beautiful man, Malfoy, it shouldn’t be this hard for me to get anyone’s attention.”

“What?” he snapped.

“Diggory passed out the patrol schedule,” said Blaise, tossing a scroll of parchment at him. “I was going to say cheers, we’ve got Tuesdays together, but now I’m worried you’re partially deaf.”

If it was an intriguing possibility — being out of doors, after dark, with no one around to stop you from doing anything you pleased — in a castle full of archives and passageways, with a map that told you exactly where all the best and most secret ones were hidden — then he kept it to himself, and firmly cordoned off the parts of his imagination that liked to wander.

“...hope his mother’s alright, dreadful thing to happen, too…”

Draco tilted his head, inclining his ear to the conversation without raising his eyes.

“Did they catch who did it?”

“No. Three aurors in the hospital, too. That’s what you get for letting bilge have clearance.”

It was a sixth year Slytherin prefect, the girl, someone with dark braids and a stained red lip. A Rosier, possibly. She was smoking something that gave off faint puffs of blue smoke and hid it whenever Cedric came by, sending conspiratorial smirks to the sneering Hufflepuff sixth year beside her.

“Three aurors must have taken some doing,” said the Hufflepuff, taking a drag from her smoke.

“Oh, yes. There’s a whole cell of them on the inside, Mum said. It’s a proper organization.” Rosier flicked some ash into her tea, and it spun there, a gray knot dissolving in the milky brown. “The terrorists. They call themselves the Order of the Phoenix. And their leader is an utter *beast.* Six feet tall, black hair, tattoos—”

“He flies into battle on a hippogriff,” added the Ravenclaw. “That’s what *I* heard, anyway.”

“And that’s without his pet werewolf,” said the Hufflepuff eagerly, “don’t forget him — my mum says he *eats* people. ”

“Pet werewolf?” said Draco lightly. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t believe you.”

“I would,” agreed the Slytherin, smirking. “But he’s real, trust me. My mum says she’s seen the dossier.” She leaned in, and her grin widened. “His name’s Sirius Black.”

“Granger. I need a word.”

He took her elbow and dragged her out of conversation with Ernie Macmillan, who watched them go with an expression that was *entirely* too knowing for Draco’s tastes, but he would deal with that later. Smug gits, each to each.

He pulled her along and tugged her into an empty compartment, checked the hallway, and then locked the doors.

“What is it?” she demanded, as soon as the lock clicked. “Are you alright? What’s so urgent? I was finally getting to a point there.”

“We’ve a security problem,” he said flatly, turning his back on the door. “The Order has a mole.”

Her irritation fell away, slipping seamlessly into clean, businesslike intensity. “How do you know?”

“Because I was just in the prefects’ meeting, and Whatshername Rosier knows that Padfoot and Moony are Order members. She claims she saw Padfoot’s Ministry dossier. And she’s not the only one. There were three or four of them, purebloods or children of Ministry workers, all gossiping about it.”

Her brow creased. “Well, that doesn’t prove anything,” she said doubtfully, folding her arms. “That’s a rumor. They’re children.”

“Children repeating what their parents have told them, and that’s a highly specific rumor, wouldn’t you say? Which just so happens to intersect with the truth?”

“Yes, but— I don’t know how they could possibly know that.” She started to pace. “Padfoot hasn’t left Grim— ‘his house,’” she corrected, “in months. He doesn’t run missions. He doesn’t leave at all. There’s no way the Ministry could know he’s affiliated, except—”

He watched her make the same conclusion he did. It took her about four seconds less time than it had taken him; she screwed up her face and rubbed her forehead, grimacing. It was gratifying, in the distant part of his brain that wasn't occupied with worry.

"Unless there's a mole. Or it's a very, very lucky guess."

"Quite."

"But who?"

"I don't know. With the exceptions of Lupin, Black, and select Weasleys, everyone under that roof are strangers to me. That was the first time I'd even met Nymphadora Tonks."

Hermione gave him a lingering sidelong look of sympathy and strange, vicarious pain.

"Really?" she said, not quite surprised. "Because her mother was disinherited?"

"I — yes, she was. How do you know that?"

"You told me in second year. Aunt Andy, wasn't it? Or Andrea, something like that?"

"Andromeda. You remembered?"

"Of course I did, you told me," she said absently. "Anyway, I don't know where to start. We can obviously trust Ron's family, Sirius, Remus… he'd never…"

"'He'd never' is not an actual reason, it's worth saying."

"I'd be far more willing to believe it's someone like Shacklebolt, or even Tonks — I like her, but I don't know her. Ron said she's one of the only Order members who wasn't part of the old guard, and apparently, the only reason Dumbledore let her in was because Bill vouched for her."

“Do we trust Bill’s judgment?”

“I’d like to, but I don’t really know Bill, either,” she pointed out. “Ron would obviously say yes—”

“Which means nothing, considering it’s his brother.”

“It doesn’t mean *nothing* , it means less. And Bill’s inside-track on planning with Mad-Eye, so I’d say Ron’s well within his rights… anyway, being brothers didn’t stop him and Percy…” She snapped her fingers. “How much do you think Percy knows about what his family’s doing?”

He cocked his head, considering. “Interesting,” he said. “I don’t know. Very little, one assumes.”

“Because if he knows anything — if he’s still in contact with any of them — one conversation, you know, it wouldn’t take much—”

“A stray line in a letter.”

“Yes. Someone mentions Padfoot, and Grimmauld Place, and I’m sure he could put two and two together, Percy’s actually quite clever. Ron said he’d been out of touch since May, but he still could have been writing Molly, or Charlie, or even Bill.”

She hesitated, frowning. The rattling traincar voiced a groan at the severity of the accusation. A wooded hillside flashed past in the window, dull and shrouded in mist.

“I don’t know,” she said doubtfully. “Do you… think he would?”

He tipped his head one way, then the other, considering.

“Yes.”

“Really? You think he’s capable?”

“I think some people are capable of anything, if it serves them. If it helps them get what they want, it’s hard to care about anything else.”

“He didn’t sound like someone who stopped caring,” she said doubtfully.

“Are we recalling the same occasion? He shouted himself hoarse on the Atrium floor. And then Ronald socked him.”

“And after that, you really think they don’t love each other?” she said absently, disarming him.

“I wouldn’t know,” he said, after a moment. “I haven’t any brothers.”

“Neither do I, but come on. You can see it from a mile off when Ron loves someone, he’s subtle like a mallet is. Look at how he is with the twins, or Ginny, or Harry.”

“Or you."

“What?”

“You’re in the same cohort,” he clarified, though her eyes had gone wide and it made something sharp twinge in his chest. “You can’t possibly doubt that. After all this time.”

“I don’t… I mean, no, and yes, I understand what you meant. But it’s different, with me.”

He didn’t like this direction at all. With vague foreboding, he asked: “In what respect?”

“Oh. I mean it’s not like it is, with Harry. They’ve always been dependent on each other. Ron adopted Harry as soon as he put eyes on him, and they didn’t even like me when they met me.”

Her voice carried a flash of something real and raw and not-quite-scarred over.

“A misjudgment soon corrected, as I recall.”

She smiled wryly. “You know, I don't think Ron more than tolerated me until third year,” she said. “I thought he saw me as Harry’s friend that he happened to get along with.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “And you did his Transfiguration homework anyway?”

“Of course I did. That was the whole point. They needed me because I was clever, and to do homework and tell them when a test’s coming up, and et cetera... I know better *now,* obviously, but it wasn't always obvious.”

Her eyes were too bright, and her arms were folded in a brittle way she was trying to hide in her robes. He wanted to grasp her shoulders and shake her until she broke out of it and relaxed again, scratch the last five minutes from the record, backtrack downstairs and restart the conversation all over again.

“First years are intolerable as a rule,” he remarked. “It takes at least a year for wizards to become people worth knowing, and anyone who likes someone before knowing them is a fool.”

“You didn’t like me very much when we met, either,” she replied, and it was both rueful and curious.

“Well, I certainly didn’t come around to it because you did my homework. Anyway, you spent our first year yelling yourself hoarse at them every time they lost house points, I didn’t think you cared whether they liked you.”

The corner of her mouth bent at a wry, crooked angle, and she cut her eyes sideways. She leaned against the stone wall and folded her hands behind her back, ironing them flat against the base of her spine. “I did,” she said. “I still wanted to be liked. I was just scared.”

“Of *what?”*

“Everything! I spent most of first year thinking there’d been a mix-up, and someone was going to send me home,” she said wryly. “Normal girls don’t get to run away and live in a magical castle. We don’t get to cast spells and fly on broomsticks—”

“Right, and you still don’t do one of those things.”

“Shut up. I was eleven. I had to get three letters and an in-person visit from Professor McGonagall just to convince my parents it wasn’t a scam. And so I yelled at them, first, because sometimes they *did* deserve it, and second, because I was stupid and panicky and homesick and cried every other night. I was sleep-deprived all the time, no wonder I was horrid.”

“Was?”

“If we’re talking about who was horrid in first year,” she said warningly. He snorted and looked away, let the point drift, and she quirked her mouth and didn’t chase it. She knew not to chase it.

Hermione was terribly vexing, this way. Sometimes talking to her was like flying in the rain, dangerous and confusing and fraught with dangers you couldn’t see until they had hurt you; and sometimes it was the easiest thing in the world, running or blinking or breathing, a game he’d been born knowing the rules to. If it could just be like this all the time, he’d — he’d probably never want to talk to anyone else.

“You never told me that. About the crying.”

“Of course I didn’t. I wasn’t going to admit any of this to you, of all people.”

“What's that supposed mean, ‘of all people’?”

“Yes, you, with your perfect wand movements and your perfect pronunciation and your perfect pureblood family and your house-elf, and your perfect tie knots and your knowing-everything-already, all without touching a single textbook. Our Potions professor was your

godfather! You had a broomstick collection! You already knew everyone's name! Sometimes I wished you'd trip over your own feet," she admitted, in tones of adorably sincere guilt, "just to see you fail at something."

Unbidden, he recalled her boggart, in third year. Professor Dumbledore and his terrible kindness and a threat that had never before crossed Draco's mind. *I am afraid there has been a mistake.*

"My first year was miserable, personally." He put his hands in his pockets to keep them still; he still disliked the way it felt to unburden himself thus, even though it was Hermione. "I thought I'd disgraced the family. I asked to go home."

"Which I always thought was a bit silly, because it's perfectly clear your mother would give you both kidneys if you asked for them," said Hermione wryly. "Getting sorted wasn't going to change any of that. Meanwhile, it took *me* a whole year to figure out that nobody was going to expel me if I missed a question in Transfiguration—"

"Though you still haven't."

"—partly because it's hard to care about detentions when you're running from three-headed dogs, I suppose. But for a long time I was scared of everything, and I was always terribly jealous of how those two never seemed to worry about what anyone thought." She sighed and brushed a ringlet of hair over her mouth, a granddaughter habit to her old tic of chewing on hair.

"They have their hands full knowing their own minds," he said. "There's no room for anyone else's, they'd start smoking out the ears."

She let out an amused breath through her nose.

"They're not stupid. Ron still beats you at chess."

“And he’s welcome to try me in gobstones any time he’d like a real wizard’s game.”

“Harry understands more than he lets on, by the way, and just because he doesn’t show off doesn’t mean he can’t put two and two together. He held his own in the Tournament last year, and you don’t get by as far as he has on luck alone.”

“Stop adulating Potter for a second, I’m talking about you. The point is, both of them would die for you. With not one modicum more hesitation than they would for each other. Doubt me if you like, but that’s the truth.”

She gave a startled smile. “Did they say so?”

“They don’t need to. Ask Theodore Nott, Ronald nearly killed him for you in second year.”

The wind whistled in the windows.

“I seem to remember you were involved in that, somewhere,” she said, after a moment.

“I was.”

“Ron said you tried to duel him.”

“Two things,” he said. “First, I resent ‘try,’ as it implies a deficit in execution. Second, it wasn’t a duel, it was a fight.”

“Difference being?”

“One has rules. The other doesn’t.”

Her head cocked at a quizzical angle. “For instance—?”

“For instance, in a duel, I would have stopped when he started bleeding.”

The expression that flit across her face was an unfamiliar child of alarm and something else. The train car hit a curve, and swayed.

“Does that bother you?” he said, curious. He never quite knew where Hermione stood in terms of comfort with violence. At times she seemed vehemently opposed, and at others she seemed almost comfortable with it, especially when employed against someone she thought deserving. Which was also an increasingly wide field, these days.

“I think it probably would have, at the time,” she said carefully. “I would’ve found it pointless.”

“And now?”

“Now… I understand it better. The reasons you might want to cause someone pain.”

“Because you’ve felt them.”

“Because I’ve felt them,” she said, in a low voice, like she was admitting a sin.

“That’s not a bad thing, Granger.”

“I don’t agree,” she said, low and firm. It sounded rehearsed. “I won’t agree to that. People should only suffer when it's necessary.”

He shrugged. He couldn't win the argument with her; he judged it was both a fundamental similarity and a difference between them, that while they both conflated self-interest and selfishness, they took diametrically opposed positions on whether it was acceptable to have either.

Voices and laughter swelled into the carriage. Trunks thundered down from luggage racks; they were approaching the school.

She straightened her skirt, which wasn’t wrinkled, and smoothed her hair, which wasn’t askew.

“We should go find Harry and Ron,” she said abruptly.

He stepped into the hallway and held the door for her. “Certainly. Let’s go find the Boy Who Lived,” he suggested. “His personality notwithstanding, I’d like to keep him living for at least a while longer.”

Thestrals pulled the carriages from the Hogsmeade station to Hogwarts. He paused for a moment when he realized it, noted what it meant, and then carefully boxed the information for later inspection.

They caught one of the last carriages up from the station. Prefects had to escort the first years to the boats, where an aptly named Professor Grubbly-Plank awaited them. Her hair contained volumes of dirt fit for plants to roost in, and it roved freely over her broad, freckled cheeks, which bunched gaily in a smile, and it was altogether a far more reassuring face than Hagrid’s had been — though it would be lying to suggest he hadn’t an instinctive preference for his own absent ferryman, all the same.

Draco found being a prefect was unexpectedly enriching. It meant people paid attention to him. The bushy-tailed seas parted expeditiously at his approach, and several of them even apologized to him.

Of course, it didn’t account entirely for the inconvenience of shepherding first years into the boats, a process which had involved several arguments, a lot of coaxing, and at least one well-placed *Locomotor* to avoid feeding a potential Minister of Magic to the Great Squid.

He had boarded his carriage with wet shoes and a grim apprehension of a year spent herding cats. Harry and Ron had held a car for them. Draco hopped up and helped Hermione climb up after him, and then Ron swung the door shut, prompting the carriage to set off with a rattle.

Hermione tumbled into her seat, her elbows unerringly finding the least comfortable points in Draco’s side, and he was treated to a faceful of wet hair. His warbles of complaint were ruthlessly ignored by all.

“We met the new Care of Magical Creatures professor,” she said breathlessly. “Professor Grubbly-Plank. She’s wonderful. I almost regret that we dropped it.”

“I’m telling Hagrid you said that,” muttered Harry.

“Oh, but don’t, though. I do miss him, obviously—”

“I’m still telling.”

“Harry!”

“I’m sad to hear Hagrid’s leaving. I heard he was bitten by a pygmy hippogriff,” said a high, dreamy voice, and he noticed the fifth person in their car: a small Ravenclaw with fluffy, ash-blond ringlets and a pair of carrots worn as earrings. “Their venom's said to put quadrupeds into heat. I don’t know if it has the same effect on bipeds, though,” she added modestly.

Draco made a mental note to get his ears checked.

“Hello, Luna,” said Hermione, with vague forbearance.

“Hello, Hermione,” she said. To Draco, she added: “I’m Luna Lovegood. *You’re* the Gryffindor chaser that Marietta likes.”

Ron guffawed. Hermione stared at her with a hawkish, incredulous expression.

“Enchenté,” Draco said warily.

“Marietta Edgecombe?” said Hermione. “Marietta who flunked Astronomy? Really.”

“Oh, you know her!”

“Not well, since she's a sixth year,” she said flatly. “And a bit old to be panting after fifteen-year-olds, isn't she?”

“She's young for her year, though. Her birthday's in June, like Draco's.”

This startled him.

“How do you know that?”

Luna blinked. “Your name? I'm sorry if I got it wrong, but I've seen you play quidditch matches, and last year you were in the papers.”

“No. My birthday.”

“Yeah, Draco, Luna, Luna, Draco,” said Ron. “We met her on the train, she’s a riot. You should ask her about wrackspurts, sometime. She did my horoscope, says I’m some kind of fish.”

“Only if you go by the western zodiac,” Luna said dreamily. “My father is working on an astrological project that will leave the twelve-sign chart behind entirely. He’s discovering new signs all the time, you know… he says there are at *least* eighteen, maybe up to forty-three…”

“And how is it, exactly,” said Hermione, “that one discovers new signs, Luna?”

“Oh, it’s very interesting! The first step is to open your Inner Eye—”

“You two can talk about that later,” Harry said hastily. “How was the prefects’ meeting?”

“Dull,” said Draco. “Unenlightening, protracted, and well-catered. Needless to say, Granger had the time of her life.”

“It was lovely,” she agreed, wholly unembarrassed by this. “Cedric is a wonderful Head Boy—”

Draco snorted.

“—but also, there’s something we should talk about. Privately. Just the four of us. Er — sorry, Luna.”

“Ooh. I can put my fingers in my ears, if you need,” Luna offered. “Or I can practice my throat singing.”

“Oh, please,” said Ron eagerly.

Hermione hesitated. “Well — if you really don’t mind — I could put a Deafening Charm on you. Temporarily.”

Luna shrugged. “Keep it on as long as you like,” she said. “I’ve been meaning to take up hand language. This could be a marvelous opportunity.”

“Oh. Well. Thank you. *Aurisclada.”*

The spell constellated around her ears and formed a glowing pair of bulbs, which Luna seemed delighted by; she examined them in the dark mirror of the window, fluffing her hair over them.

“Right,” said Hermione tersely, and laid her wand across her lap. “We’ve a problem.”

She relayed what they heard in the prefects’ carriage. Harry and Ron listened with dimming expressions, any residual gaiety from the train seeping quickly from their posture, and Ron let out a quick, unconvincing cough when she got to Percy’s name.

“You think it’s him?” said Ron gruffly.

“We don’t know,” she said quickly. “It’s a suspicion. And I don’t mean to… it’s someone who knows that Padfoot is in London, so that’s… it’s not a big group. I think it’s more likely that someone might’ve let it

slip, on accident, than that someone Dumbledore trusts would betray him. I'm sorry to accuse your family—"

"Nah, he might," croaked Ron, and cleared his throat again. "Shit brother, he was. Worst of the set." His expression was bleak but stubborn. He managed: "It's funny, innit? I always figured I'd fancy it if someone fucked up enough that I wasn't the family disappointment anymore, but it's — it's not all that fun, now he's actually gone and done it."

"That's not true," said Harry. "You're not—"

"Aw, never mind, it doesn't matter. I'm not fishing, I'm just — sore, I guess. I'll write to my dad, when we get to Hogwarts," he muttered miserably, leaning on his knees. "I'll tell him to cut contact with Percy. I know Mum's been writing letters Dad doesn't know about, begging him to come back. It's kind of pathetic."

"It's not pathetic," Harry insisted.

"She doesn't have to cut him off altogether," Hermione said quickly. "Just write to Arthur, and tell him what we know. Then we'll wait to see what he says."

Ron grunted, leaning against the window. Harry watched him from the corner of his eye, unhappy. Hermione dispelled the charm on Luna, who patted her ears curiously, and then announced, with deep satisfaction: "Just as I thought! The deaf *can* hear nargles," and it was the last thing anyone said until they reached the castle.

Dumbledore sat in a high-backed golden chair amidst the staff table, wearing lavender robes with silvery stars and a matching hat. His head was inclined toward the woman sitting next to him, who was squat, with short, curly, mouse-brown hair and a fluffy pink cardigan. She was talking, not so much with him as *at* him, with occasional interjections for food or water in which Dumbledore could slide in three odd words.

A cursory look at the Slytherin table revealed a number of familiar faces, but missed several notable ones: Daphne, Theo, and Pansy were nowhere to be found.

They weren't the only group to read the news. Other tables stopped talking when they passed. Chatter died like a candle under a snuffer at his approach. A cluster of Ravenclaws sat up straight and glared at Harry, who stiffened his shoulders and walked swiftly to the Gryffindor table.

The noise resumed when his back was turned, but it was a different sound, a harsher thing, and a much more pointed one.

"Sorry, Harry," whispered Fred, as Harry found his seat by the twins. "My fault. They heard you're friends with me, and I've got an image problem."

"It's true," said George. "There was an incident with a goat and a bottle of Ogden's. But it'll blow over in a week, so don't get used to the attention, or anything."

Harry flashed a thin but grateful smile, and sat down. Several of his housemates, Neville Longbottom especially, gave him almost defiantly loud greetings, as if to compensate for the lack of warmth in the hall's reception.

McGonagall moved through the new crop of first years at a military clip. She breezed from B through D at a pace that saw Cornelius Dreck well nigh punted off the dais into Ravenclaw, ushered Theresa Fawcett over to Hufflepuff with a double-snap of her fingers, and wrenched the hat from Armando Gilbert's head before the word 'GRYFFINDOR' had passed its lips.

Then she raised her list and cried, "Greengrass, Astoria!" and the hall went curiously silent.

He craned his neck behind the rows of Gryffindors to see if Astoria was possibly struggling with her chair — someone would have to

levitate her up the steps, inevitably, but with McGonagall there, it oughtn’t have been an issue — until a door slammed somewhere near the back of the room, and Daphne came sprinting in, wheeling her sister at near-sonic speeds down the aisle.

“She’s here!” she cried, while Astoria cackled gleefully and clung on to her armrests for dear life. “She’s here! She’s here! Don’t forget her! We’re sorry we’re late!”

Laughter politely tickled the walls. Daphne deposited Astoria at the bottom of the dais, kissed her on the head, and then turned — paused a moment, with a flicker of panic — before smiling delicately, the picture of loveliness, and dipping a deep curtsy; the hall gave another chorus of laughter, and some applause. Then she trotted with quick short steps over to the Gryffindor table. Ron moved over to make room.

“Hullo, chaps,” she whispered. “Sorry about the scene. Tori had an attack.”

“She did?”

“Is she all right?”

“Better than she has been,” said Daphne cryptically, and waved it off. “She’s fine. Don’t worry. Now: everyone look at my sister! It’s her moment! She’s been dreaming of this for years.” Gazing at the dais, she glanced at Ron, then glanced at him again. “Heavens, you're tall. Did you get a haircut?”

“...No?”

“Well, don’t,” she said, and turned to stare rapturously at her sister.

McGonagall had levitated Astoria, chair and all, to the top of the dais, where the stool was moved aside for her chair. The hat dropped onto her beaming, golden head and immediately sank into a crumple of contemplation.

The hat worked its mouth in consternation. Astoria folded her hands in her lap and peered over the hall, blinking fretfully; Daphne waved to her. Astoria fluttered her fingers shyly.

“SLYTHERIN!”

Astoria gasped and blazed with joy. Applause followed, mostly from Slytherin — sedate in character, but robust in volume.

McGonagall levitated her down, she wriggled in anticipation before her wheels touched the floor. Once they met, she whisked breathlessly over to her housemates, who with some clattering of plates cleared a place for her at the end of the table.

Daphne, while applauding boisterously, nevertheless gave a faint sigh.

“It’s alright, really,” said Harry. “You’re a Slytherin, and you still ended up here.”

“Circuitously,” she murmured, and adjusted the lay of her collar on her scars.

When the feast was over, Dumbledore rose, and Draco braced himself for a tedious discourse on unity, peace, compassion, or whatever virtue particularly held the headmaster’s favor that night; but Dumbledore said simply, “Be well. A very good night to you all,” and sat down. The woman in pink whipped around and stared at him, the smile falling from her face like a traveling cloak.

Belatedly, and with confusion, the mass of students rose and streamed out of the Great Hall, murmuring their suspicions. Draco cut past a curly-haired Ravenclaw muttering, “Blimey, don’t even know who’s teaching Defense this year, d’you think they’ll cancel it?” and one of her comrades moaning, “Wish they would, I’m rubbish.” To get through the crowd he had to clear his throat prodigiously and elbow a few heads before people gave him a wider berth, and from there he marched to the grand stairwell, where he climbed to the

second stair, turned, and whistled. A few of the first years he had harried onto the boats gratefully identified him and flocked to his feet, and he eyed them approvingly, noting them as the most obedient and therefore most preferred members of the crop.

Hermione caught his eye and gave him a slightly exasperated look. All the same, she pointed and cried, “That’s Draco Malfoy, he’s a prefect, go stand with him!” and urged her own flock of midgets to commingle with his. He resented this, distantly.

One of his midgets raised his hand. He looked like someone had put glasses and a bowl cut on a shrimp. Draco pointed at him.

“Where do we sleep, sir?”

He liked *sir* quite a lot, actually.

“Gryffindor Tower,” he drawled, leaning on the banister. “It’s up fourteen flights of stairs, and no, there’s not a lift, if you’re wondering.”

Another one raised her hand. She was one of the cherub types, blonde pigtails, about six years old at a guess. He pointed again.

“Why isn’t there a lift?” she said plaintively.

“Because Godric Gryffindor didn’t have your convenience in mind when he stuck his House on top of the sodding castle. Anyone else?”

She didn’t raise her hand this time. “Hasn’t anyone *tried* to put in a lift?”

“It’s been on my list for years, believe me. Yes, you again.”

Shrimp lowered his hand. “Is there a reason we can’t put in a lift?” he asked, politely.

“I’m sure there is, but I’m far too important to know it. You should ask Granger, she’s the castle historian.”

“Which professor is that?”

“Is she the one with the big hat?”

“She *looked* serious.”

“She’s not a professor,” he said, amused. “She’s—” His brain reached for a word that did not exist, lurched into the gap, and plummeted. “She’s Hermione Granger.”

“Who’s Hermione Granger?”

“Your prefect,” he snapped. “Who’re you, anyway?”

“My name is—”

“Never mind, I don’t care. Listen, that’s her, over there, with the hair and the face and everything. If you have a question about Hogwarts, the castle, or anything else, you should go ask her and leave me out of it.”

The first years susurrated and grappled each other, suitably awed. Hermione, on the far side of the hall, caught a few of their wide-mouthed stares, and she sent him a suspicious look. He waved her off. Fear and awe were good for discipline.

A third interloper with teeth of radically different orientations raised his hand. “Why do you call her Granger?”

He understood why Snape spoke so slowly; the longer you were talking, the less time they had for questions.

“I call her that because it so happens to be her name.”

A tactical mistake. The floodgates broke.

“Why didn’t Cedric do that?”

“Aren’t you friends?”

“Do *we* have to call her Granger?”

“Or Miss Granger?”

“Is she ‘sir’, too?”

“What do I call you?”

“You can call her whatever she wants to be called,” he said, tautly, “but others call me Malfoy, or Draco, if and only if so invited. Let me be clear in advance: you will not be invited. And I call her that because—” And there went his brain again, plummeting. Merlin’s cock. “Because I do as I please. Mind your own business, you’ll live longer.”

Shrimp was cowed, but Cherub scoffed at him. He put a red flag on her in his mental registry.

Harry and Ron waded over, joined by Daphne and Ginny, who sprang up on the stair beside Draco and waved the kiddies a cheerful *hello* with both hands. “Wotcher, firsties!” she cried. “Ready to see the *best house ever?”*

“Ah, I dunno about that.” Cho shouldered through the crowd, wearing a friendly grin. “They’ll have trouble getting to Ravenclaw.”

She looped her arm through Harry’s and went on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. Harry turned darker than beetroots and let out a very loud, very awkward laugh, which Draco despised for no better reason than that the first years were watching, all of them deeply unimpressed.

“Hey, Cho,” said Ginny, sticking her hands in her back pockets. She smiled without teeth. “Good summer?”

“Corking.”

“Bet you’re excited to get back on the pitch this year.”

“No, yeah. Can’t wait.”

“Neither can I.”

“Oh, are you on the team?”

“I’m— trying out,” said Ginny, oddly strangled.

Students from years and houses various trailed past. He could see it when it dawned on them who Harry was, because they unanimously corrected their trajectories to give him a wide radius, and dropped their voices to the point that it was actually less subtle than if they had shouted. A blond boy next to Euan Abercrombie remarked that he’d seemed bigger in the papers. Someone murmured the Dark Lord’s name and something about hoaxes, something about free publicity. A Slytherin steered her friend away, and the word under her breath was *Krum.*

Ron started at them menacingly, making them squeak and hurry off to peddle idiocy in some more discreet corner.

“Maybe we should go up,” said Cho uncomfortably, cradling Harry’s arm, as if she could somehow lift him out of range of her words. Harry’s expression was blank and dull and directed at no one in particular, but when she jostled him, he turned his head.

“Maybe we should teach them a lesson,” snapped Ginny. “Oi! You! Didn’t anyone tell you it was rude to stare?” She rounded on Draco. “Aren’t you going to take points?”

“For what? Stupidity isn’t against the rules.”

“It *should* be,” she snapped.

“Ginevra, I’ve been saying it for years.”

The crowd thinned as more students winnowed out to their dormitories. Wind creaked on the doors, and a draft sent the chandeliers twisting faintly on their chains.

With a piping blast of chill air, the doors to the Entrance Hall swept open, and out of a rain-slick curtain of night, a pair of students — a boy and a girl — strode inside. First years erupted in a burble of interest at the sight of them, washed by elements, and also, unnervingly, flanked by three patrolmen — two of whom stood the boy's shoulders. It was hard to tell if they were guarding him or escorting him, as they walked too close for anyone's comfort, and kept a hand on their wands. One of them shoved him forward, and he turned around to snap at them with a sneer that Draco knew very well.

Theo had grown into his face, which was to say that he no longer resembled a rat with pretensions, and his hair was well-combed. The square, top-heavy frame of a beater had begun to emerge under his robes, and his chest had made a promising transition to convexity. Altogether he was much better than he had been at the beginning of summer, though much of that was accounted for with a lack of injuries. In fact, he was doing a completely passable imitation of a fifteen-year-old boy.

When he turned, his expression was a kneejerk of a glare, as if Draco had done something inconsiderate by appearing in his field of vision, and he pivoted away. At his side, Pansy reached for his elbow, but one of the patrolmen held her at bay with a polite, firm assertion of his arm. She scowled and folded her arms.

The professor in pink hurried over to greet them, waving the patrolmen off. Theo said something to her, and as he watched, she tipped her head back and gave a shrill, tinkling laugh, like someone threw a wind chime into a wood chipper.

"Greengrass."

Daphne hummed, picking at something on her sleeve.

"Did you know he was coming back?"

“No,” she murmured, from the corner of her mouth. “I haven’t heard from him in months. Have you?”

“Not a word.”

“I suppose they can’t stop him,” said Harry, frowning, “but I didn’t reckon he’d have the nerve.”

“Umbridge might’ve had something to do with it,” said Daphne.

“Who’s that?” said Ginny. “She’s not a professor, is she? Dumbledore didn’t introduce her.”

“Reckon he forgot,” whispered Cho, and Draco tilted his head, privately disagreeing.

“No, no. That’s Dolores Umbridge,” said Daphne, *sotto voce.* She turned her head away from the woman, so as not to stare, but kept talking. “Apparently she’s quite the character at the Ministry. She’s the Hogwarts Special Inquisitor. And the new Defense Professor.”

“What’s a Special Inquisitor?” demanded Hermione, emerging from the flock of first-years. She grasped Draco’s hand to help her up the stairs, though she quickly let go when she had assumed a point of suitable vantage over the crowd. “Why do we have one? Is she here with the Ministry? Never mind, that’s obvious. Do you know if she has disciplinary powers, or if she’s here in an administrative capacity? *Don’t* wander off,” she added sharply, and several of the first years stumbled back into place.

Cherub goggled at her worshipfully. She looked like she’d discovered Merlin was five foot four inches tall and freckled. One sympathized.

“It’s an audit, essentially,” murmured Daphne, still examining the far wall. “She’s here to review the curriculum and staff.”

“For *what?”*

Several first years jumped at Hermione's tone. One, again, sympathized.

"Competence," said Daphne simply.

"According to whom?"

Daphne gestured: *See for yourself.*

Hermione frowned across the hall. As Umbridge chattered on, Pansy yawned, using one hand to cover her mouth. Something bright and pale glittered on her fourth finger.

Cho gasped. So did Ginny. Daphne didn't.

"She's *engaged?"*

"She can't get married, she's a baby," said Ron, outraged. "An *evil* baby."

"Of course she can," said Daphne mildly. "Her parents threw the whole thing together in a summer. His family's very much on the rise, so it's no surprise they'd want to snap him up."

"Who?"

Daphne paused. "Why," she said, "Cassius Warrington."

A blade of pity and revulsion sank through his chest, right up to the very hilt.

Pansy saw him across the hallway then, and lifted her hand in a sort of abortive, unhappy way, as if it were levitated by a force not her own. There was a softening in the line of her mouth that could have approximated happiness on something very unused to it. But when Umbridge said something else, she averted her eyes, and turned her back, for good measure.

“I’d like to go say hello to her,” said Daphne, and then paused like she was taking a vote.

“Alright,” said Ron.

“...You don’t mind? I won't say anything to Theodore,” she added suddenly, though no one had asked. Her hands knotted themselves, a lattice of guilt. “I wouldn't... I haven't answered his letters, you know. I've been properly... I haven't said anything. I told him I didn't want — I couldn't possibly, after — after everything last year — but Pansy didn't do anything wrong, and she's always been good to me — in her way. I'll just pop over and say a teensy-tiny quick hello, and leave, if — if that's alright.”

The others looked at her with moderated pity and curiosity.

“Sure, go on, then,” said Ginny.

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t want to… if it’s letting the side down.”

Harry gave a short, unhappy laugh. “What side?” he said. “My side? Is that it?”

“Harry,” Hermione said.

“What, like it’s — like we’re enemies? It’s the first day. She’s fourteen. Just go,” he said roughly. “I’m not the boss of you. Don’t, like — ask for *permission,* I’m not your dad—”

Draco didn’t think this was quite fair to Daphne, who had been doing something far subtler than Harry gave her credit for; he also thought Harry might have benefited from knowledge of etiquette rules in which it was impolite to leave a conversation without a formal excuse; but Daphne flinched.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I’ll be quick, I just — sorry,” she said meekly, and bobbed off into the crowd.

“Harry,” repeated Hermione, pointed.

“Hermione! I don’t want to be — you can’t keep looking at me like — never mind,” he muttered. “Sorry. Forget it. I’m sorry.”

He raked a hand through his hair, ruining the last of Mrs. Weasley’s effortful combing. “I’m just — going to bed. Alright? I’ll see you tomorrow. Sorry. Again.”

He climbed the stairs two by two, abruptly cutting them short. Cho watched him with a crestfallen expression.

“S’alright,” Ginny said to her in a low voice. “He’s been like this all summer.”

“I know, but I thought — maybe when we were at school, he might — cheer up a bit.” She sounded disappointed.

“Give him some time,” advised Ron. “He’ll get there. It’s Harry.”

“Yes,” she said, “I know. No, you’re right.” She smiled bravely. “I guess I’ll be off, too,” she said. “Goodnight, you lot. Er — Ginny, hope to see you on the pitch!”

“Yeah, cheers,” said Ginny casually. “Night.”

They started the long and winding climb to Gryffindor Tower, through dim classrooms. Draco caught glimpses of familiar portraits who giggled and waved at the passing firsties, and the cries of delight bounded up the winding staircase like a party of marauding fairies. The upper halls were deserted. Hermione herded wandering would-be explorers with a sharp call or two over her shoulder. He preferred to let them find their own way back to the flock. They’d end up where they needed to be somehow, and a bit of hazing wouldn’t kill them.

In the common room, firelight kindled, and a tray of biscuits had been left out by the house-elves for latecomers. Dobby’s handwriting graced the card next to it — he was one of the few house-elves that could spell, if ‘spell’ was defined generously — and bid all new Furst Yeers a very good night in their new Hoeme.

As the last of the midgets trundled up to their beds, gawking at everything that so much as twinkled, Hermione put her hands on her hips and let out a breath of relief.

“Draco?”

“Hm?”

She lingered in the girls’ stairwell, fidgeting with her right heel.

“Wait.”

She didn’t sound eager to leave. He shared her inclination.

Which didn’t make much sense, really. The boys’ dorm was closer to the girls’ than their rooms had been at the Manor. All the same, it felt different — knowing that if dreams of green light split his night open, there would be several sets of staircases and at least seven other people forestalling any way of knowing that she was there.

“You’re a good prefect,” she said.

He tilted his head at her.

“You’re very — authoritative. They listen to you. Everyone does.”

“Force of habit,” he said guardedly, and prepared for the colossal *but* waiting around the corner.

She hesitated.

“That’s all,” she said quickly. “Well done. Er — good night.”

Then she scurried up the stairs to the girls’, leaving him flushed and wondering, as always, what the hell they were ever about.

-I wrote about 1,000 words of an author's note and then my Wifi went out, AO3 force-reloaded, and the box deleted, so please go ahead

and imagine a few hundred extra words of top-tier hard-hitting content here, please. Ta.

-Chapter going up early this week because I'll be offline on Friday, but I wanted to make sure that a chapter went up before next week, especially after all of you guys were so kind about the unexpected hiatus. That means the next one won't be coming up until the Friday after this one, but hopefully the double-dose will be enough to tide you over!

-The reception to the last chapter had me teary-eyed. Guys. I really don't deserve my comments section, but as long as you're here, I'll be grateful to you. I wish I could respond to every one with detail and reciprocate the kindness you've shown me. This work owes so much of its existence to you.

-In a rather sharp tonal pivot from that note: this chapter goes out to the Dune 2 soundtrack, which has powered me through about 10,000 words of draft and counting. Hans Zimmer the artist you are.

-RIP Daphne Greengrass, you would have loved "we can’t be friends" by ariana grande. also "yes, and?" but for different reasons

-I always kind of wondered what happened to the other champions in Book 5, since we don't see Fleur come back until she's engaged to Bill, and Krum straight-up goes to the Shadow Realm until his cameo at their wedding in Book 7. What's he doing? Chilling in Bulgaria and writing letters to Hermione? He's one of the most talented students at Durmstrang and he's fresh out of school, plus apparently he believes Harry (one assumes, since Hermione bothers to keeps him on the roster), so like... is he not at all interested in the war effort? Is he acting as a spy abroad? Krum MI6 plant arc??

-Also: the fact that Krum was at Bill and Fleur's wedding basically confirms that Krum and Fleur kept in touch after the Tournament, and were close enough friends for him to get invited to a reasonably limited "friends and family" ceremony at the Burrow, which is haunting to me because it implies that Fleur and Krum had an

incredible epistolary bromance BTS throughout Book 5 and 6. Or they were actually hanging out all the time. And we got none of it. If anyone wants to write this, you know where to find me.

-Next chapter: "Umbridge's Lament."

Umbridge’s Lament

Chapter 61: Umbridge’s Lament

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Every year, the Defense professor did something different with their classroom.

Lupin’s had been a cozy, cluttered space, full of weathered furniture and overstuffed bookshelves; Mad-Eye had set the desks in a semicircle so no one had to sit with their backs to the door; but this year, the same desks were set in a four-by-ten matrix facing a large podium at the back of the room. Umbridge appeared to have moved it from the Great Hall.

Even more unlike Mad-Eye, she had decorated the walls: posters of famous Aurors and Ministers of Magic gazed stonily from beveled wood frames, or squinted nobly into some invisible sunset. Cornelius Fudge reclined in a lavish study, ogling a photographer who clearly had been given no incentive to flatter him; next to it was a mint-condition RUNCORN FOR ALL poster, and beside it hung a framed photograph of Runcorn and a small group of Ministry wizards, posing together under the Atrium at the Ministry of Magic. Runcorn was beaming at the camera. In the back of the photo, there was a small woman with short curly hair, an unmistakable pink cardigan, and a beatific simper.

Along the bottom of the photo, someone had scrawled: WE FEW, WE MERRY FEW. A.R.

Umbridge wore a frilled lace shawl and a pillbox hat, and her smile could have sheared metal.

“Please sit,” she said. “Please sit! Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone!”

Hermione brushed Draco's arm, aglow with excitement — she was mad, truly and passionately — and he was steered, not altogether involuntarily, to their usual post at the front of the room. He drew out her chair as she rummaged in her bag for an ancient, leather-bound journal so stuffed with spare parchment and pasted-in notes that it had to be buckled shut. He suspected, based on its advanced age, that she had enchanted it with interior page-expanding charms long ago.

In contrast, he flicked open a blank scroll of parchment, wetted his quill, and scrawled the date lazily in the corner.

The last chairs scraped into place. Harry and Ron shuffled in behind them; Ron leaned forward to tap Hermione's shoulder.

"Hey, Mione?"

"Hm?"

"Mione!"

"What is it, Ron?"

"You got a quill?"

Her quill stopped, and lifted; a bead of ink trembled at its tip, as if equivalently surprised.

"Since when do you take notes?" she whispered, half-delighted, half-disbelieving. Draco verged rather more one way than the other, and sent Ron a look that expressed both incredulous suspicion and, failing that, a profound fear for his health.

Ron offered a small grin, which was somehow cocky, defensive, and sheepish all at once. "You told me I couldn't skive off yours this year. We made a deal, remember?"

"Yes, but I didn't think you'd keep it," she said bluntly. Draco snorted. "I made that deal so you'd remember to study. I wasn't trying to

suggest I'd stop helping; you're still welcome to look at my notes, if you want, if it's helpful, which frankly it probably will be, since I've had more practice at them, and it's not fair to expect — really it was more the principle of the thing, even I didn't honestly expect— not that I'm *discouraging* you," she exclaimed, as Harry began to snigger, and Draco fought a smirk in vain. Ron glared sequentially at both of them. "I'm very glad that you're trying now. Here, you can use some of my parchment. Do you know how to set them up? I do mine in the Cornell Method—"

"Shut up and gimme a quill," muttered Ron. "I know how to write things down. I'm not dull."

"I never said that," said Hermione pointedly, but then Umbridge cleared her throat again.

"Excuse me," said Umbridge clearly. "I would like us to be friends, boys and girls! And when a friend says 'good afternoon' to you, what do you say? Please try again."

There was a somewhat wary refrain: "Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge."

"Wonderful. That wasn't hard at all." She clapped her hands. "Well now, your teaching in this subject has been rather disrupted and fragmented, hasn't it? The constant changing of teachers, many of whom do not seem to have followed any Ministry-approved curriculum, has unfortunately resulted in your being far below the standard we would expect to see in your O.W.L. year.

"You will be pleased to know, however, that these problems are now to be rectified. We will be following a carefully structured, theory-centered, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic this year. Copy down the following, please." She rapped the blackboard. *Course aims… Understanding the principles underlying defensive magic… Learning to recognize situations in which defensive magic can legally be used… Placing the use of defensive magic in a context for practical use…*

“Once you have finished copying the course aims, I will ask you to read the introduction and first chapter of the book, *Defensive Magical Theory,* by Wilbert Slinkhard. I would like to make sure that everyone is on the ver-y same page!”

She paused and smiled widely. “I am not hearing any quills moving!”

Draco, who was considering moving his, if only to put it through his own eye, sat back and folded his hands, incredulous. Hermione, to his right, put up her hand.

Umbridge gave a tinkling laugh. “Do you require help identifying a quill?”

Hermione cleared her throat and said politely: “Professor Umbridge, you assigned us to read the introduction and the first chapter for today.”

“That is a *comment,* not a question, my dear,” said Umbridge indulgently. “Please save all your very bright ideas to share with your friends, after class. Now—”

“Pardon me. Professor. But may I ask the point of making us read it again?”

Umbridge paused at the interruption. Her smile waned. “May I ask your name, Miss…?”

“Granger,” she said at once. “Hermione Granger.”

“Lovely. Because while *you* may be familiar with the concept of ‘assigned reading,’ Miss Granger,” she said cheerfully, “the past three years of test scores from this class have made perfectly clear that you are among the *ver-y few* people in this room to do so!”

There was an awkward, shifty silence. Harry and Ron, against whom this was a valid but nevertheless unsportsmanlike accusation, ducked their heads.

Hermione, who made this exact remark at least once a week, scowled.

“Does that answer your question?”

“Yes,” she said shortly.

“Wonderful. Now, everyone, I think we’ll read for fifteen minutes, and then we’ll discuss. I want to see those books *out* and pages *tur-ning!* Oh, goodness,” she said, peering down at Ron’s unearthed copy of *Defensive Magical Theory,* whose cover was dangling by a thread. “I’m aw-fully sorry, but I believe what you have over there is *Defensive Magical Theory,* fourth edition. Nothing but the *sixth* edition will do! You, dear,” she added to Draco. “Your copy looks perfect.”

Ron turned bright red and shoved his book back in his bag, kicking it away.

There was a silence of turning pages and unsubtle muttering for ten minutes. Umbridge presided from the podium, watching and writing something on a clipboard.

Hermione put her hand up again. Her copy of Slinkhard sat untouched atop a blank page of notes.

Umbridge smiled, showing a number of faintly yellow teeth. “Why, Miss Granger, I don’t see you reading.”

“No, I’ve done that already, professor,” she replied rigidly. “I have a question.”

“Is something about the introduction confusing, dear?”

“Not particularly, no.”

“Good. In that case, we’re reading just now. If you have other questions, you can see me during office hours.”

“I’d like to talk about pedagogy,” said Hermione.

Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows. “That’s a ver-y big word,” she trilled. “I don’t think Slinkhard uses it! My dear,” she said to Draco, who startled again at finding himself involved, “can you remind me if Slinkhard uses it in the introduction?”

Hermione scoffed.

“Not,” he said, each syllable slow and precise with disdain, “that I recall.”

“No? I thought not. Well-remembered, young man! Five points to Gryffindor. Now, can you please help Miss Granger figure out how to open her book?”

He sat back, faintly stunned.

Hermione stared at him, mouth ajar. He raised his eyebrows, silently inquiring what she wanted him to do.

She raised her hand. Umbridge sighed and opened her mouth, but Hermione interrupted her.

“I’d like to know what a Special Inquisitor is,” she said.

There was a murmur of fascination from the peanut gallery: in Hermione’s book, interrupting a professor was the kind of offense you could get hanged for. Lavender was watching the exchange like the Quidditch World Cup, apparently delighted.

“I’m sure you would,” said Umbridge. “However, whatever you may believe, your *personal* desires do not dictate the curriculum of this class, nor will I permit them to any further detract from the education of your p—”

“Everyone here can read,” she said impatiently, “and half of the introduction is acknowledgements. I’d like to know what your goals are, administratively—”

“Miss Granger—”

“—and whether we can expect similar curriculum changes to other classes, as well as this one,” she insisted, “and it *is* relevant, because our O.W.L.s are this year, so knowing whether we should expect major changes to the way we’re being taught, only nine months before the exam—”

“Ten points from Gryffindor!”

Hermione broke off, flushing. The classroom dissolved into groans and whispers.

“And it’ll be twenty,” said Umbridge softly, “if I hear another word from you before class ends, Miss Granger.”

Hermione’s mouth parted in a perfect rose of fury. Draco wondered, with irrational intensity, how a Boils Jinx would change Umbridge’s face, being that her nose was not so dissimilar from a pustule already. He drummed his fingers, which itched as if longing for a wand.

Harry’s nostrils flared. He threw up his hand.

“Yes, Mr. Potter?”

She hadn’t asked his name.

There was more whispering, now; Ron had flushed deep into the red, and Seamus’s grip would soon snap his quill in half. Neville swung his head between Umbridge and Harry, jaw agape.

“That’s not fair,” Harry said loudly. “Hermione asked you a good question.”

“It appears this class must review the definition of ‘questions’! It can be a tricky subject for young people to grasp.”

“Why can’t you just answer her?” he said, louder still. “It wasn’t even a hard question.”

“Are you a Ministry-trained educational expert, Mr. Potter?”

Harry’s expression changed. Draco identified it at once as the sure sign that Harry’s authority problem had wrestled the wheel away from the rest of his brain.

“Yeah, aced my certs last week,” he said. “I’m just here for the bants, really.”

Giggles broke out. Ron guffawed and thumped his desk. Hermione, who usually regarded unprofessional classroom conduct with extreme hostility, scoffed in quiet amusement and sat back in her chair, arms folded.

Harry’s smile was a hard, flat thing, and there was something faintly glad in it.

“Our class troublemaker, it seems,” Umbridge murmured. “It seems you have *quite* a mouth on you. Of course, I’m not very surprised.”

“Yeah? What’s that mean?”

“It means that a little birdie told me *someone* likes to blame other people for his problems,” she said indulgently, tapping her nose. “I won’t name names, but let me just say to you all: that kind of behavior is *just* what we want to weed out, in this classroom!” She swept her head to regard them all with great seriousness, pursing her lips. “It is high time that wizards and witches of this country began to take accountability for themselves.”

“Accountability—”

“One more word, and it’s detention, Mr. Potter.”

Harry swallowed. She smiled, and continued. “Your generation is struggling,” she said, with acid sympathy. “It is struggling because

many of you — not all! But many — have been allowed to believe that their problems, their failures, are the fault of other people. They believe that because they are poor, or sad, or unable to get the jobs they want, it must be the fault of society. Because why should *they* try to work harder? Why should *they* pull themselves up, when it is so much easier to be angry at ‘ *the system’?”* She was more serious than she had yet been; the sheen of insincerity had slipped away, and she spoke in a hearty register, with conviction. She struck the podium with one soft fist. “But there are no systems,” she said patiently. “There are only people. Witches and wizards. Strong ones and weak ones. And when people are strong, they do great things. And when they are weak, they suffer.”

Hermione’s knuckles were white. Slowly, carefully, she put down her quill.

“I want you all to be strong,” said Umbridge earnestly. “I believe you all *can* be strong, if only given the right instruction. It is your duty as citizens of Great Britain, and as the next generation of witches and wizards, to become strong, and be a model to your own children. I will not give handouts. I will not hold your hand! I will not allow you to entertain delusions that you deserve special treatment simply because you are unhappy! Many people are unhappy!” She peered down at them with arch dignity. “But if you rise to the occasion… if you work hard, and take *responsibility,* and meet your obligations as citizens of the British Wizarding nation… then I think you will find yourselves *much* stronger than you have been led to believe by those adults who have coddled and failed you.”

She smiled at them. The smile was the worst part: it was wide and real and hopeful, evidence that for once, there was absolutely nothing insincere in her. She meant it. She meant it desperately. It was possibly the first thing he’d heard from her that she actually did believe.

No one raised their hand. She relaxed in evident satisfaction.

“Now,” she said, “I require a volunteer to read.”

Draco had always understood, accepted, and even appreciated that it was well within Hermione's capabilities to kill somebody; but he had never been so intrigued that it might actually happen before.

"I can't do this."

"Mm."

"I absolutely can't."

"So I gather."

"I can't take one more minute with her. I won't do it, I'll read up and take the O.WL. on my own. No, don't laugh, I'm seriously considering it."

"I'm sure you'd excel."

"What was Dumbledore thinking? She's an embarrassment!"

"Quite so."

"It's humiliating," said Hermione viciously, "to say nothing of irresponsible, for him to hire such a — an obvious incompetent; a condescending, power-hungry, conniving, obsequious—"

"'Obsequious,' good one."

"—supercilious, egotistic, pontifical—"

"'Pontifical' is lovely."

"—despotic, truculent, *mean—"*

"See, now you've gone too far."

"It's not funny," she snapped. He could admit, on reflection, that his tone had been too light; he was privately enjoying the glow of the

sun on her face, which was furious, and radiating a flush as warm and rich as candleflame. He made a point to have no unusual thoughts, whatsoever, about her hair or her face; he didn't even notice that her socks were crooked, or what her legs looked like when she crossed them under the table. Nothing had changed.

"It isn't," he said. "Forgive me. I find it — mildly amusing — with respect for the obvious issues notwithstanding — that you're this riled."

"Are you joking? She's foul!"

"Naturally. She's a bureaucrat."

"Yes! What does that matter?"

"She's not important," he drawled, shouldering the door to the Great Hall, "or she wouldn't be here. She's more pathetic than intimidating."

"Easy for you to say, she likes you. She was all but fluttering her eyelashes — Victoria! No running in the Hall, do you even *read* the handbook?"

"Sorry, Miss Granger! Sorry! I'm sorry!"

"You don't have to call m— oh, there she goes, never mind. Do you suppose that was too harsh? They're so timid around me."

"Have you met yourself?"

"Very funny. I don't know why I'm asking you, I think Dennis passed out after you finished with him."

"Hopefully he'll remember that next time he fancies riding a broomstick indoors."

"You're going to get yourself a reputation," she said, with a glance out of the corner of her eye. "They'll start to talk. 'That Malfoy, the

one with the big scary voice, he doesn't let anyone off.' I'm warning you, they talk to each other."

He wondered whether *big scary voice* was a personal assessment. "Good. It'll make my job easier."

This amused her. "What, ruling through fear?"

"If a threat's credible, you only need to make it once."

She hesitated, head cocked at a questioning angle; then she smirked, wry. "Well, that's hopelessly dramatic, don't you think? I don't mean to shock you, but not *everything* is a power play."

"Scratch my earlier question," he said. "Have you met me?"

Her high, bright laugh carried them to the Gryffindor table, the miseries of Defense already fading and forgotten.

It was a tight squeeze at the table's end, with Cho and Daphne swelling their usual number, so Hermione wiggled over and ended up sandwiched between him and Harry, thighs flush, knee to knee. She reached under the table and dragged her bag out of the way to make room for him, and her hand grazed his knee on accident.

He picked up a fork and spent a moment trying to remember what it was for.

Hermione was wriggling around, her thigh a hot line of soft pressure on his right side, and there was her hip, her elbow — less sexy, therefore his friend — her shoulder; as she twisted around to put her bag on the other side of the bench, her chest grazed his arm.

She twisted back around and muttered an apology, for what in God's name he could not have said. Her ankle appeared to be seeking locations under the table that didn't involve being in contact with his ankle. It was not succeeding. Her skirt had ridden up with the fussing

and it wasn’t cold enough for tights, so it was down to a few millimeters of cotton between skin.

He was becoming so irritated by the constant wiggling and shifting around that he started to contemplate what she *would* do if he just whirled around and kissed her. He could take her by the shirt and haul her up on the table and teach her to go around touching a fellow’s kneecaps in public. As it were. Shut her up for a while.

Audience notwithstanding. He couldn’t remember them half the time anyway, when her skirt rode up over the knees.

“Draco.”

He recalled the purpose of a fork.

Ron had been offering him a plate of breadrolls for a horrifyingly unclear amount of time. “Last call,” he warned. “You want lunch or not?”

“Yes. Fine. Thank you.”

Hermione cleared her throat and folded herself into Harry’s side. This might have provoked a modicum of jealousy if Harry hadn’t immediately grumbled like Ron whenever Ginny tried to wrestle him.

“Sorry,” she announced, to no one in particular. Her face was flushing behind the curtain of her hair. She was endeavoring to put as much space between them as possible, and that stung in an unanticipated quadrant of his chest, because he didn’t think that it was altogether necessary.

A shadow fell over the table, and before anyone could look up, George clapped his hands over Ron’s eyes. Ron shouted and upset his plate, meanwhile Fred, Lee Jordan, and Katie Bell followed them up, bearing almost cartoonish grins.

“Quick! How do you block a Uruguayan flying double-barrel with two chasers in the fourth quadrant and a third on two?”

“Nah, don’t give him that, s’ an easy one,” called Katie. “Hey, Ron: how d’you block an inverse Frenchman’s Gambit from the left, with a southerly wind?”

“Please! Child’s play! Now, Ron, imagine it’s urgent: how do you deal with the Bulgarian Double-Breasted Booby? Upside down—”

“—both ways—”

“—in the snow?”

“GERROFF! Bastards!”

“Well, that’s not even a play,” said Katie mildly, and tousled his hair. “Congrats, mate. We’d haze you the normal way, but Umbridge repossessed the cattle prods. You’ll have to wait for tryouts.”

“As commentator, I cannot offer a personal opinion on any player or team,” announced Lee. He saluted Ron. “However, as a Gryffindor, I say verily unto you: welcome to Team Sexy. Tryouts pending.”

“Where’s the sexy?” demanded Ron. “All I see is these two ugly lumps and their girlfriend—”

“Oi!”

“Hey now,” said George, tweaking Ron’s ear. “Dinnae speak ill of the captain, lad.”

“Angelina’s a stone cold ten, first off, so let’s get that straight,” said Fred briskly, tweaking his other. Ron barked in frustration and shoved them off. “Second, we’re hard nines, elevens with suits on.”

“And there’s no *girlfriend* about it, Ronniekins. Freddie can’t be tied down.”

“I’m a wild, rugged individual.”

“Many have tried.”

“Following in Bill’s footsteps—”

“—if a castle bicycle has ‘footsteps’—”

“—as a perpetual bachelor. With Godric’s ghost as my witness, I shall never wed for love nor money.”

“Think Mum *was* hoping she’d have a grandchild on the spotter by now.”

“Not from him, though,” snickered Fred. “Haven’t even kissed a girl, have you, Ronaldonald?”

“Sod off!” he snapped, and shrank down in his seat. “George hasn’t, either! And Fred’s only ever snogged Angelina!”

“Have, too,” said George placidly.

“And have you seen Angelina?” drawled Fred, stealing a roll. “I nailed it in one, mate. That’s not the insult you think it is.”

Unable to rebut this, Ron rounded on George. “Who did *you* snog, then?”

“Anastasia Bonk, Hufflepuff chaser, Class of ’93,” he said promptly. “One wild night in the Restricted Section, and I was ruined forever for other women.”

“You’re lying.”

“Yeah. Got to second in the locker rooms and her boyfriend walked in. That *did* put me off the birds, for a bit, to be honest.”

“Git,” snorted Katie, but she was smiling. To Ron, she added: “Michael Corner, third year.”

“What!” said Cho, with renewed interest. “Michael Corner? With the glasses?”

“Yes’m.”

“But he’s the size of a teaspoon!”

“Most girls are smaller,” said Katie, shrugging, and Cho’s brain appeared to snuff out like a torch in the rain.

“What can you say? Boys or girls, everyone loves a quidditch player,” drawled Fred. “Ask Harry. *He* got it done last year, didn’t he?”

Harry said, “Oh, no, you see, I wasn’t even in this conversation,” but it was far too late.

“Cho!”

“Choooo!”

“Miss Chang!”

“Which makes you the last one, Ronnie. Our dear, innocent, virginal brother—”

“I hate you.”

“Eh. Wait till you’ve played a game,” he said. “Fred’s not wrong about the uniform. Turns it on like a faucet, I tell you.”

Hermione choked on her food and doubled over. Katie whacked her on the back.

“Lay off him. It’s not a race, and anyway, Ron’s not the last one,” said Harry, frowning. “Draco—”

He broke off, suddenly aware of how intensely several people were looking at him. Or perhaps Draco’s attempts at wandless magic were

working, and he simply had an aneurysm.

“Potter,” he said. He set down his knife and fork. “I believe you misspoke. What you were *about* to say surely had nothing at all to do with my personal business.”

“No,” said Harry, lying.

Daphne tossed her hair in a wide spume of fluffy gold. “Really, now,” she said. “Kissing’s not so grand a thing. It’s not a proposal, is it? I thought we were all libertines, over here.”

“Have you?” said Ron to Draco, vaguely casual. “I mean, just curious.”

“Does it matter?” Hermione said stiffly.

“No, ’course it doesn’t. Just asking him about his life, you know?.”

A new, interesting, even worse silence happened then.

“He has, though,” said Fred, in tones so soft and high they were almost tender. “Right, Blondie?”

Daphne cleared her throat. “I’ve kissed loads of people,” she announced, “if anyone’s interested in *that.* I’ve kept a list. Pansy once composed them all into a poem. Would anyone like to hear it? There’s a bit where she rhymes ‘Richard’ with ‘Prick-Hard,’ it’s quite a scream.”

“Fourth year,” said Hermione suddenly. She cut into her lunch with swift, crisp movements of her knife. “By the pumpkin patch. See? Daphne’s right, it’s not a big deal.”

“Fourth year?” said Cho tentatively. “Did that mean — was it—”

“Yes,” she said crisply, as Draco placed his fork slowly and tenuously on the table, resenting the thorny bristle in his chest. “It’s private, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh — oh, yes, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” said Hermione, with a sharp look, as if the apologies irritated her more than the question; and then she shook her head, and tucked into her lunch as if she had ended the conversation, which she almost did.

He was still contemplating how to save himself. So far, he had come up with the two options of running away and dying.

Fred slowly steepled his fingers in front of his mouth. He lowered them at Daphne.

“It was you, wasn’t it?”

“No,” she tried, but it was too late, because she was fidgeting, and there was a lot of hooting from the twins. Draco was going to immolate her, and then himself. Maybe he would do himself first, come to think of it. “No, no, but really, I mean, it wasn’t a snog—”

“You laid one on him! You dog, Greengrass!”

“You got him! Draco ‘Tightarse’ Malfoy, Mr. No Eye Contact Until Marriage himself—”

“I’m going to see McGonagall,” said George seriously, pumping her hand, “about getting you an award for Special Services to the School.”

“Oh, stop, stop — do stop — look, he’s uncomfortable—”

“Greengrass,” he snarled. The surface of his skin would soon be acquiring a nice char.

“I thought,” she whispered, hiding her face from the twins, “you have to understand — Draco, I thought — I didn’t think — you haven’t told —?”

He couldn’t bring himself to look at Hermione, or he really did expect to start a fire.

“Stop,” said Hermione.

The thing, whatever it was, stopped.

“You’re being juvenile,” she said coolly, “and beastly, and ridiculously mean to everyone. Go bother someone else, or I’ll write to Molly and tell them what you’ve been feeding the first years.”

Fred and George both reared back, startled; the invocation of Molly was enough to have them on their back feet. Harry edged away from her. Daphne had laced her fingers and appeared to be hiding behind them in misery.

Hermione gave a pointed little nod down the table, and the two of them slouched off, muttering half-hearted apologies in Ron’s direction.

Draco lapsed again into a reverie wherein he hauled her onto the table and kissed her.

There was a commotion down the hall. Umbridge had come down from the staff table and was watching, her expression thickly satisfied, as Romilda Vane clambered out of the table on shaky legs. Several of her friends had cried out in objection.

“The Hogwarts Dress Code,” said Umbridge, clasping her hands, “prescribes that skirts must fall below one’s fingertips. Miss Vane, please stand up straight and put your hands to your sides.”

Hermione sucked a breath through her teeth; Romilda had rolled her skirt up at the waistband, to make it shorter. Half the girls in the castle did.

Rigidly, Romilda lowered her head and her hands to her sides.

“Ah,” said Umbridge, “yes, Miss Vane, that is a very big gap! My goodness! Are you aware that the Hogwarts Need Fund provides financial assistance to students whose families cannot afford robes that fit?”

Romilda muttered something.

“When addressing an instructor,” said Umbridge, “you will speak clearly. Were you aware that your skirt breaks the dress code?”

“N— I have long arms.”

“No, you do not,” said Umbridge sweetly. “Ten points from Gryffindor, and you will be excused from the first class of the afternoon to go and change.”

Face burning, Romilda ran out of the hall. From the Hufflepuff table, Cedric Diggory half-rose from his seat, looking quite angry; but someone grabbed his arm and pulled him back down.

“I’m thinking poison,” muttered Ron. “Show of hands, for poison?”

Daphne made an intrigued noise and lifted hers. Draco rolled his eyes and hauled it down again.

The hour bell groaned, calling them to Transfiguration. The table quickly dispersed — Harry gladly removing himself from the dire locus of territory inside Hermione’s hitting range, and Ron shooting her fervently grateful looks, that only increased Draco’s irritation, if anything.

Hermione, for her part, cleared out before anyone could say anything else, or indeed anyone could.

She was ruthlessly efficient, but her legs were short. He caught her on the way out of the hall.

“Granger?”

“What?” she said calmly. Her strides were long and smooth. “How are you? I’m sorry about that, that was brutal.”

This was not what he had expected. There was something alarming in how dissimilar it was to what he expected.

“Fine,” he said. “It’s nothing. Greengrass has a loose mouth.”

“Apparently,” she said, and then winced. Her step flagged. “I’m sorry. That — wasn’t kind.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not. It’s not wrong for girls to kiss people. She can kiss anyone she wants. I do mean that. I’m not joking.”

“That’s true.”

“So she did?”

They reached a staircase, and she took them two at once. The others fell rapidly behind them, a cluster of murmurs and curious stares twisting out of sight on the stairwell. The winding halls above them were crowded enough to ensure privacy in the anonymity of a crowd.

“Kiss you, that is,” said Hermione, after a moment where he said nothing. “Sorry, don’t answer that if you don’t want to. I’m as bad as the twins.”

“You’re not.”

“Thanks.” She hopped a trick stair with an easy jump, wobbled, and he touched her elbow on his way up. They kept climbing.

“It was a perfunctory situation,” he said. “It wasn’t — I’m not involved.”

She laughed awkwardly.

“What.”

“Perfunctory?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the word you’d use for kissing a girl? Perfunctory.”

“It’s the word I’d use for kissing that girl, yes.”

“Gosh, you ladykiller,” she said mildly, swinging around a corner. He checked it, from instinct. Mad-Eye’s drills stuck around. “No wonder they’re all batty for you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh — muggle term, I forgot — it doesn’t really mean killing—”

“Don’t care. Who’s ‘they’?”

“Nice try.”

“I’m serious.” But they had found the Transfiguration classroom, drawing the inquest to a close.

“It’s really none of my business,” she said, with perfect calm, and it bothered him.

It could’ve been. It really could’ve been, if she wanted. If she’d been irritated, or pitched a row at him, then it would’ve been better. Worse, facially, because of the rowing, but better. Because if she’d announced that she’d snogged someone, he’d be irritated out of his skin.

He didn’t want to kiss anyone else, and it would have been more assuring if they were of a mind about it.

He preferred her angry to apathetic, at any rate. At least then she was paying attention to him.

But Hermione said calmly: “Anyway. Poor Daphne. I think she was about to explode. You’re a bit terrifying when you’re mad, you know.”

“Not as terrifying as I should be, apparently.” They entered the queue for the classroom, which was a slow-moving body.

“No, you are. You get this… look, to you, and you go still. I mean very still, unnaturally so. I can’t ever tell if you do it on purpose, to scare people, but either way it makes me think you’re going to curse someone. Or smite them, or something.”

“I don’t terrify you,” he said, half a question in it.

“Mm. I’ve seen you get knocked on your arse. It kills the mystique.”

“Not all of it, surely?”

“Most of it, I’m afraid.”

“You break my heart.”

And she gave a loud, annoying sort of laugh, the kind that most people found irritating and trumpetlike, and in his opinion was well worth their discomfort or indeed almost any cost. The moment ended when they were herded into Transfiguration, which obscured the question of what she found quite so funny about it.

At the dark breach of morning in mid-September, Ron roused him with a pointed whisper: “C’mon. My dad’s here.”

Draco peeled one eye open and regarded him in the forlorn hope that he might be some sort of unusual ginger sleep demon.

When seconds passed, and neither Ron nor the irksome gleam of his *Lumos* went away, he rubbed his face and sighed. “He’s on the Floo?”

“No, numpty, he’s hiding in the closet.”

He dressed in the dark, forgoing his jumper and tie, bothering only to render himself marginally presentable in a dress shirt and trousers. In the autumn, Gryffindor Tower nearly froze under the constant submersion of wind off the moors, and the stone held chill like an icebox, leaving fractals of frost on the window panes, and the air helped to haul him back to consciousness. He did not esteem Arthur any better for electing to call his son at the witching hour.

Which was not to say he didn't understand it. No other students abused themselves to rise at this hour, and not one measly first year dozed in an armchair by the fire. The common room was held hostage by Crookshanks, who had captured a piece of prime real estate on the sofa and hoarded it, purring jealously. Draco was so rarely awake at this time that he found himself newly acquainted with the Tower and its winding staircases, the faint gray glow that came from the sectioned windows, through which an indigo sunrise was setting up shop on the Forbidden Forest's eastern crest. He announced himself to the common room with a jaw-breaking yawn, which made Crookshanks chirp fondly in greeting, and made the cat's owner turn around where she knelt at the fire, her face half green from the flames.

Her hair was down, its contours lost in an amorphous dark shape silhouetted by flame, and one of Molly's jumpers, with a gold HG knitted over the breast pocket. Like all of Molly's jumpers, it anticipated several years of growth, but only some of those years had occurred, because she had rucked up the sleeves and the collar slipped down one shoulder, which was as close as she ever came to dishevelment.

Harry padded in blearily, still robed in oversized muggle sleep clothes; he was struggling to keep his glasses on his face, as unbeknownst to him, they were upside down.

Ron yawned. "Dad? You still there?"

"I'm here, Ron!"

Arthur's face emerged from the flames, a shimmering projection of emerald and light. He beamed when his son loped into view of the fireplace and dropped down cross-legged by the hearth. Draco and Harry followed, clambering down to huddle near the fire, which had the added benefit of providing a place to warm his hands.

"Sorry about the time!" he added, and broke into a yawn. "Couldn't get the Floo alone any other time, m'afraid. And Ron'll tell you, it's been wretched trouble trying to schedule this by owl, Mad-Eye's a goblin about post—"

"Pejorative," mumbled Hermione, and then yawned herself, nearly splitting her face open. Something soft turned around in Draco's chest and laid down.

He folded his arms and leaned against the foot of an armchair, sulking.

"—ah, yes, you're right, my girl, I'm sorry; Mad-Eye's a *wanker* about post," said Arthur. Harry laughed. "Won't let me hardly send anything, and he's not wrong, but I think one of these days Molly's going to catch him raiding her mail-order catalogs and bite his head off. Can't wait, too. Anyway — tell me everything! How are you? Keeping your chins up, eh, not letting them get you down? Tell me something good, why don't you, Merlin knows I could use it — say, Harry, how's Cho?"

Harry blushed deeply. "She's — er — really good."

"Really good?"

Hermione giggled, hiding her face behind her knees.

His chest did the thing again. He lifted his eyes to the ceiling.

"Dad!" said Ron, aghast.

“No, no, I’m sorry, we’ll let it rest. Harry, more importantly: is your scar alright?”

The ghost of Harry’s blush was exorcized by irritation. “Why does everyone want to know about my scar?” he said shortly. “First Sirius, now you? It’s fine!”

“Remus said that it had been hurting.”

“And I don’t see how it’s anyone’s business!”

“Your health is absolutely his business,” said Arthur, “and mine, for one thing. For another, if Dumbledore’s right, those pains are part of a connection with You-Know-Who, and you need to start learning to defend yourself — well, *yesterday* would be best, but ‘now’ is a close second.”

Hermione straightened. “You think that Voldemort—”

Ron and Draco both winced.

“—might have a way into Harry’s mind? Through the scar?”

Arthur grimaced. “That’s Dumbledore’s worry.”

“How did you figure that out? The connection?”

“No idea,” he said frankly. “Nobody knows where all our information comes from, ’cept Dumbledore, and he’s final say on who knows what. Alastor’s a close second, but even he doesn’t have all our agents’ names — nor does he want them. Likes to have as many baskets as he does eggs, Mad-Eye. Speaking of which.” He turned to Ron. “What’s this about a mole?”

“Someone knows Padfoot’s in the Order,” Hermione broke out, lowering her voice. “We’ve heard rumors about him and the Order, and someone mentioned there’s a Ministry dossier for him, which means—”

“Someone might know where the headquarters is,” said Draco.

Arthur winced.

“That’s not good,” he said. “No, not good at all. I — you’re sure?”

“Yeah. We think it’s Percy,” added Ron, with savage conviction.

“It’s not Percy.”

“No, but listen. We worked it out, right? Mum’s been writing him all year, we know that, and all she’d have to do was let it slip; he could’ve heard about Padfoot or the Order from anybody, her or Bill or Gin, hell, I think *I* probably said ‘Sirius’ around him once or twice —”

“Your mother,” said Arthur, “wouldn’t have told him.”

“Not on purpose, obviously,” Ron insisted, “but if she made a mistake —”

“Ron, take it from someone who’s known your mother a bit longer than you have,” said Arthur calmly. “Believe me: she didn’t.”

Ron scowled.

“It’s me,” said Harry, in a low, calm, rictus of dread.

All looked at him.

“Voldemort can get into my mind. Right? We were all ready to blame Percy, but the girl — the person Draco heard it from — she mentioned Buckbeak. Buckbeak’s not even at Grimmauld Place. Why would Molly tell Percy about him?” He raked his hand through his hair. “How would you even know that? Unless you’d seen *my* memories, from third year—”

“Harry, no, no!” Arthur was quick, almost panicky. “Dear boy, really! There’s no reason to believe that — none at all — even Dumbledore

doesn’t think You-Know-Who can read your memories—”

“How would you know?” Harry snarled, scrambling to his feet. “How would anyone know that, except me? I can’t defend myself, you said it yourself—”

“Harry, sit down,” said Hermione, and her voice cut through Harry’s fug of anger; he looked down, blinking, like someone splashed cold water on him.

She inclined her head at him with exasperated affection.

“Say Voldemort is in your head,” she said, “which, for the record, you didn’t even believe five minutes ago — but say that he is. Say that he knows everything about the Order, absolutely everything. You think the first thing he’s going to do with all that information is go open a file at the Ministry?”

Ron guffawed in hoarse relief; Harry deflated somewhat.

She gave a little laugh. “I mean,” she said, “you think Grimmauld Place would still be standing if Voldemort knew everything you do? You think *you* would still be alive? This is why you’re not our strategist, Harry.”

“But — Buckbeak,” said Harry, with watery, reluctant relief. “And Remus.”

“Information that any mole could have easily, if they’d been to Grimmauld Place in the last four months,” she continued calmly, “Sirius tells that story fairly often, he’s quite proud of it. Which reminds me of another reason it can’t be you: some of that girl’s information was *wrong.* Sirius isn’t the leader of the Order of the Phoenix, and everyone important very well knows that, so whoever said that to the Ministry was either misinformed or lying, possibly to protect the real leader of the Order — which tells me that if they are inner-circle, it’s someone who likes Dumbledore, but doesn’t like Sirius. Either way, it’s not you, or it’s not *just* you, and if it *is* you it’s

not your fault Dumbledore sent you to live in an Order safehouse knowing full well Voldemort might have a radio into your head. But I don't think he's stupid enough to do that, so I suspect there's something else going on. Like a mole, for instance."

Finishing, she smoothed her blanket over her legs like a queenly skirt.

Harry nodded jerkily, sat down.

"Well-put," said Arthur, after a stunned pause. "It's important information, I agree, and I'm touched that you went through all the trouble of trying to get it to us. I'll relay it to everyone, and I'm sure Mad-Eye will figure out some sort of inquisition." He chuckled. "Probably make his year, come to think."

"You're not concerned?" said Hermione skeptically.

"On the contrary, I'm very concerned."

"Yes, but — I mean, I'm sorry, but you don't seem it."

Arthur softened. "I understand. But Dumbledore would tell you to think tactically. What else can we do? Padfoot is still walled up in Grimmauld, and that place could survive an air raid without losing so much as a chimney. The rest of us still have our covers intact. It's obviously concerning that someone has eyes inside the building, but whatever information they're leaking isn't enough for the Ministry to act on, because if it was, they would have used it already."

"But wouldn't it be safer to relocate?" said Ron. "Just to be sure?"

Arthur smiled faintly. "Where do you suggest? The age of the house, and Padfoot's claim to it, gives us access to wards that even the Burrow doesn't have. And most of Mad-Eye's safehouses won't serve as a nexus for the work we're doing. We need somewhere central, it's essential to the operation."

“What operation? Are you doing spy stuff?”

“The first rule of spy stuff,” said his father seriously, “is not to discuss spy stuff on the Floo. Or so I’m told.”

“It is, then! Bang-on! Can we help?”

“You can help us by passing your O.W.L.s,” Arthur said sternly. “You can help us by keeping yourselves safe, and protecting each other. How’s the new professor, Dolores…?”

“Awful,” said Hermione shortly, “really hideous, thanks for asking.”

“Mm. Yes. I suspected so. Had a few run-ins with her, over the years — she’s got a passionate hatred for muggles, that woman, I mean a vitriolic, mean-spirited attitude, not just the usual pureblood prejudice… no offense,” he added, generously, to Draco.

“None *was* being taken. ”

“I’m sorry I don’t have any better advice,” said Arthur. “But try to keep your head down. The more attention she pays to you — the more she’s interested in your families, your grades, your background — the more she’ll dig, and that’s when your mother and I start entering the picture. Which *is* a security risk. The best thing you can do for the Order is stand back and try to keep out of trouble. That goes double for you, Harry.”

“I’m doing my best,” said Harry, plaintively, “and it’s not my fault no one seems to bloody believe me when I say that.”

“They may harbor understandable doubts,” said Draco, “about the extent of ‘best.’”

“Of course you’re not,” Arthur agreed peaceably. “But Dumbledore says—” He peered over his shoulder. “Oh! Now? I’ve got Ron here — right, yes, that is what ‘now’ means. Sorry, boys— and Hermione — got to run—”

“What for?” demanded Ron. “Is it Order stuff?”

“Can’t say. Might be a grocery run, honestly. Alright. I love you all very much. And please listen to me, about lying low; if you don’t, I’m going to tell your mother.”

“Good luck with that,” said Harry smugly, causing Ron to guffaw, and Arthur wrinkled his nose at him.

“Meaning Molly, you little stink.”

“Wait,” Harry added, as Arthur turned away. “D’you think we could call Padfoot like this? If we woke up early—?”

Arthur’s smile flickered. “Well — I’ll ask, but you know — we’re trying to keep certain persons off the Floo, just now. For security. Especially since the castle Floo network is public.”

“Maybe I could go down to Hogsmeade and Floo him from a private line, if that’s better—”

“We’ll see. In the meantime—”

“—or a, a muggle payphone, there are some close to Number Twelve, he wouldn’t have to go far—”

“I’ll ask,” said Arthur firmly, in a way that ended the debate. “And at the very latest, you’ll see everyone again at Christmas. Goodbye.”

“Right,” mumbled Harry. “Christmas.”

Arthur’s head shimmered away into flames, and green warmed to feeble yellow.

A creak issued cheerfully from the foundations. The dawn-light in the windows had clustered together in long shards of white that pierced the opposite walls. It was growing warmer in the tower, and footsteps thumped in and out of earshot upstairs, like an old heart clawing back to life.

They adjourned to bathe and dress. When he came back downstairs, the common room was busier, populated with various groups trailing down to breakfast; Fred and George were urging Euan Abercrombie to eat a suspiciously pink toffee, clipboards aloft; Colin Creevey was examining a layout for the next edition of the *Hogwarts Enquirer,* a Sugar Quill dangling from his mouth like a cigarette; Seamus had his cassette deck out, and he was playing a new album from a group called the Smashing Pumpkins, a nasal voice, a melancholia of guitars; Dean was crooning along with his feet in Seamus's lap while Seamus did his eyeliner in Katie's pocket mirror: *Time is never time at all…*

"You know, while we're on that thought, I was thinking about the twins said earlier," said Hermione. "About not learning anything from Umbridge. Because everyone's in the same boat, aren't we? We can't get anything from that book, and she's scaring people out of coming to class altogether."

"Can't get anything from a book?" said Harry. He snapped his fingers in front of her face. "Are you ill?"

"I said *that* book, and Defense is inescapably practical, like Potions."

"Or Herbology," said Neville, wandering down the stairs behind Ron. He scratched his head. "What're we talking about?"

"Hermione wants us to do more reading," said Ron.

"Not just 'more reading,'" she said impatiently. "It needs to be a real practice group. Like a dueling club, actually. And Harry would lead it, naturally."

Harry choked on air.

"Wot?"

Draco flicked his wand, and his airway cleared with a wheeze.

“You could show us everything you’ve learned through practice for the Tournament, and Draco and I could do research—”

“Intriguing, how I always end up conscripted in these things.”

“But you could also help with the practice part,” she assured him, as if his complaint had been not having enough work. “Since you’ve got experience with Dark magic—”

“Excuse me? What’s that supposed to mean, ‘experience’?”

“You said your house was full of Dark artifacts!”

“That doesn’t mean I’ve *used* them! Your parents are dental Healers, that doesn’t mean you can — I don’t know, create teeth—”

“And Ron,” she said, breezing past any kind of credit for remembering what a ‘dentist’ was, “you could help teach, if nothing else, since you’re a natural. And I could handle the lesson planning, and such,” she said, sounding like this was a prize treat, “and we could all… work together. To help each other.”

There was a pause. Harry and Ron wore twin expressions of skeptical intrigue. Draco was made uncomfortable by the suggestion, which seemed to solicit attention and punishment, but he felt more uncomfortable raising the point.

Hermione threw up her hands.

“Or we can just all go fail alone, like she wants us to! That’s fine to me, I’m sure *I’ll* manage so you all can do what you like—”

“No, hang on, it’s great!”

“Seriously, it’s a good idea,” said Ron, “I’m just — thinking logistics, how we’d swing it, wouldn’t be the easiest—”

“Oh,” she said, mollified. “Well, we’d have to figure that out, of course.”

“That sounds great,” said Neville wishfully. “You guys have f-f-fun.”

The four of them looked at him. He turned back to his homework with a grave, polite expression.

“Neville,” said Ron, as if he were a bit stupid, “d’you want to join?”

“Oh, no,” he said sadly. “I mean, yes, I’d love to, but I’d only slow you down.”

“Neville Longbottom,” snapped Hermione, “you’re a person, and it’s ridiculous that students at a school like this should feel embarrassed for needing to be taught. Anyway, she’s a complete toad, I can’t believe you listened to her.”

“But she was right, I can’t — it’s not your lot’s job to make me—”

“I seem to recall tutoring you in Potions for three years,” said Draco dryly.

“That’s b-b-beside the point!”

Ron interrupted them. “Do you want to help? Is that it?” he broke in. “Because I could use a hand on my Herbology. Sprout’s reaming me this year, I’m gunning for a D.”

“W— I can do that,” Neville said, as if he was shocked. “That’s easy.”

“Not for the rest of us, tosser.”

“Sorry! I didn’t m-m-mean it like— b-but *that’s* p-p-perfectly straight-f-f-forward,” he said. “I know how to d-d-do it, it c-c-can’t be hard.”

Daphne’s laugh tinkled, and she sat up from the sofa. “Neville,” she said, “don’t be silly. I’m in three study groups, and I haven’t the brains of a jellyfish. We must be shameless about it, us brainless chaps, if we’re to get anywhere.”

“Thank you, Daphne, you’re welcome to join,” said Hermione. “Six is a nice round number, and it makes the work easier if we can divide it up.”

“I’m not good for a stitch of it, my dear, but I can bring snacks.”

Hermione drew breath, then hesitated. “That,” she said carefully, “would also be nice.”

Daphne beamed at her, and Hermione hesitantly smiled back.

“I want it noted,” Draco said, “that I think this is unlikely to end well.”

“You never think *anything* will end well,” said Harry.

“And I’ve yet to be wrong.”

“I’m still alive, aren’t I?”

“As I said.”

“Prat!”

“You don’t have to help, y’know,” said Ron, buffing his fingernails, “if you’re chicken.”

“Ronald, you have in subtlety what a hippogriff has.”

“We’ll table it,” said Hermione.

“Which means you think you’ve won,” he said, mildly peeved, “and stalling will lead me to accept it.”

“Doesn’t matter. Three to one,” said Ron wisely. “You’re outvoted. Megamajority.”

“Super - majority,” said Hermione.

“Sure. Draco’s screwed, is the point.”

“Oh. Yes.”

“I’m *not!* This friendship isn’t a democracy!”

“You’re right. It’s a dictatorship, and Hermione’s running it,” said Harry. Hermione dimpled at him and preened.

The rill of discomfort that tripped down Draco’s spine was instinctual; it put his hairs up with the suspicion that he was undertaking more danger than he chose to acknowledge. He reminded himself that Umbridge was a professor, and that school associations were not, for the time being, against the rules; that no matter how grim the hallways turned, how bleak the silence in between classes, if there was one thing Hogwarts could not, as an institution, prohibit, it was studying the practice of *magic.*

But God, if it didn’t feel like danger. It frightened him that he was the only person to feel the current of danger swimming underneath them, lapping at their ankles — and worse, he felt himself being drawn after them into the water, knee-deep and freezing as the tide came in.

There were certain things that inevitably happened when you broke with power. When you stood against anything, even with people at your back, there was still something that lay ahead.

His father had learned that lesson. Too late, he’d learned it. Draco had spent a lot of long, sleepless, angry nights wondering why the lesson hadn’t stuck earlier, and it shook loose something wild and grief-stricken in him, to wonder if maybe this was the reason.

And it was such a tiny reason, really: just the feeling of watching Hermione tilt her head, smile hopefully, and silently, thoughtlessly demand of him unspeakable bravery. A silent order for the very best of himself to stand in evidence for her examination, without even any particular guarantee of approval. A call to do something bold and terrible, because she wanted it.

And so what, then. He had told her he’d follow her; he couldn’t very well renege on it now.

“Go easy.”

Confusion dimmed her smile.

“What?” she said.

She couldn’t know what he meant, of course. That wasn’t her fault. He was glad she didn’t.

A passel of laughter broke out by the fireplace, and the common room burbled with glad music. It was hardly recognizable as the same room it had been an hour ago, that cold dark chamber full of whispers and talk of spies. It wasn’t possible that the two places could exist in the same space, separated by a bare collection of minutes — nothing so insubstantial as an hour could change something that much. Because even though the hard edges of that conversation lingered in his memory, in this room, the other couldn’t exist.

-The 1995 Gryffindor prefect dynamic isn't so much "good cop/bad cop" as "bad cop/will-literally-eat-your-face cop." Which produces such exchanges as the above, paraphrased:

-Hermione: am I being too hard on them?

-Draco "regularly imagines corporal punishment" Malfoy: Of course not. Why do you ask?

-Credit where credit is due: Umbridge’s speech was strongly inspired by a famous remark by a very famous British politician.

-I like to imagine that Bill got his earring before he left Hogwarts, and that it did despicable things to the female Gryffindor population.

-I also like to imagine Colin Creevey running around in a little paperboy getup. There's no reason for this. I know he's wearing a Hogwarts uniform in every scene. But still. He gets his hands on a box of candy cigarettes and gives McGonagall a heart attack.

-Writing the Great Hall scene in chapter was a fantastic reminder of why no one should ever miss high school. Especially if your siblings went to the same school as you did.

-Thank you, thank you, thank you to everyone who commented. I had so much incredible encouragement, I wish I could have responded to them all. Know that I have read every one, and I wish you all a hot cup of tea brewed just how you like it, served in a beautiful teacup made of bone china. (Or coffee, for preference.)

-Next chapter: "The Miseducation of Hermione Granger."

The Miseducation of Hermione Granger

Chapter 62: The Miseducation of Hermione Granger

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Enveloped by the fiery vestitures of a highland autumn, the quidditch pitch sat at the base of the hill, an iron crown frilled in burgundy.

It was a fine, sunny afternoon, the second Tuesday of the term, and the vanishing few clouds that came wandering over the hills were as goosefeathers on a blue coverlet. Most of the team was already assembled on the pitch. Angelina wore her box braids in a high ponytail and stood with her broomstick cocked at her hip, directing a mass of queuing hopefuls. Fred and George warmed up by ricocheting a bludger across the field between them. Katie was doing a series of show-offy stretches with her legs.

In the stands, a collection of spectators had filed in, including Hermione — who had complained about it all the way to the pitch, but also passionately rejected any offers to skive off.

It was gratifying that she'd come to watch, even if she had buried her nose in a book the moment she sat down, and seemed unlikely to witness any fits of dazzling aerial brilliance that certain handsome persons might be inclined to do.

Which was her own loss, really.

Angelina drifted above the crowd, piping twice on her whistle. "OI, EVERYBODY!" she shouted, at earsplitting volume. Fred, with one finger in his ear, shot her a thumbs-up. "WELCOME TO QUIDDITCH TRYOUTS! WE'VE GOT ONE SPOT THIS YEAR, AND IT'S KEEPER. IF YOU CAN'T FLY KEEPER, HEAD ON OUT AND SAVE EVERYONE'S TIME."

No one moved. She shrugged.

“ALRIGHT, THEN. MOUNT YOUR BROOMS!”

Draco kicked off, and the Nimbus purred to top speed in the time it took to blink.

It was a beautiful afternoon for flying, and he cut into the sky like a dash of red paint, a blurry arc. He crested the stands and arched into a hairpin turn with his whole body, dragging the broomstick through a beautifully structured turn, like half a helix; then he bent and dipped into a long straightaway over the stands, the wind rushing up to welcome him back.

Players leapt into the air like a flock of red birds, jostling each other or grappling for control of their broomsticks. Most of them were hopelessly slow; they were too frightened of the broom, too worried of losing control at top speeds. He spun into a dive, corkscrewed out of it, and wove through the other players like an eel through a current. Some of them startled and yelped when he shouldered past, but others, like Ginny, only shouldered him back and pressed faster, cutting through the crowds, breaking out into a small formation at the front of the pack.

Harry was above them all, knitting a dizzy series of aerial stunts through the air over the pitch. His face was slack and peaceful, and it was the most relaxed Draco had seen him all summer, if not long before.

Without warning, Ginny split from the pack and rocketed past him, sending him into a clumsy spin, and they had a laughing exchange at the top of their lungs that it was good the younger students couldn’t hear.

It was soon Ginny’s turn. Draco attempted to evaluate her objectively as a player, without indulging in favoritism on the basis of someone being tolerable. She was good at tricky shots: there was a clear level of skill and imagination on display, and she had the reach to execute them, as well as the requisite fearlessness. One block saw her dangling from her knee and left arm, under her broomstick, in order

to knock away a ball with fiendish underspin from Angelina. When she saw an opportunity, she tended to do something brilliant, or else missed it altogether.

One of them was Draco's. He judged that she favored her right side, as people used to playing chaser tended to, and pitched across her body, socketing it under her left arm. It whistled freely through the hoop.

Ginny swore and swiped at empty air. The quaffle shot through the hoop and he flew to catch it, a showy dive down the back of the goalposts, and hocked it back to Katie for the next shot. A group in the stands erupted into applause, and he noticed that several people besides Hermione had come to watch: Lavender, Parvati, and Padma Patil, as well as Cho and another girl from Ravenclaw, were waving streamers and drinking what appeared to be pumpkin juice from champagne flutes.

Parvati waved cheerfully and whistled at him. Padma hid her face, then picked up a book and began hitting Parvati with it.

He rolled his eyes and saluted at them. Lavender mimed a catch and pressed it to her chest.

Hermione clapped mildly. She sat apart from them with a book open on her legs and a cup of tea steaming on her right, and she arched a deeply skeptical eyebrow when the girls started cheering. At Lavender's catch, she made a show of rolling her eyes so hard her whole head moved.

He floated down within earshot. When his shadow covered her page, she glanced up, unimpressed.

"Having fun?"

"Not as much as some," she said, wryly. Her face was faintly flushed from the sunlight, and the wind sent her hair dancing free of its clasp.

“Do you mean me? Because you’re not wrong.”

“Not quite what I meant.”

“No?”

She leaned forward on her knees, smiling conspiratorially. “I don’t mean to shock you, but I think *some* people,” she said, “didn’t come for the quidditch.”

“So they’re like you, then.”

She was startled; her mouth parted.

“Supporting their friends,” he said. “House spirit. Et cetera.”

“You are *not* Parvati’s friend.”

“I might be.”

“You *might* be?”

“Yeah, I might be.”

“Mm. And would that sudden change in relations have anything to do with her blowing kisses at you?”

He smirked. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

She gave a snort of disgust. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Am I.”

“And shallow.”

“Shallow, you say?”

“Meaning vain. Easily flattered. Conceited.”

“Careful, I’ve still got to fly straight.”

“Well, you can always go talk to Parvati, if you’d like a change of pace.” Her head cocked sideways, rueful. The corner of her mouth twisted.

He was aware that this was not precisely a friendly tenor of conversation. He was speaking a bit too low, and she was a bit too drawling, and there was a kind of — pleasant tension to it, like they were competing for something. It was a game of feints, like a drill or a practice, where you could say anything except the reason you were playing. You could point at the tension so long as you called it something else.

But it wasn’t illegal, a bit of flirting. Between friends. George and Angelina flirted, sometimes, and they were platonic as it came. Lavender would flirt with a skrewt. At any rate, Hermione certainly didn’t seem bothered by it — she was back to her book in a moment, anyway — and so he was safe, the whole thing was safe, it was deniable, which meant he didn’t have to stop.

It wasn't a change. Just a transposition.

“MALFOY!”

Angelina nearly bowled him over. “YOU! BLOND TOSSER! SOME OF US ARE TRYING TO PLAY QUIDDITCH IF YOU’D LIKE TO JOIN US—”

“Coming, Johnson, Merlin—”

“—IF I WANTED SOMEONE TO SIT ON A BROOMSTICK AND JABBER I COULD GET PEEVES TO FLY YOUR SLOT, HE’D BE A DAMN SIGHT FUNNIER—”

“Alright, I said, *alright—”*

“—KNOW BLOODY WELL IF YOU’D PULLED THIS WITH OLIVER HE’D TAKE THE SKIN OFF YOUR TAINT AND DON’T THINK I WON’T—”

She harried him back to the goalhoops, bellowing. Lavender’s clique gave a raucous burst of laughter.

Ron was finishing his keeper’s tryout. He wasn’t showy; he had great height, long reach, and a solid, dependable coverage of the keeper’s box. He’d only missed one, and it was Draco’s, which he’d changed up at the last minute to a spinning backhand — a tricky switch-up that no keeper at the school had ever comfortably got their hands on, and so no great shame to miss.

Angelina rounded out the tryouts with a chaser’s scrimmage. She divided the candidates into teams of four and had them fly five-minute scrambles, pulling out the strongest keepers from the shootout to guard the goals. Two of these being Ginny and Ron.

Ginny flew well, but she kept darting off the line to help out her chasers — couldn’t particularly blame her, given the state of them — and finally Angelina whistled her out.

“Stay in your box!”

“But I had a shot!”

“What you have are chasers! It’s their shot, not yours!”

“It would’ve been my shot if I’d made it!”

“Woulda, coulda, shoulda,” Angelina shouted, checking her watch. “Next time you’d better make it, then. Next up! Stockton, Cattell, Harris! Yates, to the box—”

A commotion was happening on the ground. A short woman in a pillbox hat marched out of the gates, her kitten heels sinking awkwardly into the soft earth of the pitch. She squinted up at them,

her face pinched, and then started waving her hands and hopping up and down.

Angelina groaned.

“What’s she want?” Harry snapped, drawing up alongside Draco.

“Dunno, but bet you we will soon,” said Katie grimly. Angelina soared down and dismounted neatly in front of Umbridge, whereon they broke at once into a very fast, gesture-heavy conversation. “Hope Angie keeps her head.”

Umbridge was shorter than Angelina, and had come directly from the castle, for her full suit and frilled jabot stood sorely out of place among the uniforms and training pinnies. Grass stains on her pink suede heels proclaimed the great personal inconvenience she had undertaken to make the visit, and, as it happened, the points of her heels kept sinking into the earth, requiring her to yank them out every few seconds, a task that obviously did only good things for her disposition.

“But as your professor, I am burdened with a duty of care,” she cried. “And I am afraid it is no use! You may submit an application to use the field *if* and *when* the Gryffindor team has followed the requisite procedures!”

“I got McGonagall’s permission for this,” said Angelina, in the cool hard tone of one past her natural reserves of patience, and fast racking up debts. “It was all checked out. I got the forms.”

“But Professor McGonagall must be ignorant, then! For you have *not* followed the rules, Miss Johnson! I do not want to see you make mistakes that could jeopardize the children of this school!”

“What mistakes?” demanded Fred, landing hard next to Angelina. He stood by her shoulder, looming — drawing attention, incidentally, to the fifteen inches and two stone that he had on Umbridge, to say nothing of the very large bat in his hand.

“Thank you for joining us, Mr. Weasley,” said Umbridge. “Miss Johnson may explain to you—”

“She says the rules say we’ve got to register our brooms,” snapped Angelina. “Which we’ve never done before, by the way.”

“Possibly because you have never before been helped by a competent administrator!” said Umbridge helpfully. “But that has changed!”

“Madam Hooch is our ref,” said Katie.

“As I said,” said Umbridge, after a pause, “though I find it dreadfully unprofessional to name names, it is *patently* clear that the instruction you have received is quite lacking! But I suspected as much. In fact, as soon as I harbored that suspicion, I at *once* hurried to review the quidditch rulebook for you. I care deeply to ensure the safety of each and *every* Hogwarts student, including those who indulge in activities I personally consider very silly.”

“Thanks ever,” muttered Fred.

Umbridge smiled at him. “Yes, Mr. Weasley,” she said. “I think some thanks would do nicely, in fact. Since I *have* saved you all from many serious injuries!” A pause. “That will be: ‘Thank you, Professor Umbridge.’”

“Thank you,” said Angelina, “Professor Umbridge.”

“Ah, gratitude. It is music to the ears of any who work with children! Now. You are all dismissed to return to the castle, where I will generously extend the office deadline to register your broomsticks with my office to seven o’clock tonight—”

“Why’re we registering them with *your* office?” demanded Harry, soaring down beside Katie. He hopped off the broom midair, swung it behind his back, and dropped elegantly with a soft *thud.* Umbridge

squeaked in surprise. “What does the Defense professor have to do with quidditch?”

“As you would know if you had been here earlier, Mr. Potter — I — what is *that?”*

She was staring at his broomstick.

“It’s a Nimbus One,” he said, with a touch of pride. His chest swelled. “Mint condition.”

Umbridge’s violently pruned eyebrows became tiny alpine peaks.

“A Nimbus One,” she whispered, as glee blossomed on her face. “A Nimbus One! My goodness. Why, Mr. Potter, you *must* know that the Ministry has prohibited competitive use of old Nimbus models for *years!”*

“What? No, it’s fine — it flies like brand new—”

“They have a steering defect! Banned from competitive use, without a license! You will report it to me at once for confiscation!”

“Hang on!”

“Wait a minute!”

“You can’t take his broom,” said Angelina, outraged. “That’s team equipment!”

“Not going forward!” said Umbridge delightedly. “Where did you even buy such a thing? The only remaining Nimbus Ones for purchase are on the black market. My, my — have you been *naughty* in your back-to-school shopping, Mr. Potter?”

Harry clutched the broomstick and took a half-step back.

“I didn’t. It was a gift,” he said feebly. “It was from — from a—”

From Professor Minerva McGonagall, who would have sooner snapped it on her knee than consign it to Dolores Umbridge's pink claws.

"It was from a family member," said Draco shortly. Harry relaxed infinitesimally.

Umbridge pursed her lips. "Whoever they are, your family should take a greater interest in your wellbeing," she sniffed. "As I have. Never mind; it doesn't matter. A Ministry customs sweep will identify —"

"You can't do that!"

The team turned, as one, and cleaved in a quick curtain-sweep of red robes: Hermione came steaming through them, her cloak snapping over the grass.

"You," she repeated hotly, "can't do that. Professor."

"Miss Granger! I was unaware that you were on the quidditch team. Or are you trying out?"

"Harry's broom is private property," she blurted. "You can't take it."

"Really, now? Mr. Potter, do you have the title? Do you know," added Umbridge conspiratorially, "what a title is?"

"It doesn't matter if he has the title," snapped Hermione, before Harry could open his mouth. "You can't ask for it unless you have reasonable suspicion it's being used to commit a crime."

"Excuse me! Excuse me! Miss Granger! Rule Ninety-Four, Section Two, Part C-Four of the Hogwarts Handbook expressly states—"

"The Hogwarts Handbook isn't law," said Hermione brusquely. (Fred clutched George's shoulder in shock.) She shouldered in front of Angelina, scowl blazing in the harsh wash of the afternoon sun. "And the rule you're citing doesn't even apply, anyway, broomstick

registration only applies for students using Hogwarts funds to *buy* a broom. Harry didn't. It's his property. He's free to use it, or any other Nimbus, or even a — an enchanted teaspoon, if he wants."

"Excuse me! Rule Ninety-Four, Section Two, Part C-Six of the Hogwarts Handbook makes very clear—"

"That administrators retain discretion to disqualify broomsticks on safety grounds, yes, obviously, but there's a due process requirement to that, you can't just go around benching the whole team because you don't like the spit of a Comet Sixty," said Hermione crossly. At any other time, in any other context, Draco would have whirled around and demanded to know when she learned what a Comet Sixty was. "You have to issue a formal citation, which you haven't, and give them ample time for compliance, which you haven't, and provide them with alternative equipment to use during the inspection period, *which you haven't,* and, lastly, either you knew all of that before you came here, or you clearly never made it to Part C-Seven."

She took a deep breath and added, after a collective beat of astonishment: "Professor."

Umbridge's mouth looked like leather that had been left out in rain. Harry was practically glowing. Angelina was gazing at Hermione like she wanted to sweep her up and propose marriage.

"Quidditch," said Umbridge, silk-soft, "is an inherently unsafe activity."

"As is climbing a moving staircase," said Hermione.

"It is responsible for countless injuries every year—"

"Statistically insignificant margins, lower than muggle football."

"—encourages brutality—"

“It’s good exercise.”

“—and distracts students from their studies.”

“It builds athleticism,” said Hermione desperately. “And teamwork. It boosts morale.”

“It is useless frivolity—”

“It’s a Hogwarts tradition,” she blurted.

Umbridge stopped, and eyed her warily.

“It’s been around for — for centuries. Sicne before the Norman Conquest. It’s our legacy, as British wizards, it’s — our heritage.”

Umbridge’s pillbox hat had begun to cant backward on her head. She adjusted it delicately, considering, and then sniffed.

“A good point,” she agreed. But she continued: “Tradition is no excuse for unsafety. I will expect to see forms documenting the make and model of all broomsticks currently in use on my desk by eight o’clock on Monday, and if I find a cause for concern, I will not hesitate to confiscate the dangerous equipment in question.”

“Fine,” she said shortly. “They’ll do that. But technically, Madam Hooch should be—”

“And you’ll have detention, Miss Granger.”

Silence. Stone cold, frigid with shock. Hermione flinched like she’d been slapped, though that probably would’ve been kinder.

Hermione had never had a detention. Everyone on the team, including Draco and Harry, had been punished for infractions of varying seriousness; everyone had seen their fair share of lines. But Hermione had kept her nose clean. She had been polite and orderly in classes, almost never used magic in the hallways, and observed

the dress code like scripture. Breaking rules, she could, and did; but in terms of public infractions, her record was spotless.

Nearly spotless, now.

“No,” she said, reduced to simple denial. “No, I— I can’t.”

“For insubordination and rudeness to a teacher,” said Umbridge, “as well as general uppityness! We will work on that together tomorrow evening. Report to my office at nine o’clock.”

“But—”

“Would you like another one?”

Hermione closed her mouth.

“Very good,” said Umbridge, and it sounded not unlike a word of praise for a pet.

It couldn't take that much force to shatter a broomstick on someone’s face, he thought. They weren’t known for durability, broomsticks. Or faces.

Hermione’s expression was no less painful than a faceful of wood shrapnel.

Umbridge smiled at them and trotted off the field in the same direction she’d come. Hermione turned around slowly. The team swarmed to murmur consolations, but she didn’t reply.

“It wasn’t your fault, kiddo.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong—”

“—took the heat for us, I’m sorry—”

“Can probably spring you from that detention—”

“—dungbombs under her desk—?”

“Hell, we’d do it even if you weren’t—”

“Granger.”

She winced and held up her hand. He stopped.

Hermione bit down hard on her cheek, curled her fingers into her fist, and stuck it to her side. Then, stiff-shouldered, she strode off the pitch.

It was all intimidatingly stoic; or, rather, it was, right up until she passed the goalposts, and broke into a run.

The common room bubbled that evening with anticipation of the upcoming weekend at Hogsmeade. Plans circulated for exploratory adventures through the castle’s corridors, quidditch skirmishes, picnics on the lawns and punting expeditions on the lake. Rumor had it there was going to be a party. Draco listened to none of them. After dinner, Hermione had shouldered her bag and with a stiff wordless march had removed herself to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, where the hopes and sympathies of Gryffindor Tower went with her.

Others had trotted along like lost sheep back to the common room, and taken up a circle near the fireplace. Harry had brought her leftovers from a dinner she hadn’t touched, and Ron was doing his real, God-honest best to start the Transfiguration homework without her, which was something she had been asking him to do for four years without success. He had answered three questions in two hours and asked Draco for help on two, but that didn’t make it less laudable.

He had hoped she might be back before his prefect rounds with Blaise, but when ten o’clock came, the portrait door remained empty.

“I hope Hermione’s alright,” said Neville, who sat on the floor by the fireplace, his cheek pillowed in his hand. He had the Potions homework rainbowed around him in a hemisphere of woe, and had been jotting down answers in between feedings of his Mimbulus Mimbletonia. “I remember my first detention. Snape made me scrub cauldrons.”

“A bold choice to let you near them, really,” said Draco, “considering how many you’ve melted.”

“F-fourteen and counting.”

“Don’t say that like you’re proud of it.”

“Sorry.”

The door opened again, and more first years piled in, several of them wringing evidence of Peeves’s water balloons from their robes.

Harry followed Draco’s gaze, and checked over his shoulder.

“She should be back soon,” he said.

“I know that.”

“It’s almost ten. She’ll be done any minute.”

“I am, again, aware of that.”

“She’ll be fine,” he said, unconvincingly. “It’s an ego thing.”

“I dunno,” said Neville, frowning at what appeared to be a two-sentence answer to a question with ten lines of space. “Umbridge is no joke. My gran knows her— she’s a member of the Old Guard at the M-M-Ministry. The bloke before her went out in a big scandal right before she was promoted. Big Pop politician with a spotless record, everybody wants him for M-Minister one day, and then one day, he resigns. It’s odd, my gran thinks, anyway.”

“I’ve noticed your grandmother has something of an antiestablishment streak,” said Draco, turning a page.

“Oh, yeah. She marched in the Squib Riots in the s-s-sixties.”

“Augusta Longbottom? The pureblood? In the Squib Riots?”

“She set fire to a building, once,” said Neville proudly. Then, glumly: “Probably’ll do the same to me, if I don’t p-p-pass Potions.”

The hour-bell tolled ten times. Draco checked his watch, checked the door again, and jogged his knee.

“Oi. Go on,” said Ron quietly. “We’ll take care of her.”

That rankled him. Not the sentiment, which was admirable, nor even the offer, which was embarrassingly observant, and frankly made him chafe at his own apparent obviousness; but it was something about the way Ron said *care,* a sort of velvety helplessness that suggested more than it ought.

He rose from his seat.

“I’ll be back at midnight,” he said coolly. “Tell her where I am.”

Ron examined his work. “Think she knows, mate.”

“Would you still tell her?”

“I mean, sure, but she’s going to tell me off for acting like she doesn’t know it, like I’m the dummy—”

“Ronald. I’m asking you to tell her.”

Ron paused, and his voice was light. “Sure,” he said. “Whatever. I’ll let her know.”

“Thank you,” he said stiffly. And he swept out of the room, ignoring Harry’s polite and embarrassed cough.

At five past ten, he found Blaise lounging at the bottom of the Grand Staircase, buffing his nails with a silver file.

“Malfoy! I say! It’s five past. Do you expect me to wait an age?”

“You were half an hour late last week.”

“And I said I was very sorry for it.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t,” agreed Blaise, and continued not to. “Ready to go cheat some poor girls out of a good snog?”

Draco’s foot was level with his head; it would have been very easy to kick him. He sighed and rounded the banister.

“I don’t like you.”

“I haven’t given you the chance.” He sprang to his feet and sauntered along behind Draco. “I’m a perfect delight once you get to know me. Shame you won’t; Theo says I’m not to talk to you.”

When he stopped, it gave Blaise a chance to catch up with him.

“What’s Nott’s problem?” he said flatly.

“Lord Merlin. How long do you have?”

“I meant with me.”

“Personally? Nothing. But I’m still forbidden from trying to sleep with you—”

Draco closed his eyes.

“—or inviting you to the commons, or answering any questions you might ask about him. I told him he was an awful narcissist to assume

we'd be gossiping about him on prefect patrols, but then again: here we are."

"It's amusing that he thinks I would want to talk to him at all."

So Theo hadn't told the other Slytherins what he'd done. He wondered if Pansy knew. Daphne didn't, but he happened to know she wasn't talking to Theodore, and the rest of his coterie, it seemed, had been kept in the dark. There were many things about their little clade he didn't understand, and he could admit now that it was too late to really try.

There were a few levels of dungeons to scour. Torches studded fathoms of stony, dripping darkness like small solar systems, revolving in and out of sight from corridors, shielding the metallic smell of wet stone and mold with woodsmoke. The halls narrowed the deeper they plunged, as if the castle increasingly resented their intrusions the deeper they went, and tried to squeeze them out back the way they came. Staircases and doors of identical make slipped past in dizzying circles, and if Draco didn't know it, it would have been a nightmare. Blaise strolled along like each hallway was its own gala carpet, his earrings jingling cheerfully in the cold silence.

Patrol was less interesting than it sounded. They checked in empty classrooms and behind tapestries for students, knocked on bathroom doors, cast detection charms. Draco took some pleasure in throwing doors open with *Bombarda,* which on one go had scared a pair of sixth years so badly that they knocked over a desk. The Slytherin common room was ensconced behind its usual brick wall, and no one sequestered in the dozens of tiny cupboards and alcoves near the Potions room, including the locked door to the undercroft, which Draco insisted on checking, despite Blaise's whinging about efficiency and beauty sleep.

It was perhaps no surprise, then, that there were not many Slytherins out of bed, save one or two first years wandering back from the library. Points were docked, scoldings were given, and they scampered home.

In one vaulted stairwell, the ripped echoes of weeping wafted from the floor below. Draco peered down and saw a dark head bent into a small set of arms.

“Who’s there?”

The head snapped up. He came down the stairwell, and found himself staring down into the wet, red-ringed eyes of Pansy Parkinson. They regarded each other with shared dismay and embarrassment.

“My God,” she said thickly, “your sense of timing should be sold to weapons manufacturers. Hello, Draco.”

Blaise came strolling up behind Draco, and startled. “Merlin, Pansy,” he said, one hand at his throat. “Wear a bell.”

“No. Dock points and go away.”

“While you’re crying?” he inquired. “I would never go after a woman in such a delicate, emotional condition.”

“Go choke on a giant’s cock,” she said warmly, standing up, “and then piss off, bugger yourself, and die, in whichever order excites you least. I simply cannot handle you tonight, and I have better things to do than try.”

“Like soaking a hanky?”

“See, this is the part where you say, ‘Get back to bed,’ and I say, ‘you’re the ones leering at a young woman alone out of bed after hours, wait until my father hears about this,’ and then you run off to preserve your reputation.”

“Speak for yourself. My mum would be delighted to hear I’d been harassing a young woman for a change.”

“Cass would skin you.”

“Ah, yes,” said Blaise, stroking his ring finger unsubtly. “The future Mr. Parkinson. It seems I’m not the only one who’s forgotten him.”

Pansy wasn’t wearing her ring. She shoved her hand into her pocket and sneered.

“Well?” she snapped at Draco. “Aren’t you going to congratulate me?”

There were few people he could remember liking less than Cassius Warrington. He could imagine very few girls he considered deserving of Warrington’s affection, and that included Pansy, regardless of her many faults.

He had left Draco in an undercroft to bleed out with Gregory Goyle and a lead pipe. He had also said something to Hermione for which Draco still owed him a visceral debt, and interest had been accruing hastily since.

“Should I?” he said coolly.

“You should. I’m first in our year to get a ring. Holleen’s so jealous she could vomit.”

“Which I’m sure has made you quite courteous.”

“I’ve taken to leaving the diamond out on my nightstand, so she can see it when she goes to sleep,” said Pansy. “I hope it’ll motivate her to do something about those boils.”

“Charming.”

“Why should I be? I did it,” she said, with an edge in her voice. “I got it. I got the thing, I won. I have the best breeding, and that’s why I’ve got a ring and no one else has one, because none of them are as good as me—”

“Parkinson—”

“Why should I make *them* feel better about it? Boohoo, cows! I’m the best!”

Apropos of nothing, he remembered a girl with pigtail braids and a round collar like a doll’s, sitting on a tree root by a Samhain bonfire, saying awfully big things about a future she knew nothing of. He remembered a Gryffindor boy who had said them, too, and only half meant them. He hadn’t had the wisdom to wonder at the time if she only half-meant them, too.

If he could reach back and pull that boy into the future by the scruff of his collar, and hold him there to observe each other, he didn’t know that either of them could have contained their disgust.

Blaise withdrew his handkerchief and placed it on the stair beside her. She scoffed and kicked it away.

“Tell your parents you won’t do it,” said Draco flatly.

“Why in the wretched name of God would I do that?”

“Because you’re obviously miserable, and your father dotes on you. He won’t force you to marry at fourteen.”

“I’m not marrying him now, dullard. I get to graduate and everything, like a real girl; that’s what my father’s doting gets me, more time. But I can’t say no, nor would I.”

“Why not?”

“Because then he’ll go marry Maude Rosier! Obviously! Her family was after him for months, he could get them back in a heartbeat if I jilt him!”

He braced the bridge of his nose. “Refresh me. Am I meant to give a damn what happens to Maude Rosier?”

“No, but *I* am, because if he marries Maude, then *she* can’t marry Peter Selwyn.”

“And the seventh seal shall break?”

She squinted. “I understand that your abode is located under the world’s biggest, heaviest rock, but even rocks get newspapers. Maude and Peter? Me and Cassius? You already know about Crabbe and Millie.”

He hadn’t been paying attention to gossip, that summer; he’d been preoccupied trying to learn how to not die, and he was needled by the implication that he was somehow foolish for it.

“Only the official matches are public,” she said. “But I’ll tell you, because I’m very smart and I know everyone’s secrets: the Fawleys and the Goyles have been orbiting each other since July, and Gemma was seen out with Greg at two balls in August. Odin Davis is angling to nab Theo for Tracy, after all that business with the League, but — for one, good bloody luck — and for two, with Sibelius in Azkaban, Theo’s been operating as head of household, and he’s stalling.”

“No clue why,” remarked Blaise. “Tracy’s lovely. My favorite girl in our year.”

“Of course you like her, she’s a slattern.”

“You’re such a chauvinist, Pans.”

“Anyway, you see the picture. I can’t reject him, my parents will never find anybody for me.”

“There’s a fair sight more than five eligible bachelors in Britain,” he said.

“Not that qualify,” she said, frowning. “You’re practically the only free agent left, and my parents know better than to try you, after what happened with the Greengrasses.”

Draco felt a headache kick up in the overtaxed quadrant of his brain responsible for juvenilia and subterfuge. “What?”

“The offer? For Daphne? Duh? Merlin’s balls, this was literally all that happened to me in August, I can’t believe you never even heard.”

“An offer to *marry* her?”

“Rumor is that they offered Astoria,” said Blaise blandly, “because of Daph’s unfortunate condition, et cetera, but Lady Malfoy said a six year engagement was too long, so then they *did* come back with Daphne, but Lady M said they should have led with the older, because if nothing was wrong they would’ve offered her first. Which put paid to *that.* Silly twits, trying to pull one over on a Black — but of course, the Fawleys heard the Greengrasses had gone for it, so they threw in their older girl—”

“Didn’t even get an answer, though. Small wonder. Irena’s a lesbian.”

“Allegedly.”

“Allegedly, yes.”

“I’m not marrying an eleven-year-old,” said Draco, with rare passion. “Which was not a sentence I imagined I’d have to utter when I woke up this morning, so thank you both, sincerely, for the occasion.”

“You’re welcome,” said Blaise. He turned to Pansy. “Here’s one thing I never understood. Why not Theodore?”

“For Astoria? Not uninteresting. It’d suit, and it’d keep Daphne in the fold, but the issue the Greengrasses are having with Tori is it’ll be an age until she graduates, and with everything that’s happening, no one wants to wait—”

“For you, silly bird.”

“Lord! I don’t expect you to understand why *that’s* a horrible idea,” she said, “since you don’t have a brother. And neither do I. Which is

a good thing, because if I had one, I'd still love Teddy more." She folded her jumper over her arm primly. "Also, just to shut you up: my father asked. Teddy said no."

"Really? I daresay he's off the girls, then. I always said, if it wasn't you or Greengrass, it wouldn't be anybody."

"Don't get excited. He's not your type."

"Scottish?"

"Real," she said coldly. She drew herself up, a motion Draco had seen Narcissa perform half a million times. "A grown-up, serious, real boy, with real duties and real problems. What would you do with a boy like that who needs you? What would you want with it? You, with your toys and your chocolates? He'd eat you up just by having you. You wouldn't survive Theo's love, you silly little man, you'd shrivel up like a fig in the sun."

The hall rang with her echo. Her shoulders heaved.

Blaise, impassive, said only: "I resent *little,* rather," and no more.

Fawley and Greengrass were Twenty-Eight families. So were Rosier and Selwyn. Two weddings like that in a generation would have been a spectacle. Four, five, even six — even their parents' generation hadn't been so closely tied, and theirs had seen two Blacks married to a Malfoy and a Lestrange.

"It's too early," said Draco.

"I beg your pardon?"

"For all of this. It's too early."

"Did you expect it to wait for you?" said Pansy, dripping frost. "I'm sorry you don't feel prepared. I assure you, the rest of us don't either, and some of us have much heavier crosses to bear."

She hopped down the stairs and sank into the shade of the dungeons, the torchlight slipping away from her like a diver winnowing into the deeps.

When he returned to the common room, Hermione wasn't there.

Ron and Harry remained at their posts by the fireplace, and when they saw him come in, he didn't blame them for their expressions of dismay. He expected that his own face looked the same.

"She isn't—"

"No," said Ron. "We thought you might — if you ran into her, or something—"

"No."

"Oh."

"Yes," he said. Then: "Detentions run late."

"Of course they do," Ron said hastily.

Draco requisitioned his preferred armchair from a quaking first year, and pretended to read.

The pearls of *Alchemy* magazine failed to distract him. Across the common room, doors seemed to creak every minute with new groups of stragglers, laughing their way up to the dorms or darting to the bathrooms, tactlessly existing and filling the common room with botherations, and distracting him from the stimulative properties of chimera hair. It was at least another half-hour before the portrait-door moved at all.

"Excuse me, Colin."

She sounded tired. He looked up.

Hermione stumbled in from the portrait hole and leaned against the wall, her hands pressed behind her back. Her expression was bleak and pensive.

He stood up. The magazine slipped to the floor, forgotten.

“Granger.”

She winced. “Hello,” she said dully. “You’re up late.”

“I had rounds.”

“Oh, yes. How was that? I had mine with Ernie yesterday, it was a bit boring. He’s quite interested in inheritance law, though, you might talk to him about… about that, sometime, I told him you…”

She trailed off and bit on her cheek, eyes slipping into the distance. He felt oddly on-edge.

“What is it?”

“What’s what?”

“You know what—”

Ron craned his neck. “Hey, there she comes!” he called cheerfully. “Welcome to the club, bigmouth! Detention Crew! How’s it feel to earn the stripes?”

Hermione jerked her head and made a shuddering, furious sound, like tearing parchment. Ron broke off, shooting an alarmed look at Draco. Draco sidestepped him, crossing around the sofa to approach her.

“Granger—”

“Don’t— sorry. Please don’t. Just give me— I need a moment—”

“What happened? I thought it was a detention.”

“It was,” she said thickly, “certainly a detention. That is — that much is beyond question.”

“Granger, if you don’t explain yourself, I’m going to start making assumptions.”

He tried not to sound affected. It was probably not successful, because she tipped her head back to look at him, and a wave of hollow tiredness washed the distress out of her face. She flicked back her right sleeve.

“Assume away,” she said dully, and lifted her fist.

A thick row of cabled scarring split the skin of her hand, still shiny and brittle and fresh. Blood clotted in black lumps on the corners of each jagged carving. It looked like someone had taken a paper cutter to her skin, and used it to carve the words: I WILL NOT TELL LIES.

A hundred years passed. From far away he heard someone talking to him. It seemed to be increasing in volume.

The start of the hundred and first found him halfway out the portrait-hole, being hauled back by Harry’s steadfast grip on his robes.

“Unhand me.”

“Nope,” said Harry grimly.

“Unhand me now.”

“It’s ‘please,’ actually, but that’s still a nope.”

His wand was in his hand; he didn’t remember that.

“Release me, or you will be made to.”

“Very scary. Are you done?”

He wrenched his arm free and stood in the portrait-door, breathing deeply and carefully. When he recovered his ability to see, he found Harry glowering at him.

“Are you?” he snapped. “Because if you are, then get down here. We’ve a situation.”

Hermione was cradling her hand to her chest, watching him quietly. Her eyes were dark and unreadable. Ron looked sick. The common room had become a silent theater of horrified witnesses.

He stepped down. Harry exhaled in relief and hauled the portrait door shut.

“Give it here.”

Hermione twitched. “What?”

“Give it here,” Draco said calmly, and held out his hand. She extended it slowly, visibly wincing when she caught sight of the scars.

He took her wrist and settled the tip of his wand against her skin. *“Episkey.”*

“It won’t—”

The skin knit together, the scar shrinking into a line of glistening pink. A heartbeat later, the scars reemerged, splitting open the frail skin as if drawn by an invisible blade. She winced.

“It’s enchanted,” she said. “It won’t heal. I did try.”

“It’s… permanent.”

“I don’t think so. It’s better than it was an hour ago. My theory — one of them — is that it’s resistant to magical healing, so the student… remembers.”

Her professor had ripped open the back of her hand, and she had *theories* . Plural.

“The Hospital Wing—”

“Is closed,” said Hermione, “and I’m not going to wake up Madam Pomfrey for this. I don’t — I didn’t want anyone to see it, you see.”

“I don’t give a damn if she sees it or not.”

“Well, I do! And it’s my hand!”

“I can get some aloe,” Neville ventured meekly. “Lavender has some. I can borrow it.”

“Aloe’s for burns. Good thought, though. She needs muggle stitches,” said Harry. He radiated the calm, grave focus that came from seeing an awful thing he was used to. “D’you have rubbing alcohol?”

“I do,” croaked Lavender, rising from her armchair on trembling legs. “We — we use it to take off nail polish.”

“That’ll do. Katie, can I borrow one of your piercing needles? And sterilize it.”

“Yeah. Sec.”

“Get Hermione’s sewing kit, while you’re at it. Just need some of the thread. Not as good as sutures, but it’ll keep for a bit.”

“You can do stitches?” said Hermione, with understandable wariness.

“Sure I can,” said Harry. “The Dursleys have me do the mending. Nev?”

They hurried off to the dorms. Their footsteps crested and faded at the top of the stairs.

“Thanks,” said Hermione crisply, and made to take her hand back. Draco didn’t give it to her.

“Did she do it herself?”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” she croaked. Her eyes were faintly red, her nose flush, the rest pallored with exhaustion. No tears, though; she’d have cried alone, if she could.

There was nothing good enough that he could do. That was the problem. He wasn’t capable of anything as evil as she deserved, and he wasn’t good enough not to want to be. So he was useless. And she was bleeding. Which put a prong of fear deeper than he had expected, because it was a failure of an order he hadn’t expected.

He couldn’t fight. He didn’t want to fight. But he couldn’t save her, either, which meant he was good for nothing, of use to no one; he was hardly even a Malfoy, if he had no protection to offer her when she was bleeding. If he couldn’t stop it. He had walked into this castle with two goals for that year, and they were to stay alive and keep her out of danger, and he’d failed on the second before the first week was out. But then, he couldn’t save Harry in the Third Task, and so he had no idea what laughable mockery of confidence had made him imagine he could save her.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said sharply. “It’s… it’s quite obviously only one person’s fault, and it’s not… oh, hell.”

She ground her free hand into her eyes and gave a little laugh. “That,” she said, “will teach *me* to get detention.”

They were funny words, delivered with a touch of humor, but she was angry. She was angrier than he’d ever seen her, and he’d seen her as angry as he thought it was possible for a human being to be.

“We’ll tell Dumbledore,” said Ron hoarsely. “We’ll get him involved. He’ll do something.”

“No, he won’t.” Hermione was calm again. “He doesn’t have the power. That’s what the vote at the Ministry meant, by the way. I looked it up. The Hogwarts Special Inquisitor isn’t a faculty position, it’s a Ministry appointment. She’s a professor by courtesy, but even if he fired her, she’d still have a position at the school. That’s how he got them to drop the charges against Harry.” Her tone was wretchedly clinical.

Umbridge was a Ministry operative. Irremovable. Permanent. The Ministry’s will made manifest, sitting there on her hand, staining her fingers red.

“So — so we’ll talk to the Ministry, we’ll squeal—”

“Nobody at the Ministry cares if some muggle-born has a bit of odd scarring,” she said harshly. “Even if they did, I can’t prove she did anything. Who’s going to believe me? I don’t count.”

One day, it’ll be me. She’d said that, once.

He still had his wand. He pressed his thumb flat on the grip and it coursed gently up his fingers, the magic, pleading to be used, helpless to a problem that he knew very well it couldn’t solve.

“Then— then— I mean, we’ll do something, I’ll write my parents—”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. Hermione’s wrist was a warm weight on his palm and he closed his fingers around it, drawing a flush to the skin. “They couldn’t change anything.”

“We can’t do *nothing!”*

“I didn’t say that.”

“Here,” said Harry, hurrying down with Neville, whose arms were full of bandages and tiny pots. He sprawled them out on the table and

sat down. “First thing, you want to get it clean, so you don’t catch anything — I know you know that,” he added, “but Madam Pomfrey always talks while she’s doing things — says it calms people down. I dunno if it works on you—”

“Respectfully, I can’t think of much that would calm me down right now, Harry.”

“Got it. This is going to hurt, by the way,” said Harry evenly, and then, with the firm, unapologetic force of someone who knew it was crueler to be slow, he swept the cotton pad over her scars.

“Ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow!”

“There you go,” he said, handing off the pad to Neville. “Good job.”

“Don’t patronize me!”

“I’m not. Katie?”

He threaded the needle with a neat flick of a seeker’s hand, then carefully pinched the skin of her hand together. “Pomfrey gives us a sticker, sometimes,” he remarked, “but I don’t reckon that’s in the cards.”

Hermione made a scathing sound.

“Sorry. It’s a thing. For me. Injuries, humor. Moony says it’s inherited.”

“I thought,” she said, and she was blinking like she had an irritant in her eyes, “I thought — you know, it was pretty stupid, but I had this thought: ‘She can’t really hurt you. She’s a teacher, and you’re a student. She’s here to protect you.’ Isn’t that — *ow* — isn’t that stupid?” She winced as Harry tightened the knot. “You’d think I’d learn, wouldn’t you? Honestly. How stupid could I possibly be?”

“It’s not your fault,” said Ron.

“I *know* that.”

“I know. I was just saying,” he said. “In case it was there.”

Draco didn’t know muggle first aid. He hadn’t bothered to learn. Someone else would have. They would have known how to help her. Possibly there were several people who she should have preferred to stand at her side during this particular trial.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t one of them. But was the one holding her hand, so she was going to get the few promises he could make, for whatever they were worth.

“She’s going to regret it,” he said.

The danger was lapping at his knees, and he found — refreshingly enough — that he didn’t care. It didn’t seem real, in that particular moment, or if it did, it wasn’t half as real as the tears on her face, the blood on her hand. It was nothing, the danger, compared to that.

Her mouth twitched. She cleared her throat and swiped something glittering from her cheek. “Somehow, I suspect she’s never regretted anything in her life,” she said. “Much less hurting someone like me. If you know what I mean.”

“I don’t care.”

“Draco—”

“And the underground thing, too. The defense group. I’ll do it. I’ll help you. Whatever you want.”

Her head lifted sharply, like a startled bird. “Don’t do it because you feel sorry for me. I don’t want it to be out of pity.”

“That’s not why.”

“Fine, but if you don’t believe it’s a good idea, be honest.”

It probably wasn’t, but that didn’t matter. What mattered was a line of swollen scars running under her knuckles and the prim little smile on Umbridge’s face, like she could taste her tears, and the fact that he would have set the Defense classroom on fire with its professor locked inside it if he thought it stood a chance of undoing either one.

He knew how to keep a secret. He’d more practice in the trade of secrets than any of them. And he had watched them all walk into danger without him before — Hermione, half-drowned from the bottom of a frozen lake; Harry, vanished in a burning clearing with Viktor Krum; Ron, standing in front of a Death Eater’s curse — and he had watched the threshold of his tolerance for it sink. Fear had carved it away, inch by inch, until now it was nearly as low as the rest of them.

“It’s a good idea,” he said.

Her smile was a fleeting thing, a flash of a knife in the dark, hidden in the quick dip of her head.

When she put her free hand on his wrist and squeezed it, it was the first time she’d touched him unprompted, on purpose, since the Hogwarts Express. And held on tightly, too, trustingly, without horror or wariness. She held him like she needed him there. The relief was poignant.

He slid his hand back along her wrist until he held hers, lightly, palm to palm. If they were doing this the traditional way, he’d kiss her hand, and she’d kiss his, and it would seal a gentlemen’s agreement. If they were true adherents of the old school, they would slit their hands and shake with them, fixing the writ in blood.

She was anything but traditional, however, and he didn’t like audiences.

So he smoothed some blood from her knuckle with his thumb. If she noticed, she didn’t say anything.

The fire snapped. There were murmurs in the common room, murmurs from the stairs, and the walls of the castle, their ancient bones of wood and marble, groaned as if in horror at the things being done inside their arms. Outside, the wind howled, and howled, and howled.

-Bit later than usual! Sorry, all. Ran around all day and just when I got home, Wi-Fi went out. Technically, it's still Friday in America, so I'm electing to count this as on-time.

-"But if the Squib Riots took place in the 60’s wouldn’t Frank be like five when his mom—" Yes? And? Give him a helmet and one of those toddler leashes, he’ll be fine.

-The reception to the last chapter, as usual, has blown my socks off, boarded them on a space shuttle, and rocketed them into a neighboring solar system. I am de-socked. I am sockless. I am rendered unsocked by you, and your generosity, and your unfailing kindness. I would answer every one if I could. Instead I will offer to you a pair of the warmest, thickest, nicest socks, like Albus Dumbledore sees in the Mirror of Erised.

-Pansy is incredulous that Draco isn't subscribed to whatever the pureblood version of deuxmoi is. Blaise, meanwhile, lives for it.

-I've often felt the need to include this disclaimer, but especially so this chapter, considering some of the language that's getting slung around the dungeons, so here it is, once and for all: THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY PANSY PARKINSON ARE HER OWN AND DO NOT REPRESENT THE OPINIONS OF THE AUTHOR, GREENTEACUP, THEIR PARENT COMPANIES OR RESPECTIVE AFFILIATES.

-Also known as: 1995, though better than most that came before it, was still not the nicest year to be a teenage girl, no matter what House you were in.

-Next chapter: "The Hogwarts Resistance." Featuring: a Hogsmeade trip, a fancy piece of jewelry, and a cameo by Marietta Edgecombe.

The Hogwarts Resistance

Chapter 63: The Hogwarts Resistance

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

It was a bright cold day in Hogsmeade, and there were patrolmen at the gates.

Sometimes they would call one of the students aside and ask for a permission slip, or to see their wand; other times they would stand there with dull beefeater stares, eyes lidded under the flat brim of a patrolmen's hat, as if they could walk through over you without turning their head.

Their presence quelled the natural chatter of students approaching their first Hogsmeade visit. Even the third years dropped their voices to a whisper, and through the gates, the streets were thinner than usual, students electing not to do their usual noisy loitering where someone of the law might apprehend them. It looked as though someone had taken an eraser and blotted out odd parts of a normal Hogsmeade visit: not all of it, and nothing in particular, but perhaps a group of girls chatting here; a trace of laughter, there; a stray firework erupting from Zonko's, in violation of ordinance, or some cheerful purple-haired ruffian marking up the walls behind Madam Puddifoot's. It was an unfinished scene.

A clock tower tolled. He turned up the collar of his cloak to keep the wind from biting him, but it whipped and snapped at his ankles in recrimination. Spinning skirts of brown leaves and airbound dust rose from the cobblestone and bobbed beside them like a detritus ballet.

"How awful for Pansy," said Hermione. Her hair was twisted up in a businesslike knot that had a half-life of perhaps twenty minutes, since parts of it were already escaping in furtive strands around her

temples and neck, which fluttered in a very engaging way whenever the wind blew at her.

A length of gauze trailed from one of her woolen gloves.

She had her journal in one arm and her schoolbag in the other, and had subjected both unhappily to search by patrolmen at the gate. Harry and Ron strolled behind them at a distance, for covertness; Hermione said it was something they did in “spy movies,” and he didn’t mind the privacy, personally.

His jumper was navy blue, and his fur mantle swept the pavement behind him with an auspicious whisper, and made people sidestep out of his way. He took her arm to escort her up a tall shelf of pavement, and then he kept it, idly, on the pretense of keeping cover. The patrolmen didn’t tend to stare when they were walking together.

The patrolman on the corner even nodded at him as they passed, and he felt idly irritable. He increased their pace and drew her down an alley onto a thinner street, pressing her close enough that she was almost hidden behind his shoulder.

He was aware, however reluctantly, that he was crowding her, but she seemed too distracted to notice. She was back to touching him, now, and he was finding all sorts of ways to take advantage of it; when she leaned on his shoulder to adjust her shoe, he touched her waist, casually, not indecently, but in a way as to provide a chaste support for a dear friend as she removed a pebble from her sole. He touched her shoulder to keep her from opening a door — though that was chivalry, naturally, as was a hand offered to help up a set of steps, or assistance in removing a stray leaf from her hair.

If she noticed, then she allowed it, and did them both the courtesy of not remarking on it. She had been subdued since her detention, and no one could blame her, but if it made her less inclined to mind the limits of friendly conduct, he wouldn’t be the one to bring it up.

“Granger, I didn’t know you cared for her.”

“I don’t. I still don’t want her to marry Cassius Warrington,” she said briskly. “No woman deserves that. I’m also frankly horrified that Daphne’s parents tried to arrange your engagement without asking you first. What a nightmare. Thank God your mother said no.”

“I, also, would have said no,” he said, a mite tetchy. “To marrying Astoria Greengrass. Let's establish that.”

She paused. Her tone was light. “Could she make you?”

“My mother? No. She has the power to contract a betrothal, since I'm underage, but she wouldn't.”

“Are you sure?”

“Reasonably. Apart from any considerations of my happiness — which mothers have been known, on occasion, to harbor for their sons — she can't force me to marry someone, and if I refuse a match, it's embarrassing for everyone concerned. The bride's humiliated, her family's slighted, my mother looks weak, and I look rakish. There's no reason to put us in that position.”

“Does she know that?”

“Know what?”

“That you'd refuse,” she said, frowning.

As they passed Zonko’s, something from inside gave a maniacal cackle, and a firework popped. He recalled his mother's face when Hermione had stepped through the Manor door; her slow, costumed entrance from the grand stair.

“I think she suspects,” he said vaguely. “Anyway. Can you imagine it? The Greengrass-Malfoys of Wiltshire?”

She glowered.

“A joke, dear.”

“That’s revolting. You’re both far too young. And you’d be a terrible husband for her.”

“Would I?”

“Yes. You’d irritate her.”

“I don’t think Daphne finds me irritating.”

“And that’s just one more reason it wouldn’t work. At least *one* partner should be able to see past their own nose.”

“Maybe I ought to have you draw up a candidate list. Happen to know any nice girls, Granger?”

Points of color appeared in her cheeks. “None that deserve what you're suggesting. Are we close, by the way?” she said briskly, lifting her head. “We’re late.”

“No, *you’re* late. I’m arriving precisely when I said I would, which is when I feel like it.”

“Pithy,” she said. “Cute. Some of us, however, said we would be there at one o’clock.”

“Then you’re fine. Daphne will assume that means one-thirty, and Neville’s probably still trying to find his socks.”

He turned into a side street that shambled up to a battered inn. Under a facade of soiled moss and splintering wood, pockmarked with the holes in the plaster where something had taken a bite out of it, there crouched a dingy wooden building with windows black from grime. It was crowned with a rusty hanging sign of a hog’s head. A skinny billygoat wandered about the tundra of a yard, bleating.

“This was where you wanted to meet?”

“You said you wanted discretion.”

“Ah,” she said. “Yes. Well, it has that.”

The billygoat screamed. Hermione’s mouth did something suspicious.

“I was *following instructions—”*

“No, no, it’s very good! It’s definitely good.”

“I don’t lark around places like this in my free time! I have a mansion! I don’t slum it for kicks—”

“I mean, does it smell? Yes, it does. I feel that we have reached a point, as friends, where we can be honest with each other that some buildings do, in fact, have smells. We can accept that.”

“‘—get an island for your pet kneazle’ rich, you understand, not just tea at the Ritz and a flashy watch—”

“Though I’m hesitant to mention it, if you really haven’t noticed. I have to assume you weren’t aware.”

“—could clear the dining room at the Salazar Club and tell the waiters to have a ballet choreographed before I get there — I don’t know if you actually understand how rich I am, is my point, because otherwise you wouldn’t be implying that it’s *my* fault we’re here. Would you like me to do something impressive? Is that what you’d like?”

“Oh, no! I’m very impressed.”

“Really.”

“Mmhm.”

He glared at her. She was officially losing the battle against a smile. A humiliating defeat for both of them.

“I’m getting you a house for Christmas.”

He stalked up the path.

She laughed, and then stopped laughing.

“Wait. What?”

The door shrieked when he swept it open, and she hurried after him.

“Don’t, though. Don’t? Don’t do that. Draco. You’re joking, aren’t you? You are joking.”

“In France,” he added, and she made the loveliest sound.

It was the same it had been last year; no one had so much as swept it since. The bar was filmed in grime, and the candle-stubs on each sticky tabletop drooled wax into grimy saucers. A certain spongy texture of the floor leant the impression of packed straw, and the stairs leading up to the second floor were rickety wood.

“Aberforth,” said Draco to the bartender, and the man peered out from behind a sheaf of white hair. His eye was electric blue, and the only bright color in the room. “We’re going up.”

“There’s more of you?”

“Only a few.”

The barman grunted. “Password?”

“Trois Glorieuses.”

Harry came in behind them, hastily stuffing the Invisibility Cloak back into his bag. Ron whistled quietly at the state of the place.

“They’re with us,” Hermione added.

“On you go, then,” grunted Aberforth, jerking his head at the stairs. “You paid for it. Don’t need my invitation.”

He had. That was the worst part, too.

“No trouble getting into Hogsmeade, was there?” Hermione murmured to Harry. They climbed the staircase and crested onto a tiny landing with a single door. Draco checked that the hallway was clear. “Did you use the Notice-Me-Not, like I told you? And Muffliato? And the Cloak?”

“Yeah, yeah, we were careful.”

“We’re not doing anything illegal,” muttered Ron. “It’s a study club, not a guerrilla group.”

“I’d rather not find out where Umbridge thinks the line is.”

Draco opened the door and nearly jumped out of his skin.

“HEY! IT’S MALFOY!”

The room had twice more people than chairs, and twice as many chairs as it could fit. Neville and Daphne were there, in pride of place at the weathered old longtable, but so was the rest of the bloody castle: Ginny, Dean, Seamus, Lavender, Parvati and Padma, Fred and George and Lee Jordan, Cho and Anthony Goldstein and some Ravenclaws he didn’t even know, Katie, Angelina, Colin Creevey, Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, and some more Hufflepuffs from the quidditch team, including — wonder of wonders — Cedric Diggory, one of the few seventh years present, who stood at the back of the room with his arms folded, like a presiding king. He smiled and winked.

Half of them chorused variations on *hello.* The other half stared like they expected him to turn into a bat.

He turned to Hermione and lifted a finger. She raised an eyebrow.

He corrected himself, and then turned to Harry.

“Potter.”

“Okay, right, okay,” gasped Harry, squeezing through the door, “so, I have a good reason for this. Really.”

“How many people did you bloody tell?”

“And where’d you find the time?” marveled Ron.

“Oh, it isn’t his fault, really,” sighed Luna Lovegood. Perched in the window, she wore a large headpiece in the shape of an egret, which occasionally rustled its wings. “Harry was stung by a wrackspurt at the end of last year, and it makes you incredibly popular. People are drawn to it subconsciously.”

Ron hooted with glee.

“Thank you, Luna,” Hermione said, in tones of: *for nothing* . “Harry, do I even need to say…?”

“I only *technically* told Cho,” said Harry defensively. Cho had hurried over to kiss his cheek, but was now somewhat hiding behind his shoulder, not unreasonably, considering how Hermione was glaring at both of them.

“And I only told Marietta,” she said hastily, “but I guess she must’ve told Luna, too.”

“And I told Padma,” agreed Luna, “who told Parvati, who told Lavender, and she told Seamus, who told Dean and Ginny—”

“Who told Colin,” said Dean, wincing, “who told Justin—”

“Who told Susan, who told Leanne, who told Hannah, who told Ernie—”

“Who told Cedric,” added Cedric, grinning mischievously. Ernie blushed and muttered something about duress.

“—and Terry, and Sheila, and Mandy, and Michael—”

“Seriously, Abbott?”

“I thought it was a study group,” wailed Hannah. “She said Hermione Granger was giving a tutorial! I assumed we’d be doing homework!”

“—who told Zacharias,” said Luna, and heaved a great breath, “but I don’t know the Gryffindors, I suppose you’re all here on invitation.”

“Blimey,” remarked Ginny. “Good memory.”

“Yes, rather,” she agreed. “I can remember my mother’s womb.”

“No, you *can’t,”* Hermione said crossly.

“Oi!” Ron clapped his hands. “We’re all here now, and we can’t take it back to the store, so we might as well try it on, right?”

“This was supposed to be a discreet group,” Hermione whispered.

“You invited Neville,” muttered Draco. “How much discretion did you expect?”

“Let me introduce everybody,” said Cho quickly. “This is Marietta Edgecombe, my best friend, she’s really wonderful; and that’s Luna Lovegood, and this is Anthony, Terry, Michael— everyone, this is Harry, my boyfriend. Say hello.”

“Hello, Harry-my-boyfriend,” said Michael.

“Hiiiiiii, Harry,” crooned Terry. Harry seemed to be searching for a rock to crawl under and die with.

Colin wrestled to the front of the crowd, holding his camera. A press badge around his neck read *OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPHER, HOGWARTS ENQUIRER.* He appeared to have made it himself.

“Picture, Harry?” he chirped.

“No, thanks, Colin.”

He saluted, replaced his lens cap, and turned to address the second year next to him. It was Dennis — who must have snuck out of the castle, since second years weren't allowed in Hogsmeade. "No pictures," he said sternly, and Dennis dutifully tucked a disposable camera back into his robes.

"Seamus," said Ron. The many-piercéd boy was leaning against the back wall with Dean. He jerked his chin.

"Sup, Weasley."

"Thought you didn't believe Harry, mate," said Ron coolly.

"A'might," said Seamus, indifferently. "Or a'might not. What's it to you? But if you're gonna tell the English government to go fuck itself, you're pure mad if you think I'm not with you."

Harry blinked.

"Tell it to… what?"

"That's what this is, isn't it?" said Katie. "We're here to fight Umbridge. It's the Hogwarts resistance."

There was a lull while Harry gathered himself. The eyes of the crowd accused him expectantly.

"No," he said weakly. "It's just a club. We're trying to learn how to defend ourselves. Against the Dark Arts."

"She *is* the Dark Arts, mate," cried Lee Jordan. "She's the institution! She's *the man!"*

A lot of the sixth and seventh years seemed to find this tremendously rousing, and gave a sort of disorganized cheer.

"No — well, I guess, but — we're not here to pick fights. I don't know how we'd even — the point is, we're just practicing."

“For what?” said Marietta nervously. “If not her, though? What’s worse than she is?”

“What’s worse than her?” He raised his hands, slightly agitated. “I dunno — if *Voldemort* comes knocking—”

“OI!”

“Don’t *say* it—”

The room was filled with loud objections. Draco shifted his weight onto one foot and gave Harry a hard look.

Hermione waved her arms, trying to reel in the crowd.

“Excuse me! Excuse me! Order, please! I’ll go ahead and speak for Harry, since it was, er, my idea — I’m Hermione Granger, I’m a Gryffindor — I’m a Gryffindor prefect—”

The chatter, if anything, grew louder.

“We can answer your questions,” she cried, “sorry — if you could just be quiet—”

Her voice vanished under the din.

Draco was drawing his wand for *Silencio* when Ron hauled Colin’s chair out from under him, jumped up on it, and banged his fist on the ceiling.

“SHUT UP!” he roared.

It was swiftly done. Someone at the back of the room sniffled.

Ron gestured at Hermione, and hopped down.

Hermione cleared her throat.

“Thank you, Ron,” she said. “So — yes. We’re here to learn Defense Against the Dark Arts, on the understanding that we *will* need to use them at some point. I’ll let Harry explain the story behind that, but if you’re here then you probably already know it, and if you believe him and you still want to join, then you can sign this piece of paper.” She held up a scroll of blank parchment. “If you don’t, then you can leave, and none of us will say we saw you here today. But if you sign, you can’t say a *word* about it to anyone who wasn’t in this room. That’s important. Think of this like a — a magical non-disclosure agreement.”

One of Cho’s friends raised her hand. Hermione pointed at her.

“What happens if we do?” she said. “Tell?”

“Good question,” said Hermione pleasantly. “Anyone else?”

The mild ripple of impression and old-fashioned fear was, alas, incredibly attractive. He started to think about her smirk and the various things one could do with it, and had to stop it.

“Hannah, yes.”

“D’you think he’s back, then?” she said in a small voice. “V— You-Know-Who?”

Hermione hesitated.

“Yes. He killed Viktor.”

Susurration of doubt and fear, wrestling for conviction of the room. Hermione lifted her voice.

“He’s a man,” she said calmly. “He’s only a man. He was killed once, and they’ll kill him again. In the meantime, we ought to all try and do our part.”

He hated to hear her talk that way, as if she was joining an army.

It was one thing to fight Dolores Umbridge, up-jumped bureaucrat, and the Hogwarts administration. But they weren't joining the Order. They weren't putting themselves in the Dark Lord's path. Neither Hermione nor anyone in the room — with the possible exception of Harry — could know what that would bring, and a gorge rose in his throat at the idea of them finding out.

He lacked the means to show them that to *live* meant you had to *run.* Let the people stronger and older and wiser raise their wands in defense of the good fight. Let them stand in the line of fire, their faces to the foe, and have poems read at their funerals. He'd take his friends alive.

He needed Hermione, in particular, alive. And she was standing there with her feet apart, fists at her sides, aglow with terrible purpose, as if she intended to make him fight tooth and nail for it.

"Yes, Ernie."

"What's wrong with your hand?" he said brusquely.

Her face shuttered. She glanced at Draco, who shook his head — *what right has he to know?* — but she replied, with steely candor: "Umbridge."

"She *hurt* you?" cried Cho.

"Yes, she—"

"But she's a teacher!"

"What did she do?"

"Did she cut you herself?"

"Did you tell McGonagall?"

"Did you tell *Dumbledore?"*

“Is it because you’re—”

The din crested, teetering on the knife-edge of panic.

“Would you all *shut up,”* snapped Hermione.

The room did. Ron, who had been opening his mouth for a reprise, peered down in impressment. Draco’s mouth curved.

“Yes,” she said thinly, “she hurt me. Yes, it was bad. I did tell McGonagall, and she was angry, and... said she would speak to Dumbledore about it, but... she's not optimistic. She said Umbridge isn't properly a school employee, you see, and even if they fired her, she would still be around — only angrier, and with less to do, and — there's politics involved. Anyway, I’m not going to talk about it, except to say that I would try to avoid detentions.”

Colin swallowed and sat up straighter.

“I don’t know what she’ll do if she catches us at this, so I’m not going to find out. This club is going to be a place for us to help each other learn, and figure things out, and not… have to worry about being punished. Because we’re classmates. We’ve been here for five years — longer, some of us — and we’ve got to count on that. Each other. If anything.”

She paused, and seemed somewhat surprised that everyone was still listening to her. Her face turned the golden pink of tea roses. “So,” she said, “yes. Well. Thank you for that, and, er. Sorry for snapping.”

Ginny whooped and applauded. Several of the others broke into confused applause, as well, including Ernie Macmillan, who stood up and started whipping his hands together like she’d announced a run for Minister.

Hermione reddened at once from rose to tomato and gestured, flailing, at Harry. “Now-Harry-tell-them-about-You-Know-Who!” she

blurted, and sat down next to Ginny. Ron hunkered down beside her, thumping her shoulder, and Ginny leaned over to elbow her gleefully. She received celebration with bemused embarrassment.

Nervously, with occasional glances at Hermione for support, Harry had started to talk. The tale of the Third Task cast a hushed pall over the room, and the cheer of Hermione's exhortation dwindled away, replaced by grave fascination. Even Luna Lovegood had cast off her dreamy stupor, and was staring at Harry intensely, a faint line growing between her eyebrows.

Daphne leaned over to Draco. "How rousing," she whispered. "I feel inspired to go burn a brassiere or something. Hoorah."

"You've gone native."

"Ecstatically. I love a good zeitgeist."

"There's a saying, you know, about your friends jumping off bridges."

She clutched her chest. "Why? You haven't jumped off any bridges without me, have you?"

He rolled his eyes. She chortled to herself and patted his arm.

Ron was leaning over to say something to Hermione, speaking close in her ear. She tilted her head at him, frowned, and nodded, turning to speak back into his. They were rather cozy.

He tapped his foot. She had functional hearing. He didn't need to tongue her ear.

Ron said something that made her break into a giggle, touching the back of her hand to her mouth.

Draco tapped his foot faster.

Hermione rolled her shoulders out of her peacoat, wriggling, and Ron reached over to help tug her out of it, his hands brushing her

shoulders, her back, helping tug a bit of her hair out of the buttons. There was no reason for him to be touching her hair. There was no reason for anyone, *ever,* at all, to be touching her hair, as if they had any right to it.

Draco felt cold and hot at once, uncomfortably caught between extremes, skin prickling. At the bottom of his stomach there was an oily pool of dislike and it was growing in temperature. He had an idea of going over and sitting down next to her, and making her look at him. And he could lean in and put his mouth to her ear, and help her with her jacket, and sit with his hand somewhere on her chair, and if anyone looked over at her or her hair or the clever curl of her mouth, they would understand that those things weren't for them. They weren't *for* anyone. But if they were going to be *for* anyone, it wouldn't be them.

Hermione turned to say something to Ron again, touching his arm to get his attention, and Ron leaned his head in without taking his eyes from Harry. They were chatting in the quiet shorthand of people who knew each other too well to bother with full sentences, a half-language of grunts and nods and glances at the front of the room, as if they were old partners going in on a venture, and the venture was Harry.

Ron fancied her. This had struck him over and over again, and yet he was surprised each time. As if it was any particular surprise that Ron would fancy her, spending as much time with her as he did; as if he could help it, seeing her stumble down the girls' stairs every morning with her useless hairties and her horribly abused bookbag, the big wild breathless smiles, the way she arched her neck back over the chairs when she stretched, the perfect tie knots, the tiny ridge of scars from biting her bottom lip— it wasn't to be helped. Not when Hermione was sitting there with her legs crossed, giving quiet little laughs that tugged at him like she held a cord that ran right into his stomach.

Her laugh could make a very smart man want to do stupid things, like walk over and tip back her chair and ruin a friendship.

His mouth tasted bitter and metallic, and he held his tongue between his teeth to keep it still.

No one would be surprised if she fancied Ron, either. They were a matched set: Harry's girl and Harry's boy, brains and brawn, bookworm and man-about-castle. It fit. They'd match.

And she'd get the Burrow, too. That was a part of it. The Weasleys were a large, cheerful, friendly family already half in love with her by headcount, and she could slot right into it, as she'd already done once, and never worry if Molly Weasley approved of her, or if an errant grandparent would denigrate her from behind a tapestry. It would be a magical home, just what she'd wanted. It would enfold her seamlessly and love her passionately, and she would deserve it.

He was acutely, painfully unhappy, so much that it startled him to realize that he could feel this bad when he'd been fine only a moment ago. Nothing had *happened* except that he'd looked over and thought about her being in love with Ron, and then his heart had started to cannibalize itself.

Harry finished his story, fidgeted in silence for a moment — wincing, as if preparing for a hit — and then was almost bowled over by a tide of applause.

"What," said Harry weakly, "so you all — believe me, and everything? Because I know the *Prophet* hasn't, it hasn't said the most — flattering things—"

Cedric stood up.

"I believe you," he said. He held the attention of the room effortlessly, and when he spoke, even the sallow Hufflepuff pricked up his ears. "I wasn't there," he continued, "but I know you're not a liar. You're a good bloke, and Dumbledore trusts you. If you tell me that Voldemort's back, why wouldn't I think it's true?"

"Yeah, but I — Cedric, hang on — aren't you Head Boy?"

Fred and George gave a hiss.

“Sure. Supposed to set an example for the younger students, aren’t I?” Cedric smiled the smile that had stolen, somewhat uselessly, a hundred girls’ hearts. “So here I am.”

Fred and George stopped hissing, though they remained wary.

“Right,” said Hermione, relieved. “On to scheduling! I drew up a chart of the week, and I’d like everyone to fill in where they’re busy and where they’re free, so we can optimize for when the most people are open— there’s at least one, two, three quidditch practices we’ll have to negotiate, so please only mark yourself busy if it’s an unavoidable commitment, as opposed to something you’d prefer to do! Mealtimes *are* on the table, so be advised that you may have to skip lunch—”

She unfurled the chart on the table and handed out quills, gesturing with the inspired fervor of an artist at her many beautiful color-coded charts. She was having the time of her life.

She was lovely. Ridiculous, also. The parts of his brain responsible for compartmentalization were all on fire.

“Our first meeting will be sometime in late October. If your name’s on the list, we’ll make sure you hear about it — and *don’t* write, we’ll come and find you. The Ministry watches owl post, you never know what they’ll pick up.”

The crowd congregated to add the last signatures. Hermione folded up the list of names and the schedule and placed both into the back of her journal, which she tucked under her arm.

“Thank you all,” she said quietly. “I think this is going to be really, really good. I honestly do.”

Ginny hooted and clapped. The group followed her example, with varying enthusiasm. Lavender rolled her eyes, but she’d signed her name, too.

“Oh,” Hermione exclaimed. “Well. Thanks, I guess. For that. Er, you can leave now. Please. Thanks.”

With titters, everyone clambered to their feet and filed out. “Bang-on, Madam Chairwoman,” said Ginny, clapping her on the shoulder.

They marched out into the cold pale sunshine, and the stream of students spilled out in many winnowing groups across the cobble. Owls rustled overhead, and the day was late, but there was a pleasure in the sort of hush over the street now — a sense of something contained, a captured secret, a silence taken by choice, not held by force.

Cho lingered behind. She laced her arm through Harry’s, who startled, and held his elbow out awkwardly, as if he had never seen anyone walk with a lady before. Draco despaired of him.

“That was really well done, Harry! You’re a great storyteller.”

“Er, thanks.”

“I mean, the part where you fought the spiders in the Maze? That spell was really brilliant, can you show me how to do that?”

“It wasn’t… I mean, Hermione taught me how to do most of the magic in the Triwizard Tournament,” he said, with a silent appeal for help, but Hermione folded her arms, amused. “She’s the brilliant one. I just do what she tells me.”

“And you drilled for it with the bloody wall, did you?”

“And Draco throws chairs at me, sometimes,” he amended.

Disclaimers notwithstanding, Cho whipped up an excited torrent of praise on their way down the hillside; apparently Harry's speech had done a number. Harry himself continued his transformation into a turtle. Draco would have considered it wildly outside of his business to say so, but he didn’t think that Harry was much enjoying it, and he

wondered frankly whether it was giving Cho any joy to say so, either — it read as a little nervous, as if she was being graded on her ability to recite Harry's accomplishments in chronological order.

At one point, Cho remarked on the number of girls who had showed up to the meeting, and Hermione gave a derisive snort.

"Most of them were younger than me," said Harry, strangled. "And I have a girlfriend."

"I don't see what difference that makes," Hermione said. "You play quidditch and you spent last year all over the papers. You do have a reputation."

"Half the school thinks I'm a lying murderer!"

"Reckon that does it, for some of them," said Ron, slinging an arm around his shoulder, though he appeared not to notice Cho's look of distress. "It's the James Dean thing. Look at you, with the hair and the inscrutable sadness. Beat 'em off with a stick."

"I'm not James Dean!" Then, passionately: "I am not *inscrutably sad!"*

"Quite the inscrutable thing to say," murmured Daphne. "If you ask me."

"Oh, yeah. Can't scrute a knut out of this guy."

"One might even consider us… scruteless."

"Unscruted as hell," said Ron. She gave an ugly shriek of laughter, clapping a hand over her mouth. The two of them were far too pleased with their mediocre joke, and continued to snigger to themselves; Draco atoned, not for the first time, for introducing Daphne to the Weasley brand of humor.

"Scrute my ass, perhaps," said Harry entreatingly.

They were passing the Three Broomsticks, with its glimmering lights that flushed the sidewalk gold, and couples crowded together over tankards of froth in the windows. It was less full than usual, but even so, the warmth and sweet smells spilling out of its doorway were like a window into a different Hogsmeade, from last year, or the year before.

“Harry, d’you want to have a butterbeer?” Cho said.

“Oh — actually, I reckoned I might have a chat with these three—”

“They can come, too,” she said eagerly, with a glance at Marietta, who was hi “ ding behind her shoulder. Hermione snorted with unusual emphasis.

Great!” said Harry, with uncomplicated delight at how things had worked out for him. “Ginny?”

Ginny, who had been uncharacteristically quiet for the journey down the hill, glanced over her shoulder and gave a small smile. “Nah,” she said. “Got a date.”

There was a rousing show of solidarity from the female contingent. Cho gave the whistling firework-screech that girls sometimes used to greet good news or perhaps a very small dog. Luna gasped: “Oh, *that’s* why your aura’s all yellow.”

“Who is it?” demanded Ron — not angry so much as bemused, like someone had announced the nuptials of their pet gerbil.

“Michael Corner.”

“Michael?” Cho cried. “Oh, he’s lovely! I hope you like him.”

“I, er… hope so too.”

“Handsome,” offered Marietta.

“It’s true,” agreed Daphne. “If a bit short. But then, Ginny’s ripping tall, it can’t be helped.”

It was true; like all of her clan, Ginny had popped up over the summer, and was coming into her final form as a lamppost. She was already the same height as Harry, who said, with a bit of lingering surprise: “Oh, well — have fun, then, Gin.”

“You, too, loverboy.”

There was a beat where they stared at each other with different flavors of apprehension: Ginny, apparently waiting for someone to say something, though from her expression perhaps not even she knew what it was; and Harry, regretting not knowing.

With a short nod to Cho, she took off trotting across the street, her red hair flickering like a trail of coppertips in the wind.

“She’s really cool,” announced Cho, when she was out of earshot. “I like her.”

“Yeah, she’s a mate,” said Harry. “Anyway. Drinks?”

Inside the warm pub bustled and clattered, full of glasses and light. Tables suited to their party’s size were hard to come by, and though Draco was content to evict some of the third years, Harry forged on to the back of the barroom, where one group had taken off and left the detritus of their meal to stave away vultures.

The crowds obscured, until it was too late to avoid them, the Slytherins tucked in a booth across the aisle: Tracy Davis and Millicent Bulstrode, along with Goyle, Pansy, Theo, and a short, yellow-haired girl in a chair. Theo was leaning against the window, his forehead balanced on the glass, watching Millie and Goyle laugh about something with weary fondness. Pansy had her ring back on, and she was smiling with the first sincere glint of happiness he’d seen her wear all year. She reached for some of Theo’s butterbeer

and he swatted her away. Astoria giggled, wearing a white curl of froth on her lip, and Tracy dabbed it off with a handkerchief.

He felt himself on the outside of something warm and closed-off, and consulted his feelings for any tightness or misery — but it wasn't there. A residual pang, perhaps, the echo of something, but mostly there was a great weariness, as if bracing for the ordeal that might happen if they noticed him. Then again, perhaps they wouldn't. They were preoccupied with their own conversation, and he was being ushered into the booth alongside Hermione and Daphne, while Harry bobbed off with Cho to get drinks.

That possibility vanished, however, when Daphne saw them.

"Tori?" said Daphne brightly. She waded over to their table, and Draco hissed in irritation, but he stood up to follow her. "Tori! What are you doing here? First years aren't allowed in Hogsmeade!"

The question was cheerful, but there was a beat between *here* and *first,* and it was coupled with a lingering look at Millie and Tracy.

"Daph," said Theo, sitting up. "Hello. Hi. How a—"

He saw Draco appear over her shoulder, and broke off. The color washed from him like a bit of linen in rain.

Green light, and the sound of a body when it hit the floor. Always the same sound, the one-two, shoulder, then skull. Crouch had gone down fast; he'd dislocated his shoulder, not that it mattered, since he'd already been dead when he was falling.

He closed his eyes. A hard shudder started, and he suppressed it, grounding himself with a hand on his wandgrip. Panic buckled his knees. *Not here.* Not in front of everybody, not in front of Gryffindor and Slytherin and the people who needed him and the people that he did not like but still, nevertheless, could not afford to have think him weak. There were people who needed him not to be weak.

Hermione was behind him, he could feel her watching. Bright-eyed and upright and perfectly alive, and he was standing with his hand on his wand between her and the door. It was fine. He had it handled.

When she caught his eye she touched her wand, questioning, and he shook his head. But his heart rate was slowing. His brain became reacquainted with the present, and not a moment too soon.

“We showed her the tunnel by the Jenkins statue,” said Pansy. She flicked back her hair and tried for a smile, holding out her hand. “Did you see my ring, Daph? It’s horrible, isn’t it?”

“What? Oh, dreadful, just,” said Daphne, with an indifferent glance. “Makes me sick. Tori, did you get my invitation? Lavender has tea and music on Fridays, and we talk about everything, truly everything. You must come.”

Astoria shifted. “Sorry. Couldn’t make it. I’ll try next week.”

“Lovely,” said Daphne, after a beat.

“Wonderful,” said Astoria. “Grand.”

Another beat.

“Tori,” she said curiously, “have you… made friends?” She cocked her head at Millicent.

Millie curled her lip. “What’s it to you?”

“Well,” she said, “I’d just be surprised — seeing as you didn’t think much of my family, before.”

Astoria was begging with every line and feature on her face for her sister to stop.

“Your family is fine,” said Millie. “Your family is perfectly respectable. Your family isn’t the reason you ditched us.”

Daphne shrilled in fine, high, terrible laughter. “I ran away because you killed my *cat,* you perfect bitch.”

“I’m the bitch? *Me?* You hit Tracy’s father because you couldn’t take a *joke,* you loon—”

“Daffy,” hissed Astoria, “Daffy, please, I’m sorry, I’ll come next week, could you just—”

“Could I just what?” said Daphne shrilly, staring at her. “Leave? You want *me* to leave?”

“No! It’s just — we’re out of seats—”

“There’s not a *seat?”* Daphne’s next laugh was even worse than her first. “You think I came over so I could sit with *them?* Millie ‘Mono’ Bulstrode and the castle broomstick?”

“OI!”

“Daph,” said Pansy, startled.

“Go sit on a skrewt. Everyone knows you’re shagging someone in Gryffindor anyway,” said Tracy, and her eyes did a mean little swivel at Draco. “That’s why you’re always staying nights.”

“I sleep in the girls’,” Daphne interrupted, breathless with anger. “And that’s — that’s some implication, for someone who’d open her legs for a house-elf if it played quidditch!”

Theo was still watching him miserably, his mouth a seam of unhappiness.

“Hey,” said Hermione coolly, appearing at Draco’s shoulder. “What’s going on? Why’s everyone shouting?”

“Oh, look,” said Tracy shrilly, waving at her, “what a surprise, rabble to the rescue! Tori, take a look — it’s the Gryffindor special, half-breeds, mudbloods, and blood tra—”

“Langlock!”

Daphne’s wand had somehow found its way into her hand. Tracy’s jaw sealed shut and stayed there, despite her shrieking and fumbling.

“I’m a Slytherin,” said Daphne, in the lull of heavy breathing that followed. “I *am* a Slytherin.”

Millie turned slowly from Daphne to Astoria, who was curled up in her chair as if she wanted to be anywhere else in the world.

“As you can probably tell,” said Millie, “there’s more than one kind.”

“Millie,” said Theo, “heel.”

Millie spat, but she shrunk down in her seat, silent.

Astoria sniffed. Daphne stared at her, then gave a incoherent cry of anger, and stormed out.

Hermione stepped out of her way. “Ten points from Slytherin,” she said, after the door jingled shut.

“What!” Astoria sat up, indignant. “We didn’t *do* anything! And Daphne’s a Slytherin, too!”

“You may not know this,” she said coolly, “but using inappropriate language for other students is against the Hogwarts handbook. Not to mention a bad idea, in general, if you want to make friends. And you should be kinder to your sister. She’s the only one at this table trying to help you.”

Tracy said something sharp and probably unfavorable, but her jaw was still welded together.

Astoria trembled. “I don’t even know you! Why don’t you just stick your nose out?” she said furiously. “Nobody asked you!”

Hermione looked down at her and said nothing. Something in her gaze cut through Astoria, who quaked, lifted her shoulders, and after a few, searing moments, dropped her eyes to the floor, a blotchy flush consuming her cheeks.

“Right,” said Hermione. “Okay. Well, I could take points for mouthing off to a prefect, but I have a sneaking suspicion you don’t really mean that, and I’m sorry to say that I can’t help you more.” She paused, and turned to Pansy. “Congratulations, by the way.”

Pansy’s face did an unpleasant thing.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “On your engagement?” she said, fluttering her left hand. “Congratulations. He’s very wealthy, and I know that was important to you.”

Pansy took a long breath, which seemed almost certain to precede something nasty, but all she said was a hollow: “Thanks, Granger.”

Hermione nodded, and turned away from the table. Draco cast Theo a cold sneer and went with her.

She was talking under her breath before they were even out of earshot. “I think she was headed for the gates,” she murmured, striding quickly to the door. “I’m not sure where, Harry always has the Map, if she’s gone back to the castle—”

“Greengrass?”

“Yes! Daphne, obviously! Keep up,” she said absently, pushing out the door. “I didn’t see where she went — do you want to split up, check the side streets? If she’s gone into a shop, we can still find her —”

He was slightly surprised.

“You’re being kind to her,” he said, as the wind started to rip and pluck at their clothes again, out on the open pavement. The bell

clattered behind them as the door to the Three Broomsticks swung shut.

“Hardly. I’m being decent. And I do care — I mean, she’s a bit condescending, but I’d be a hypocrite if that bothered me, I suppose — do you think she went up this way? She can’t be far. It’s a small village, and Daphne isn’t the type to cry in the woods.”

Draco caught her arm. She stopped, gazing curiously at him, another string of orders caught half-formed on her lips.

“Granger—”

In the cold, her cheeks and her mouth turned the same shade of floral pink, like the beads of red at the heart of a tiger lily. Her breath steamed a cloud around her face, stained golden in the late afternoon.

“I happen to like Daphne,” she said, almost stubbornly, as if rebutting a point no one had made. “She’s a nice girl. Well — not really, all the time, but I’m not, either, and — I feel bad for her. She should find better friends.”

“She has a few.”

“Yes, but she still wants her old ones. You know how that feels.”

“I recovered.”

“It’s different. You were so young. How would you feel now, if you were tossed out of Gryffindor?” she said absently. “You’d miss me—”

Like air.

“—and Harry, and Ron—”

He replied, dryly: “I’d hope I could still *talk* to you. Unless you select Potions partners by House.”

“Oh, obviously. I mean, you’re not getting rid of me, I’d hunt you down if you transferred to Durmstrang— *I’m* not doing Potions without you, I can’t stand butchering.”

“The moving dedication one feels for a prehensile carving knife.”

“A very *nice* prehensile carving knife. And you know what I mean. If I moved into Ravenclaw, it’s not like we’d stop being friends.”

“If you move into Ravenclaw, you’ll take me with you, and that’s final. You’re not leaving me with these people.”

“I’m not exposing you to Marietta,” she said darkly.

“Do I detect a concern for my virtue?”

“Wh— *no,”* she said, flustered, “I don’t care if you — and if you *did* want to, I’d — but I’d be shocked if — you never seemed to want to *do* anything, with—”

“Do what?”

“Anything non-perfunctory!” she announced, addressing a passing cloud. “Unless you did. And you haven’t said as much. Which, obviously, you don’t have to say to me, we don’t talk about that kind of thing, which is fine. You’re at liberty to — with anyone. But I can’t imagine you would find very much that’s edifying about Marietta Edgecombe. My two cents.”

“Naturally.” Then: “There hasn’t really been anything to talk about. You know.”

“Right,” she said quickly. “I know. Not that — not that I *know,* or assumed, I didn’t — but none of the Gryffindor girls said anything, and someone would’ve mentioned if you did. And people would notice if it was another House. Not that they’re snooping — which they are — but also, it’s just — noticeable. Parvati was seeing a

Hufflepuff for three months last year. She was always suggesting trips to the kitchens."

"Right."

He went silent in the rustle of the falling leaves. Suddenly, he turned.

"Do you all *talk* about me?"

The door to the Three Broomsticks jingled. Ron hurried out, wrestling his jumper back on; it was hard going, since it was on backwards, and he had his head halfway through a sleeve.

"Oi! You lot! Where we going? What happened? Where's Daphne? What's the problem?"

He popped his head back out the right way and blinked at Draco, who was still holding Hermione's arm, and standing close enough that their breath was the same mist.

He let go of her arm. She straightened her coat — his coat — with a little tug.

"Gone," said Hermione briskly. "The other girls were awful. We should just go looking and tell Harry later, I don't want to interrupt him and Cho."

Ron grinned. "Harry won't mind an evacuation," he said. "Marietta keeps asking what a dementor smells like."

"You go on, then, and let's meet at the Hogsmeade gate, ten minutes to curfew. Good?"

"Yes'm," he said, grinning, and snapped off a salute. Hermione laughed and tossed off a little salute, herself, and it was harmless.

Draco turned on his heel.

"Ten to curfew," he called.

“Yes! At the gates, remember!”

“Seeya!” chirped Ron, which was an embarrassing reminder that he hadn’t the slightest idea what was going on in Draco’s head.

The wind washed his face, ruffling his hair, and the last warmth from the Three Broomsticks whiffed out. He chose a corner at random, turned it, and then stepped with his back to the wall, taking a moment to wrestle himself back to composure.

It took three. Then he swept down the alley, Vanishing a host of rubbish that stood in his path. It reappeared about twenty feet behind him, but then, his concentration was off.

At the far street, emerging on a somewhat dingier road populated mostly by residential cottages, someone called his name. He stopped walking, but didn’t turn around. He threw a glance over his shoulder.

Theo stood on the other end of the alley, a small black silhouette inside a crevice of light. His hands were in his pockets. He was flat of mouth and dead of eye, as if he were half asleep, despite having just called his name.

Draco turned back around and kept walking.

“Draco!”

He turned right and headed in the opposite direction he’d seen Daphne go. No need to lead the wolves to her doorstep.

“Listen to me — just give it a go, would you?” Footsteps sounded on the cobble behind him, hastening when he failed to respond. “You can still hate me afterward, you prat, I promise.”

He was on the verge of responding to that when he caught himself, and sealed his mouth.

“There’s a certain element of irony to this, you realize,” Theo called, scrambling up the hill after him. They were trailing out of the commercial center, through a road of sparse houses and sparser cobble, near the place where pavement became dirt. Burnished leaves fluttered through the air like a shower of copper coins, glinting in the sun, a fortune of the cheapest order. “Me? Chasing you? Desperate for a word? I mean, how the tables turn, don’t they?”

“I was *never* desperate.”

The footsteps stopped. He turned around, and found that Theo looked amused.

“Thought that might get you,” he said softly. “Predictable.”

He said nothing. Theo inhaled, halting, and looked down at his feet.

“Why is it,” he said, “we always have our uncomfortable conversations in Hogsmeade? Is it the climate? It’s a cheery place, I don’t know why we do these things here.”

“Because if you were ever honest in front of your friends, you wouldn’t have any.”

He waited for something caustic to come bouncing back at him, but none did. The barb slipped cleanly through the air between them, landed, and stayed there.

“I’m not so sure about that,” said Theo, at length. “They’re worse people than you give them credit for.”

“Daphne isn’t.”

“Does she still count me as a friend? That’s actually a relief, thank you.”

“I wouldn’t hold out for Pansy.”

Levity vanished. “Don’t talk to me about Pansy.”

“I was surprised you let it happen with Warrington, frankly.”

“We’re going to get her out of it.”

“Will you? Happy hunting.”

“Your insincerity is noted and rejected. Have you seen this thing?” He flipped up his sleeve and showed Draco a seamless band of braided silver, like a cross between a manacle and a wristwatch. “It’s custom. Won’t find this at Moribund’s. Sends up an alarm and pings every patrolman in a five-mile radius if I breach the castle grounds. Plus I’m banned from Floo and owl post — they’re worried I might contact my father, or go through a middle-man. Thicknesse takes security seriously, I’ll give him that.”

“Right.”

The sky was turning gray. Not cloud-gray, but the dull gray of a winter’s evening, when the sun had been so bright and cold that it seemed to scour the blue out of it, leaving the whole landscape a shade of tinsel. Alternating shadows coursed over the ground in reeling waves.

“You killed someone.”

“Fuck off,” said Theo immediately, panicked. “No, I didn’t.”

“Barty Crouch—”

“Died at the hands of my *father,* who’s in Azkaban for it, thank you, justice done.”

“Your father shot a Killing Curse at an unarmed man.”

“And where you get the gall to judge, I certainly don’t know. Do you think your father made Death Eater with his hands clean? What would *Lucius Malfoy* have thought about what happened that night?” Theo flung wide his arms. “He would have — he would’ve shaken my hand!”

“No, he wouldn’t.”

This was a blind lie, in fact. Theo was probably right.

But Draco would rather die than let him believe it, because he didn’t *know* what Lucius Malfoy would have done, and he never would. And it was vile to invoke his father’s memory against him, as if Theo had any idea what it was like to be the last of his line, any inkling of the waters he was drawing from.

He was the last Malfoy. That legacy belonged to him. No one had the right to invoke it. Draco decided what Malfoys did and didn’t do.

“I didn’t kill Crouch,” Theo snapped. He was talking almost unintelligibly fast, getting in three words for Draco’s every one. “Listen to me. *I didn’t kill him.* Can you get that through your head? Stop looking at me like that. I didn’t.”

“Your father—”

“Acted on the orders of the Dark Lord, and what did you want from him? Was he supposed to die? Was *I* supposed to die? Is that what you wanted? You wanted me to die on an altar I don’t believe in so you wouldn’t have to *feel* bad when you looked at me?”

“—killed an unarmed man—”

“Who would’ve done the same, and I respected Crouch, I did, but men don’t just stop being your enemy because you respect them!”

“Why was he unarmed, Theo?”

Leaves on the breeze cracked and broke into a shatter of brown dust over their heads.

“Why was he unarmed?”

Theo wet his lips. He dropped his head, and the surrender was totally, humiliatingly complete. It was a white flag planted on a dead

body. It was very nearly pitiable.

Green light. The sound of a body. He wondered if Theo could hear it, too.

Nearly pitiable. Only nearly.

“Because you disarmed him,” he finished, when it became clear Theo wouldn't. “Can you possibly believe that Crouch would have died if he had been able to defend himself?”

“As if you wouldn’t have done the same thing,” spat Theo. “For Narcissa.”

His wand whispered out of its sheath.

I ts point was at Theo’s neck before he could flinch.

“Keep her name out of your mouth.”

“Say you wouldn’t. Say you’d let her be killed, I’ll call you *liar.* I’ll call you *fucking hypocrite.* I’ll do that anyway, come to think.”

“He wasn’t going to kill your father.”

“As if you’d know!”

“The Dark Lord was mostly dead *himself* before your fool of a father started meddling, and Pettigrew is a shred of a man—”

“Are you sure?” he demanded, stepping forward, until the point of Draco’s wand nearly brushed his forehead. “How sure were you? If it was Narcissa, how sure would you need to be? Before you ran the risk?”

“If I thought you gave a single damn about your father, that argument might have an ounce of weight. But you hate him. It's not equivalent.”

“Of course I hate him,” said Theo slowly, as if Draco were speaking Greek. “But he’s my dad.”

“He hit you.”

“That’s speculation.”

“In third year. Do you remember? He hit you, and it nearly got your neck broken on the quidditch pitch. George Weasley saved you. Do you remember any of that?”

“He’s my dad.”

“He made you learn to Apparate at fourteen. Merlin knows how many times you splinched yourself, but I bet it wasn’t just the once with me and Pansy. That was your blood on his hands. He didn’t care.”

“Correct,” said Theo. “He’s also my dad.”

“Fine. Put the violence aside. He’s put you in an impossible position. You see that, don’t you? He made you a pariah. He made you a *criminal.* He put your life in mortal danger—”

“He’s my dad. He’s my dad. He’s my dad—”

“He won’t protect you. He doesn’t care for you. He’s not *there.* Nothing you do is going to change the fact that *he doesn’t love you —”*

“Shut up!”

“Listen to me.” He was shaking with a rage that he barely understood. “He doesn’t love you, you — you idiot, you prize fucking fool. How much proof do you need? You’re throwing your life away for *nothing,* for a man who barely knows you and wouldn’t want to if he could—”

“He’s my dad, he’s my dad, he’s my fucking *dad,* are you listening to me?” He shoved Draco’s wand away and stepped close. “He’s my

father. Now till ever. I'm his son, I've always been his son, I'll always *be* his son, I can't just decide — it's not like — I don't have any choice. I don't have any choice!"

"Tell that to Viktor Krum's parents."

It was a clean hit to the jugular, wide spray, horrible mess. It took Theo apart on an atomic level, leaving him wild-eyed and distant.

"Remember him? There were two people who died that night," he said. "Not to mention Potter, who, by the way, almost died himself, not to mention the Dark Lord has returned. Which means that you and I both might *also* die, and that's no matter what we do, because the thing about wars, Nott, is that people don't fight them with Stunners. So I regret to say we are well past the point at which I could give a fuck about your lack of choices."

"It's not my fault."

"If you really find that convincing, I'd be surprised, but suit yourself," he said coldly. "Just don't suppose that I do. Because I don't. And if I end up dead in what's coming, I don't want you to imagine for one moment that I'd have forgiven you. I wouldn't. I won't."

"You're fucking cruel, Draco, you know that? You have everything in your corner, everything—"

"Everything? *Everything?* The phrase 'blood traitor' is about to become a death sentence, and you think *I'm* cruel?"

"I had *no choice!* Are you joking? You're Lord Malfoy! A real boy, with real parents, a real life! Saint Draco of Gryffindor Tower, always sneering, always lording over the high ground! First man in history to get Snape *and* McGonagall wrapped around his fucking pinky, with your perfect marks and your prefect's badge and your do-gooder pals — you've had a good life all but shoved down your throat, and you still think you have the right to talk about hard choices? Sorry to

trouble you, *sir,* but I'm Theodore fucking Nott, and I broke the world. And you're free. So don't talk to me about death sentences."

A flock of crows leapt from the trees, shrieking, roused by the bellow of voices from the street below. The flutter of their wings dappled shadows on the street.

You're free. You're free. You're free.

He stared at Theo for a long time. It would be lying to say the thought hadn't occurred to him, but he had never in a hundred years thought he would hear it coming from someone else's mouth.

At least not someone wearing a green tie.

"You had a choice," he said finally, "not to disarm Barty Crouch."

"You're not listening," said Theo tiredly. "You don't care. Of course you don't. Who would? Running question of my life."

"You had an out." He spoke clinically. "Crouch gave you a plea deal. Witness protection."

"You're hilarious."

"The two greatest living aurors swore to protect you. You went back on it. Don't ever tell me you didn't have choices."

"It didn't feel like a choice."

"It was."

"Right. Like a choice between drinking piss or hemlock. Or between hemlock and a noose."

"Those are still choices."

If Theo was surprised to hear that, it was nothing compared to how surprised he was at himself.

“I don’t understand why you’re so angry at me,” Theo rasped. “I didn’t hurt you. I was careful not to. I even — I even saved Potter for you.”

Draco was sincerely and completely astounded. He had to give it to Theo for that, he really did. It was the one thing he couldn’t have possibly expected to hear, because it was patently untrue.

“I told you about the Cup,” he added. “I told you. I tried to tell you, anyway.”

A beat passed. He stood like a child holding a broken toy, nervously awaiting reprimand.

Draco took a breath, fully prepared to argue it to the last — and stopped.

The sun was low, and the bells were tolling. Curfew. He’d missed their rendezvous at the gate. He’d have to catch up with them at the castle, explain where he’d been. One more exhausting conversation.

And what did he want? Nothing. What did he ever get from Theo, except more exhaustion, more frustration, more knives in his back. Perhaps it hadn’t been his hand on the wand; perhaps he hadn’t wanted to; but it wasn’t a question of wanting, of intention. They were past the point where it mattered whether they liked the choices they were making.

“You’re right,” he said quietly, and wondered what his face must have looked like, for Theo to turn so pale. “Thanks.”

He stepped around Theo and started walking.

“Draco?”

His voice was high and thin. “Draco, what are you doing? Come back.”

“For what?”

“We’re not finished!”

“Yes, we are.”

It hung in the air like a withered leaf, trembling on the breeze. He walked away before Theo could disagree with him, and if he tried, it was too late for Draco to hear.

He didn’t return to the Tower immediately. He went instead to a room tucked in the lofty floors near Ravenclaw, and when he had made certain that he could still find his way there, he crossed the long breadth of the castle back to Gryffindor, which had the added benefit of giving him time to burn out the residual anger on the grueling enterprise of approximately ten million stairs.

When he reached the Pink Lady, the torches gave more light than the windows. He’d missed dinner. Almost missed curfew, too. Students milled here and there on their way back from the Great Hall or the library, but their steps were quick, and they moved without leisure, all in more or less the same direction, murmuring quiet prayers for the stairs to cooperate and keep them out of Filch’s reach.

“Mimbulus Mimbletonia.”

“Cheer up, dearie,” she whispered, winking at him. “Hot toddies inside. Don’t let the bastards get you down.”

He could have laughed. He really could.

Climbing through the channel brought with it a blinding tide of firelight, and when it cleared, he was in the warm smoky common room, just the same as it had ever been, with the same coterie of students doing homework, reading, giggling over games of jacks and gobstones. Some of them waved to him. One of them — known first as Shrimp, since introduced as Alfie Chrissenpoffer — popped up his head and eagerly invited Draco to watch as he successfully

demonstrated his first mastered spell, a Levitation Charm. It was perfectly acceptable, and Draco informed him of as much, which made the poor hopeless swot-in-training beam all out of proportion with his face.

At the fire, a pair of armchairs were drawn close together, and he recognized the shadows. He crossed the common room, gliding almost noiselessly through the murmuring commons, and the pair of faces rotated into view, washed yellow and warm from the light. It was Hermione and Ron. Their heads were bent together, and they were speaking in low serious voices about something, the subject inaudible, but its severity writ in the firm line between Hermione's eyes, the gentle slack of her mouth, as if she were absorbed entirely in it.

Her bandaged hand was extended on the arm of the chair, and Ron was holding it.

His breath encountered something jagged and thick in his throat. He revised his opinion, after a moment of nauseated staring: he wasn't holding her hand. He was cleaning her cuts, although for some reason his body didn't seem to think that was much better; her hand was still splayed on his, and Ron was daubing at the cuts with a little cotton bulb, making her twitch and wince now and then. When this happened, Ron would grimace and squeeze her hand, as if to say, *Hang on,* and she would nod bravely and carry on talking in that soft low voice that meant she didn't want to be overheard.

Draco was outside himself and inside himself at once, hot and cold all over again. He opened his mouth to say something, and felt it coming up fast and hot from somewhere in his chest. He knew what to say to make them jump apart. It was something oily and subtle and it would burn them both in the right places at once, like thumbing a button. He could carve a swath of distance between them, and it wouldn't hurt anymore. It was so easy. It was one of the few things he'd always been good at.

What he did instead was not that. He took his tongue between his teeth, carefully, and then bit down until the taste of blood washed the acid out.

Once upon a time, he'd said a word that ripped apart the conversation under it, and then he'd nearly done it again, and he *wouldn't* . He wouldn't. He wasn't Theodore Nott. He wasn't shackled to anything, not even cruelty, not even himself.

He breathed in and out, and to give his mind something to do, he counted; but the counting didn't help, so he did sums, arithmancy problems, integrals and multivariable derivatives, the numbers spinning until his head was full of the clean clockwork of numbers against numbers and not feeling, not oil, not heat, nothing that could burn anyone but him. And to a mild, pleasant surprise, the acid receded, and the feeling went down. And he was still himself. And he had said nothing that anyone would have to forgive.

He considered his own hand, latched unconsciously on his wand. He pried the fingers off and flexed them, ignoring the twinge of pain in the tendons, from too much clenching. Pain was easy. Pain was a mantle he'd been wearing since he was eight years old. This was — this was nothing. A girl he fancied was leaning into someone else's hand, smiling at someone else's jokes, liking him or loving him, and it didn't matter if he felt slightly like dying, or what one might suppose dying to feel like, if one had never felt death, or this, any time previous.

It didn't matter if it was Hermione Granger, the only creature of her like the universe had ever made, or would; it didn't matter if she had a string tied to something at the center of his chest and could pull him around with it, tug on it, reel him as she liked, with the laughter and the eyes and the raw-bitten lips. She could still pull him anywhere. What she wanted — whatever she wanted — if it wasn't him, in *that* way, it wasn't his business. She still had the string. He was still hers. She'd still promised — she'd still promised to keep him, if it came to that.

Hermione didn’t break promises.

He was acting like a fucking fool. He laughed a little at himself, rubbing his thumb and forefinger into his eyes, and Hermione heard it.

“Draco? Is that you?”

“Oi, mate, there you are,” said Ron, standing up.

Hermione stood up, almost tripping over herself in haste. “Finally! We were going to go out with the Cloak, in a bit, if you still weren’t back. Well — Ron and I were, Harry’s over in Ravenclaw with Cho — it’s a shame you weren’t here, everyone made fun of him, you would’ve loved it — but you're alright, aren’t you?” She stumbled around the chair and gave him an unsubtle sweep with her eyes, as if expecting to see him down a limb.

“Perfectly. Sorry to trouble you.” There was some pleasure in the irony, at least. “Ran into Theodore Nott. Had a nice chat.”

“Him? What did he want?”

“Merlin knows.”

Hermione frowned. “I hope he’s not up to anything,” she said, slipping the bandages back over her hand. Draco averted his eyes. “I don’t suppose he do much with his father in prison, but still.”

“Wouldn’t put it past him,” Ron said. “Slimy bugger. What’d he say?”

Their silhouettes were twinned against the fire, two figures of a painter’s study in shadow and light. He wondered what he looked like, in the shadows.

“Nothing important,” he said curtly. “Daphne?”

“Sleeping. Seemed pretty wrung out when we found her. Didn’t say much.”

“Alright.” There was a good deal left to sort there, but he was too tired to care. “I’m going to bed.”

“It’s half nine.”

“And we have quidditch practice at six, so you’d be well-advised to follow my example.”

It was too sharp. He touched his tongue to his incisor, hard, and then corrected himself: “But stay if you like. Potter doesn’t sleep but after midnight, and he’s the star player, so clearly it can’t be all that important. Enjoy yourselves.”

Hermione said his name, but he pretended not to hear it.

It was selfish, but he didn’t want to see her try to explain it, or hear what she might say, especially if, God forbid, she tried to be honest with him. He was at his upper limit of honesty for the day. He could bear no more of it. If she looked him in the eye and tried to tell him, with her stubborn magnetic insistence of a voice, exactly what she and Ron were talking about in such tender, private tones, he might very well lose his mind.

So he ignored her. It was selfish, but he could indulge in a trifle of selfishness, privately, where it wouldn’t hurt anyone. He was a selfish person. She knew that perfectly well.

He climbed the stairs and went into the dorm, where he shut the door behind him, leaned on it, and slid down to a slow rest at the base, his head tipped back to the cold wood, letting the cold leech all feeling from his limbs.

-An author I admire greatly once said that the key to writing strong side characters was to remember that everyone experiences life as the protagonist of their story, but sometimes their story is taking place in a different genre than yours. Anyway, in my outline document there’s a little footnote by Astoria’s name, and it reads:

“while everyone else worries about incipient fascism, Astoria is living out a fucked-up wizard version of Mean Girls.”

-This one goes out to another absolute banger from the soundtrack, Dumbledore's Army. Thank you to my lord and savior, Nicholas "Daddy" Hooper, conjurer of jams that kill writer's block stone dead.

-Shoutout also to Michael “Short King” Corner, who has now, I realize belatedly, canonically pulled not one, but two of the coolest girls in Gryffindor. I can't say that was on purpose, but I've written it in and I'm keeping it. Frankly inequitable rizz.

-A lot of chapters in this act of Book 5 got renamed and reshuffled during a huuuuge restructuring that happened in the second draft. I spent more editing, rewriting, and cutting together the six-chapter span of writing between September 1995 and December 1995 than I did writing Books 1 and 2 put together, and let me tell you, it was an Experience.

-For everyone who commented saying something kind — especially the people who write Those Comments, and you know who you are — you are the reason I have sat at my desk with my head in my hands, giggling and making strange, horrible noises far too late into the night for my neighbors' consideration. I hope that your trains run on time and your bus pulls up to the stop precisely as you get there; or, failing that, that the seats in your car are already warm when you get in.

-Next chapter: "The Room of Requirement." It will feature: Narcissa Malfoy's unexpected contribution to her son's advancing career in juvenile delinquency; a lot of nerd shit about duels; and a salient piece of architectural trivia.

The Room of Requirement

Chapter 64: The Room of Requirement

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

There was a problem. Several problems. A set of infinitely divisible problems, stacked in a fractal formation, and also on fire.

He had been given to understand from a young age that his mother and father had drifted together in a celestial confluence of pleasure and destiny, joined their fortunes, and never thenceforth been parted. He had never contemplated the particulars of their meeting, or courtship. That wasn't important. It seemed obvious that when two people were well-suited, the inevitable would happen, and some cosmic chorus of witnesses would politely applaud from their box seats.

Aside from them, the evidence was depressing. Fred and Angelina had some sort of situation configured, but it was horribly particular, and seemed to involve a lot of yelling and brotherly tussling. Katie smuggled girls up the staircase sometimes and hung a sock on the door, but they were all ushered out by morning. Seamus and Lavender had been on dates, but Lavender flirted indiscriminately, so whatever Seamus brought to the table couldn't be all that appealing.

And Hermione was complicated.

Sometimes, in the library, he would find her staring into the middle distance with her lip caught between her teeth, and he would have to get up and pretend to fetch another reference text to stop himself from thinking about it, or better yet, doing something about it.

Which made it almost fucking impossible to concentrate on potionmaking, among other inconveniences. It also made it difficult

to get to sleep. Sheets could generate unexpected degrees of friction.

Other times, while they were reading in the common room, she would tip over and put her head on his shoulder, usually because she was too tired to notice what she was doing; and the longer he allowed that to go on without moving, the more guilt he felt, as if it was something he were stealing from her.

This guilt failed to stop him from imagining anything vis-a-vis: the library. Or the sheets.

“I don’t think she likes Ron,” declared Daphne.

They were in the common room. Rain drizzled softly on the glass. He had his boots up on the table and *Moste Potente Potions* in his lap, making lazy annotations between lines of his godfather’s dark scrawl.

Daphne was painting her fingernails with a bit of muggle varnish, and every so often she would waggle her fingers at him to ask for a Drying Charm or an opinion, only one of which dignity permitted him to give.

“I don’t recall soliciting your opinion.”

“Then sulk more quietly.”

“I was being silent.”

“Only on the outside!”

“That’s where the sounds tend to be.”

“I have reasons. Don’t you want to hear my reasons?”

“No.”

She sulked, lacquering varnish. “There’s no need to be huffy,” she said huffily. “I know you think you're terribly opaque, with your standoffish Victorian situation, but if you want other people to remain in — well, can't say *ignorance,* I'm certain Harry's noticed something and repressed it like a good little boy, but let's try *plausible doubt* — then you can't keep staring at Ronald like you're going to kill him. It's bad manners. Throw down your glove and duel him for her like a gentleman, or pack up your frowns, Obliviate yourself, and leave them to each other. I have no other advice.”

The tips of his ears heated. “This isn't the nineteenth century. Gentlemen don't duel over witches. For one thing, the witches tend to object.”

“Phooey! I wouldn't!” she exclaimed. “I'd love to have some strapping gents clobber each other over me. I'd dine out on it for years! And frankly, I’d give anything just to have a crush. Better something fun and hopeless than nothing.”

“‘Fun and hopeless’ is meant to be encouraging, in this context?”

“I rather think I’d like a quidditch player, actually. Who would you advise? I wish that Oliver Wood were still here, he was gorgeous.”

“There are at least a dozen reasons we are absolutely not having this conversation.”

She twined a curl around her finger and smiled. “Indulge me,” she said, “or I’m going to start flirting with Harry.”

“Lord Merlin. Do you always open your negotiations with death threats?”

“No comment! He’s fit, and you’re not helping.”

“Fine. I’ve heard George Weasley is unentangled, you harpy. Your union will revolt me, but at least I won’t have to kill myself.”

“I don’t like the twins,” she said, frowning. “They’re not kind.”

“What, to Ronald? They’re his brothers.”

“I’m not like that with Tori.”

“You’re also not her brother.”

She fell silent. He lowered his quill, and braced himself.

“Would you care to discuss it?”

“No,” she said sharply, and shoved the varnish bottle to the side.

The wind whistled furiously in the eaves.

“You’re asking too much of her, you know.”

She worked her jaw, rolling her fingers to and fro in the light.

He dropped his eyes to the book, inferring her answer from silence. At the top of the page there was note in different ink, crosshatched over other instructions, as if Snape had scrawled it for want of anything else to write on: *Vermicarnis.*

It was underlined. Twice. It had no description except: *For B.*

Which was, of course, terribly intriguing. Though not much in the way of a spell description.

Presumably Snape would know, but he was never in his office to be asked; Draco had twice visited since the start of the year, and both times found him gone. Apparently he wasn’t spending his free hours in the castle.

The reasons for which didn’t bear thinking about. Knowing that his godfather was a spy was different from knowing that somewhere, at that moment, he was among Death Eaters, his life staked on a cover that an increasing number of people could break.

Draco, now, being one of them.

“Astoria annoys me,” remarked Daphne, drawing him out of reverie. “I adore her, but she can’t stand not to have her own way.”

He held his tongue, with difficulty.

“I mean, she’s a sweet girl. Truly. I love her to distraction. But when we were younger, she’d follow me around *everywhere.* Wouldn’t leave alone! I’d have friends over, Pansy, Te—Blaise, and the cousins, and so forth, and we’d want to go off on our own. But the minute we tried to leave, Tori would pitch a screaming tantrum — I mean ripping her hair out, beating herself against the wall — until Mummy ordered us to take her, just so it would stop. She was a horrible brat. We both were, but she was monstrous. And of course, she’d pretend to everyone else that she was a perfect angel. Because she so desperately wanted them to like her, you know? No one ever came to visit her, because she was so young, and she couldn’t go out to parties, like me; her disease was a bit more advanced, that’s why the chair… anyway, I played a mean trick on her once.” She blew on her fingers. “Pansy and I — and Teddy, of course — we wanted to go riding Daddy’s thestrals. Of course we couldn’t see them, but that’s part of the fun of it, if you’re tied in the saddle, it feels like you’re flying. Only Tori threw the biggest, loudest, nastiest fit, because it wouldn’t be fair; she couldn’t ride. So Pansy and I, we — oh, God, we were really such bitches — we told her we were going to go swimming, and we pushed her out all the way to the big wading fountain in the farthest part of the garden, where you could barely see the house, let alone hear it. And then we took some ropes and tied her chair to a tree, and left her there, and went riding.”

Daphne scraped off a smudge of varnish with her thumbnail. “Anyway,” she said casually, “it was so lovely and fun we rode until it got dark, and I hate to say we forgot about her. We were children, you know, we weren’t — we didn’t think. And when Mummy asked where she was, I — I was so scared of getting in trouble that I lied, and said I didn’t know.” She paused. “It was Teddy who finally went out and got her. But he didn’t tell Mummy what Pansy and I did; he

just said that he'd heard her talking about swimming earlier, and had a hunch. And somehow — to this day, I've absolutely no idea how — he convinced Tori to back him up. She claimed she'd lost track of time. Never mentioned the fiasco again."

He waited, but whatever point she had in mind, she believed it made; she tucked the varnish bottle into her bag.

"Teddy was always like that, though," she said absently. "He made our problems go away. He'd smile all pretty, and snap his fingers, and everyone did what he wanted, especially Tori… That's what worries me about her being alone with them. She just wants to feel liked, and she's willing to be awful for it."

He holstered his quill in the pot. "Well, you're right, or you're wrong," he said briskly, dropping the book on the desk and lowering his feet. "Either Slytherin suits her or it doesn't. Neither outcome rests in your hands. As with both you and I, a capricious piece of senile headgear has elected to create years of difficulty for her, and far be it for *me* to suggest that our lives should ever be easy. Speaking of which. It's time for our routine endeavor in courting expulsion."

She brightened. "You say that like you don't love it."

"I don't."

"You do," she averred, springing up. "And do you know, I suspect I'm starting to love it, too? It's dreadful, but the whole enterprise has grown on me. *Such* excitement. And everyone's so jolly all the time! Perhaps I'm more of a lion than I thought."

"As watching Diggory trot around in his shirtsleeves has nothing to do with it, of course."

"I said a 'lion,' Draco, not a nun."

The seventh floor of Hogwarts glowed pale blue. The windows were soaked in the low-hanging sunshine of an October afternoon, like they were walking through a bridge into the sky. At the end of the hallway sat an undecorated stone wall.

Draco drew his wand and checked his corner. There was no one. The Marauder's Map found Filch safely in his office, and Umbridge in hers. They were four stories of castle and half a thousand stairs away, and that was how he liked them.

"Clear?" hissed Hermione, ducking her head around the corner. He pushed it back, and she made a noise of irritation.

"If I'm checking a corner, do wait for me to *check* before you stick your head in it, please, Granger dear."

"'Do wait for me to check,'" she imitated, under her breath, and sidestepped him. "Someone thinks he's Mad-Eye Moody."

"Bothered, Minerva?"

She scoffed, which more or less proved his point.

The group milled around in the sunny space outside the wall, waiting for someone to do something impressive about it. Marietta started whispering to Cho.

He crossed twice before the wall. The request of *I need a place to practice magic* was slightly bled in with *Make Ronald stop smirking,* but he expected the Room could multitask.

Wrought-iron curlicues sprouted from the brick in oily black lacework. Hermione laughed, pleasantly surprised, as if she'd honestly expected him to take them to a big corridor in the middle of nowhere.

He raised his voice. "Everyone get inside, and step lively, as I *will* shut the door on you. Be advised that if your nose gets caved in, I am unlikely to notice and less likely to care."

“He doesn’t mean that,” added said.

“In fact I do, and you can decide for yourself whose bluff you’d like to call.”

The doors parted at his touch.

It was a cathedral.

No, it wasn’t; only the light made it seem so, pouring through the triptych of red-and-gold stained glass at the far end of a massive hall, with a scalloped ceiling embroidered here and there with dangling grape-bunches of gas-lamps. Suits of armor stood in file under a barrage of sconces, and bookshelves enough for a lifetime of reading, or, for Hermione, a week. Embellishment of serpents coiled around the crown and foot of the Corinthian columns, and the flagstones were polished to reflection.

“Nice,” said Ron wisely. “Understated. Intimate.”

“D’you think the ceiling’s high enough?” said Harry, craning his neck. “Don’t want to bump my head.”

“It’s beautiful,” murmured Hermione, staring up at the stained glass.

Draco smirked at all of them, individually, and then at the group, broadly, which streamed in with appreciative murmurs. Even Fred gave a low whistle when he peered into one of the cabinets.

Harry climbed onto the center dais, glanced at the podium, and then shuffled in front of it, rather than behind.

“Thanks, everybody, for coming! Anyone not here? Anyone — no? That’s great. I was thinking the first thing we should do is Disarmers Charm. So, er — partner up, and have at.”

The crowd fell into disarray. Hermione cleared her throat. Harry stepped down to confer with her.

“Harry,” she whispered, “you need to show them how to do it.”

“What? It’s Expelliarmus. It’s simple.”

“Yes! For you! There are first years here!”

“Oh. Oh, right! Sorry, everyone! Let me just run through it, quickly, and I’ll show you… it’s *Expelliarmus,* right, and then there’s a jabby bit, like this…”

Fumbling, Harry vaulted back up to the dais and hurried through a demonstration of a Disarming Charm that made up for in enthusiasm what it lacked in any sort of academic use.

Hermione came over to stand beside him. He folded his arms and watched Colin Creevey enthusiastically hurtle a Disarming Charm clear over his partner’s head.

“Well,” she said, as the crowd began to mimic Harry, with results varying, “it’s… at least they’re practicing.”

“‘Practicing’ is astonishingly generous.”

“They’re trying!”

“Also generous.”

Harry hovered, but his suggestions trended vague and therefore unhelpful: “Decent grip, maybe hold it a little bit sideways,” or “think you’re aiming high, maybe work on that, I reckon.” They were kind but overly gentle, unwilling to admit of failure, and not much helpful to anybody, since it did not prevent them from failing the next time.

Ron was not much more useful, though he was better technically as an instructor; he could usually get a student to do what he wanted them to, and knew how to make them understand it, using words they could grasp; the sole problem being that he himself rarely knew what they should be doing, and so this skill was not fruitfully employed.

Hermione, after an observational period of increasing distress, bounded in to try and help, but her instructions were not much better: exactingly specific and long-winded, she gave Lavender almost two full minutes on everything she was doing wrong, which left her more angered than competent, and in any case forced Ron to intercede and take Lavender aside to fix her grip.

Draco leaned against one of the columns and supervised, tapping his wand against his thigh. As far as he was concerned, he had done his part in bringing them to the venue. He hadn't the patience for pedagogy; he grew irritable when someone took too long answering a question in class. All the same, he didn't find it particularly hard to identify when someone was doing something wrong; examining a guard for weaknesses was a hobby and a pastime, and exploiting them, a skill.

Dean, for instance, didn't keep his feet still when he was casting. He stepped into the swing, likely a holdover from some kind of muggle sport in his past; it would take drilling to fix. Katie whipped her wand sideways instead of extending the point, which sent her spells arcing like quidditch passes. Fred and George were technically competent, but lacked discipline, and it showed in their sloppy wand movements. Seamus, meanwhile, could not produce a Disarming Charm to save his life; every spell he cast resulted in some kind of explosion. This was not as concerning as Hermione, who was trying to coach him, seemed to think; in Draco's opinion, it was a gift with any number of uses.

The broader problem was this: they were children who had been locked in a castle under rigid discipline and threat of corporal punishment, without access to usual entertainment or indeed free communication with the outside world, for almost a month. And there were only so many ways you could possibly expect a human being to act.

Decorum died slowly. Fred and George's drill turned into an all-out skirmish, and spilled over into Katie's bout with Lee, who gave a gleeful cry and tackled Fred at the first provocation. Hermione

ducked a stray cartwheeling charm from Dean and snapped at him, only to almost get bowled over by George.

Ron caught Hermione's elbow to stop her from tipping over and shouted, "OI! SIMMER DOWN!" but it was no use. He turned to her, and said something that was inaudible through the burst of voices, but she nodded. His hand lingered on her arm long after she was standing on her own two feet. She had to look up a great deal to talk to him, and did, though he bent to listen to whatever it was she said. Abruptly, she broke into a tired laugh, gesturing at the Room behind her. Ron winked.

They could have been in a room by themselves, for all that the din bothered them.

Draco rolled off the pillar and slipped into the shadows of the room, tasting bitterness.

It constricted his throat. It nauseated him, more to the point, the very idea of it. Sat at the center of his head like a gravity well, drawing everything else into the dizzying orbit. Her smiling and touching Ron's arm. Her hair splayed on his shoulder. Going up on tiptoe to—he wasn't that masochistic.

He leaned against the back of the pillar and considered his wand, the long black point, the thousand wicked things it could do.

"Draco?"

It was Neville. He held his wand awkwardly in one fist, no grip that Hogwarts ever taught, and Draco cataloged three areas for improvement before he caught himself being helpful.

"What is it," he said thinly.

"I was wondering if you had any a-a-advice, on the charm," said Neville. "I just tried it with Daphne, and you're good at Charms, s-s-so."

It was worth pointing out that he had never volunteered to instruct anyone, but Neville was a considerable danger when left unattended at a cauldron, and this seemed similarly dire. At any rate, he at least knew Neville to be *teachable,* which was apparently more than one could say for Dennis Creevey, who had trouble telling his lefts from rights.

Draco sighed and crooked his fingers.

“...Is that a y-y-yes?”

“Let’s see it.”

Neville blanched. “What? On y-y-you?”

“No, I want you to try disarming the bloody wall.”

“W-w-what if I…?”

“Hurt me? I would truly and sincerely be impressed.”

Neville swallowed, found his courage, and stabbed it to its sticking place.

“Exp-elliarmus!”

It wasn’t actually terrible. Draco didn’t bother to deflect, out of interest as to whether it would succeed if it landed. It didn’t; it veered wide and shattered on the column.

“Try it again.”

Neville obeyed, jabbing his wand out like it was autonomous and malignant. His spell splashed, inert, into the flagstones.

“You’ve one problem.”

“Just one?” said Neville, much cheered.

“It’s significant.”

“Oh. W-w-what… is it the st-t-tutter? Gran says—”

“No. Your incantations are decent. Not *great,* mind you, but serviceable. Your problem is that you wince, and it makes you close your eyes.”

Neville blinked. “I do?”

“Unerringly. I’ll hand it to you: if your good habits were as reliable as your bad ones, you’d be a wizard to rival Merlin.”

“Okay, and — well, thanks, b-b-but — why? And what do I d-d-do about it?”

“No idea. Try to open them? Pretend you’re me or something. I don’t know.” He clapped Neville on the shoulder. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” said Neville, with unnerving sincerity.

Worrisome failure. He hadn’t meant to be helpful; he’d meant to crack a joke. People might come to suspect that he was some sort of associate teaching fellow in this ramshackle college of St. Potter’s.

He regrouped with Harry at the foot of the dais, where the leader was evaluating his pupils with a bit of despondency. The meeting had become mostly social; conversation had broken out in place of sparring, and few people were still bothering to practice spells. Ron hoisted Colin Creevey out of his way by the nape of his neck and stepped up on the dais, expression grim.

“If this is what we’re meant to fight You-Know-Who with,” he said, “we’re buggered.”

“Chin up,” said Harry vainly. “They’re doing… some things.”

A few spells flashed past, but they were accompanied by giggles and the teasing of students play-fighting.

“This is piss,” announced Ginny. Her hair was mussed and ashy from some sort of encounter with Seamus. “You lot need to pull it together.”

“We’re doing our best,” snapped Hermione.

“I know. It’s not bad, but it could be a lot better.” Ginny surveyed the room with a deeply critical eye. “I reckon they don’t respect you.”

“Oi!”

“Excuse you!”

“Speak for yourself, Ginevra,” said Draco mildly, not disagreeing.

“C’mon! You know how on the first day of Transfiguration, McGonagall always shows off the cat thing? And it gets a shout out of the first years, and it’s adorable? I mean, there’s a point to that, innit? She’s saying: ‘Hey, I’m good at this. I know more than you.’ This lot’s all used to watching you faff about with a pocket snitch in the common room. Reckon you got to do the same.” She used her wand to scratch her head. “For the young ones, at least. Dunno what to do about Fred and George.”

“I think McGonagall’s still working on that one,” said Hermione flatly, watching Fred make fish-faces inside his Bubble-Head Charm.

“A good point, well-made,” said Draco. “Alright, Potter. Go on and turn into a cat.”

Harry flipped him the bird while Ron sniggered. “Why don’t *you* do something, tosser?”

“Have you ever heard the phrase ‘not my phooka, not my forest’?”

“No, because I’m normal,” said Harry. “Anyway, idiot, here’s your chance to show off. You’re always bragging about how Mummy taught you to duel.”

“Hey, there’s an idea,” said Ginny suddenly. “Harry, duel Draco.”

The expression on Harry’s face made Draco snicker.

“Seriously? I get why it’s *him,* on account of the dueling experience and everything, but why me? Why not Hermione? She’s best in Charms—”

“Because it’s not her they have trouble listening to,” said Draco dryly. “Granger and I happen to have a certain reservoir of authority here. If you hadn’t noticed, when she says *jump,* the first years are already four feet in the air.”

“Because she’s a prefect,” Harry muttered.

“Because she runs the Tower like a brigadier-general. Where have you been?”

“Come off it,” said Ron lightly, and when Draco flashed him a look, he added: “I mean, yes, but it’s easy for you to say when you’ve got the other badge, innit?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, just… c’mon. It’s always been a bit harder for the rest of us to get people to listen when we talk.”

“I don’t see how that has anything to do with who’s prefect.” He was increasingly irritated. “Did you *want* to be a prefect?”

“No,” said Ron pointedly, “but it wasn’t like I ever had a shot at it, so I didn’t waste time hoping—”

“You had the same shot as everyone else.”

“Not under Umbridge, I didn’t!”

“McGonagall chooses the prefects,” said Hermione. “She wrote both letters. I’ve seen them.”

Ron paused. “Right,” he said, and the lightness was even more forced. “Sorry. I didn’t know that. Since I didn’t… yeah. I didn’t know.”

“It’s fine.”

“I mean, you would’ve gotten it fair and square, anyway. Any other year. With your marks, and your — everything. So. No offense.”

“Offense retroactively un-taken,” said Draco coolly.

There was another pause. Ginny was politely examining the middle distance. Harry looked like he longed to join her in it, but couldn’t tear his eyes away from the train collapse happening before them.

Ron frowned. “How’d you see his— oh.” His expression cleared, and it was even worse than a scowl, his little slouch. “I forgot. You got them when you were staying at the castle.”

“Manor,” said Draco, which would have been alright to start with; but Hermione said at the same time, “It’s a manor, actually,” and their unison plunged the whole conversation into a humiliated well of silence from which four unspeaking faces consulted each other helplessly for rescue.

Harry was looking at Ron, who was looking at Hermione, who was looking at no one, and rather avidly, too. Ginny and the middle distance had become so intimate that they might announce the wedding any minute.

Draco tapped his fingers on his wandgrip.

“Fine,” he said briskly. He shrugged out of his robe and tossed it over a bench. His wand glided out of its sheath with a quiet *snick* and he spun it around two fingers, marching down from the dais. “Get everyone out of the way. Potter, we start at ten paces.”

Ginny raised her fists. “Thank Merlin. EVERYONE CLEAR OFF! DEMONSTRATION!”

Clamor filled the hall. The crowd drew back and settled itself on the stairs of the dais, whispering iniquitously, grouped in a huddle of eager and mildly bloodthirsty faces. Everyone liked a good scrap. They were mostly Gryffindors, after all.

A red carpet unfurled from one of the flagstones, the Room's eager contribution to their task. It spanned the length and width of a proper duelist's piste, its color rich as aging roses against the dull stone, and its outline glowed with faint Boundary Charms. Harry stood in front of the dais, all of the Defense Club sitting in rapt eagerness at his back. Draco crossed the piste and stood to face him, with naught but the door behind him.

His was actually the better position — no chance of catching a shot from the back if a spectator got antsy; Goyle taught him that — but the optics were not unaffecting. The difference between staring down one face and forty.

There was an awkward silence as it became clear that while everyone was jolly excited about a duel, nobody knew how to start one.

Draco repressed the urge to sigh.

"Ginevra," he called, "since you've instigated, you might as well do us a favor and call."

"Wot?" Ginny scrambled up from her seat. "Can do. How's that?"

He lifted the hand that held his wand and massaged his temple with his knuckles. "Traditionally, it's the challenger's second who calls. There are two parameters, means and limitations, which take the standard form—"

"How long is a challenger's second?"

"Hilarious. For those of you with brain cells, that's the wizard who steps in if the challenger is made incompetent. Ginevra, in this case,

for me, I suppose. Almost certainly Ronald, for Potter, though ‘made incompetent’ is a rather foregone conclusion in his case.”

“Oi! Put your money where your mouth is!”

“Trying to, Potter, keep up. Ginevra, repeat: ‘To the wizard’s disarm, clavicle to coccyx. Wands only. Call.’”

“To the wizard’s disarm,” she announced, planting her hands on her hips. “Clavicle to… sorry, what?”

“Coccyx,” he sighed, fighting the urge to rub his eyes. “It’s a small bone at the base of — never mind. For our purposes, it means nothing under the belt.”

“Just say that then, posho. Anyway! Clavicle to coccyx. Wands only. Call.”

“Thank you. Now, Potter, we say our names. You first.”

Harry blinked at him as if this was an order of baffling complexity. “Harry.”

“Not — I — never mind. Draco Malfoy.”

He slid one foot back into a duelist’s stance. Harry mimicked it. Behind him, Ginny plopped down with Hermione and Ron. Hermione had her book on her lap, a pretense of disinterest, but she was watching them anyway.

He caught her gaze. She rolled her eyes at him, as in: *I wash my hands of this tedious and jejune peacocking, please get it over with so we may return to discussing subjects that might interest me, Hermione Granger, a very intelligent and pretty sixteen-year-old girl.*

In retrospect, he could pinpoint that as the moment he decided to win.

Draco crossed the piste in three strides and opened with a sideways lash across the throat, sending *Flipendo* glittering through the air like the lateral slice of a knife. Harry blocked it with a shield, startled, and then dispelled, stepped back, and ventured a skittering *Expelliarmus* into the afterglow. It whistled its way past Draco's ear as he twisted his shoulder to dodge it, and kept walking.

Duels were slower than they sounded. In reality, it wasn't a steady, breathless back-and-forth, but several short bursts of magic, followed by prowling and waiting for the other person to do something. Harry jabbed out his wand, guarding against a potential volley, and Draco pressed his weight onto his back foot, searching for an opening.

It was less interesting to watch than it was to do, and Ginny must have agreed, because she cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted: "Somebody *do* something!"

"At your service, Ginevra," said Draco tautly, and amongst the titters of the crowd, he sprang into the next movement.

Harry staggered back from the crackling Trip Jinx, spat back a few indecisive flickers of Disarmers, then tossed out a whirling Jelly-Legs that nearly caught him with sidespin. Draco caught it with a flick of his wrist and sent it soaring at the ceiling, where it burst into a firework against the chandelier. There was laughter and applause from the crowd, like it was a carnival. As sparks fell, he snapped his wand into his riposte, a Blasting Curse that hit Harry's shield so hard it nearly split open.

The duel grew from a short volley of spells into a more tangled, complex thing, as they gained a feel for each other's rhythms. He noticed that Harry erred on the side of defensive magic, leaning on his back foot, slipping easily into Shields and Refractor Curses, even at the cost of an opening. He risked as little as possible. He fought like someone with a healthy wariness of being hurt, which was more common for muggle-borns — or people without ready access to magical healing, at any rate — but also meant that he spent less

time on the offensive, and Draco, who liked to live on the offensive, had a lovely time beating him there. He snapped three curses around his neck and finished with a fourth that spun sideways near his abdomen, volleyed two Trip Jinxes at his feet, countered a Disarming Jinx to the face and activated a Shield Charm that bounced it back. Then he dispelled with a flick of his wrist and spun his wand in a crescent that loosed a searing chain of a Blinding Curse, which whirled after Harry in a helix. It exploded against Harry's Banishment Charm, but his *Petrificus Totalus* went shrieking through the shower of sparks, and Harry dodged it with a fumbling sidestep off the mat, at which the Room gave a soft warning chime.

Draco lowered his wand, smirking at him.

"Technically, that's the point conceded," he said, pointing at Harry's offending foot, "but if you'd like to continue, I'm willing to indulge you."

"Oh, piss off," said Harry pointedly, and threw a Stunner at him.

He did an elegant double-backstep and dropped down, bent at the knee, marveling as it glimmered over his head. *Stupefy* was more bite than he'd thought Harry was willing to risk, in a practice duel.

"As if," said Harry, raising his voice over the crowd's excited babbling and applause, "it bloody matters — where I put my *foot,* honestly—"

"One, it's unsporting to complain about the rules after you've lost the point, as Oliver Wood ought to have taught you. Two, I don't see you objecting to there being rules in quidditch."

"Quidditch is a game. In a real fight, I'm not going to faff about with footwork."

"In a real fight, I would've put you down on your arse while you were complaining," said Draco, and there was a cool susurrus of amusement from the dais. Fred whistled at him. Ginny cackled.

“Yeah, right,” said Harry. “That’s the reason I’m still standing here, isn’t it, because you’re so good at it?”

Draco scoffed and slid his foot into position.

The next sixty seconds passed like hours. To his credit, Harry had been in enough fights to know where his weaknesses were, not to overextend or take steps longer than he could quickly recover from — knew, in essence, how to make as few mistakes as possible. He was faster than Draco, smaller, and more agile, which allowed him to get closer without the same concern of being caught. He never broke Draco’s guard, but he could put pressure on it, and that wasn’t nothing.

Harry was decently good at dueling, and he was good without Draco’s advantage of practice, which was impressive.

Unfortunately, Draco *did* have the advantage of practice. He knew how to stay on the balls of his feet and move lightly, with an awareness of where his weight and momentum; how to dance in and out of a jinx, how to engage and disengage from a movement, how to shift from defense to offense and when the time came to do both. He could see, like invisible prints in the air, the trajectories that different spells would take, and which line to choose based on where the opponent’s wand was moving — things that were not so much instinct, as some duelists described them, but *rules,* practiced so long and for so often that their execution felt like an original idea. He let his thoughts drift to more cerebral questions of strategy while his body did what it wanted, and found, pleasantly, that what his body wanted was to do it right. It was a waltz performed at ten paces. Dancing, with occasional violence.

He sliced a cut up the side of Harry’s guard, forcing him sideways, and in the space that cleared he could suddenly see Hermione again. She was staring, book abandoned, focused intently on the flurry of spells. Ron sat beside her, his hand resting somewhere behind her on the dais — and his arm wasn’t quite around her, but it was in her personal space, and he was saying something to her

while watching Harry. She nodded, frowning, and then turned to whisper into his ear.

Harry swayed back into place, blocking them off, and Draco, hardly thinking, watched his hand move of its own accord.

“Relashio.”

Harry saw it coming from a mile, and promptly sidestepped. It whistled past him and into the crowd.

Ron toppled backward with a shout and spilled into the laps of the people behind him; namely, Lavender and Parvati. Hermione threw herself to one side and shot a furious look at Draco, who smiled guilelessly, twirling his wand through his fingers.

“Draco!”

“Hm?”

“Honestly!”

“My apologies,” he said. “That was careless of me.”

“That’s it,” shouted Ron, fumbling upright. “Enough — playing nice — Harry, budge over—”

“What are you doing?” Harry called, warily.

Ron came striding up to the piste. “I’m your second, yeah? Great. My turn. *Impedimenta!”*

Draco caught the spell on his wand-tip, smirking at him. Hermione was tugging her jumper straight, slightly disheveled, and looking properly indignant.

“This is a demonstration duel, remember?” she said, with faint concern. “It’s one against one. There’s no point to this if you’re going to break the rules.”

“Ah, he can take it,” Ron said chipperly. “Look at him. Proper mama’s boy, all coached up.”

“No need to be jealous, I’m sure you’ll do fine,” called Draco, flipping his wand in the air. Ron flashed an irritated look at him.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said sharply, closing her book. “It’s not fair. You two don’t get to beat up on him just because you want Harry to win—”

“Oi! We’re not gonna ‘beat up’ anybody—”

“They’re not going to *beat up* on me, thank you.”

“—and as a practical exercise, it’s not helpful for anyone to watch you three bicker like little boys!”

The matter had very little to do with Ron wanting Harry to win, and one almost suspected she knew it, considering the high flush in her face, and the quick, anxious way her eyes darted between them.

“We’re not bickering,” tried Ron. “We’re demonstrating a — a dynamic conflict encounter.”

“Just so. Dynamic. Right you are.”

She half-rose from her seat, a storm gathering in her face. “This is ridiculous. Ron, get down from there — or better yet, Harry, *you* step out—”

“The thing is,” said Harry, apologetically, “Hermione, the thing is — I just really want to see him get knocked on his arse.”

“Harry *Potter!”*

But Ginny cheered, and Hermione threw up her hands, as if to wash the whole affair from them. She started muttering mutinously to Daphne — who had very little sympathy to give her, being transfixed in delight.

Draco smirked, slightly.

The fight took two minutes. It was the longest hour of his life.

Harry and Ron were good fighters, separately. Together they were nearly a great one. No showy pieces of magic, nothing spectacular, but it was their synchrony that made them difficult. Harry and Ron knew each other's movements down to the very twitch of a tendon; each had a preternatural sense of where the other boy was and would be, and what part of his guard would need watching when he was. It was a triumph to score a hit on them — when Ron yelped after a Stinging Jinx to the arm, or Harry froze in a short-lived *Petrificus* that Ron snapped out with *Finite* a moment later. The pair of them moved like they were boats on a tide, the step and the counterstep, spells leaping from their wands like luminous eels.

He thought briefly of Mad-Eye Moody and Barty Crouch, dueling Sibelius Nott in the headmaster's office. It gave him an idea.

He Summoned a bench from the side of the room — it came flying, skittering loudly against the stone, and students gasped — and threw it at them.

It screeched down the piste and nearly bowled them over. Harry knocked it away with a Banishment Charm, stopping it before it could flatten anyone on the dais, but Ron just vaulted it and lunged. Draco ducked and darted under his arm, backhanding him a curse that Ron dodged. Remembered the way he'd leaned down to speak in Hermione's ear, at the Hog's Head, his arm getting personally acquainted with Hermione's space, his mouth almost intimate with her ear, and there was something sharp and hot in his stomach — and the next curse was a nasty corkscrew of yellow, exploding against the stones.

Ron grunted in surprise and threw an elbow that caught Draco in the side. He tripped and caught himself, his jaw clamping, accidentally snapping his incisors together around his tongue.

Pain welled, and a moment later, so did blood. He wiped his mouth delicately on his sleeve, leaving a rose-bright smear of blood. He checked it and grimaced. Someone whimpered.

“That’s enough,” said Hermione sharply, making to stand, but Ginny hauled her down. “Back off! Now! That’s enough! He’s *bleeding—”*

“I’m fine,” he snapped, wrenching up his sleeve. A fine sheen of sweat lay on his neck; his collar felt tight. Uniforms were not proper duelist’s wear. Absently, he wrenched out his tie knot and ripped it off, tossing the scrap of red silk aside. Cool air grazed his throat when he opened his collar. He probably looked ridiculous, but he was too preoccupied being in a snit to care.

There were a few giggles, most of them in a decidedly high register. Katie gave a piercing whistle. Since he knew for a fact that Katie saw most of them shirtless at quidditch practices, this meant it was a calculated move to embarrass him. He sent her a glower and turned back around.

“Well?” he said irritably. “Are you going to make me wait?”

Ron’s forehand jinx nearly caught him on the shoulder, and drove him all but headfirst into *Expelliarmus.* He went down to a knee and lashed a Trip Jinx for his heels, rolled back upright and whipped a curse over his shoulder. A shout from Ron told him he’d bought himself a second and he used it to lunge, snapping two jinxes to keep Harry preoccupied while he whirled back to catch Ron’s next on a Shield, and gradually he caught sight of it — or *feel* of it, rather, the rhythm of the duel, which had grown faster but was still the same. There was such a thing as a dance for three, after all.

And there was blood on his teeth and sweat on his neck and hair in his eyes, but for a moment he had them both at bay, nipping at him fruitlessly, unable to touch him, unable to get close enough to land a hit, sprinting here and there just to try and get a taste of him, and it felt good. It felt good, to be good at it. It was good to be powerful.

Applause met the occasional explosion of colliding magic, gasps for the neat dodge, a scream whenever someone did something daring — and Harry *was* more daring with Ron there, more confident, more eager to lunge and open his sides and try trickier spells. He feinted and caught Draco with an underhand he wasn't expecting, and Ron went running in for the finish on his back, and he could block one but his wand couldn't point in two directions at once, so he cut sideways and swung wide in a lash of a Stunner that hit neither, but gave him time to arrange his limbs for what was coming — the Disarming Charm that clipped his wrist, tossing his wand high and free, and then the Trip Jinx that snared his left ankle, sending him down on his side, hard, to the floor.

"DISARMED!" Ginny hollered. "Done! Called! Geroff him, gits!"

Ron leaned over with a rueful grin and extended his hand. Draco grabbed it and hauled himself to his feet, grimacing.

He rolled to his feet. Blood welled at his lip and he scrubbed it off again, irritated by the mess more than anything, because the adrenaline washed out the pain. He made to leave the piste, but his way was blocked: people were swarming down from the dais, wildly applauding Harry.

Seamus snatched up Draco's hand and hoisted it over his head.

"TWO AT ONCE!" he howled. "THE MADMAN!"

And he realized they were cheering, not just for Harry — who had, in fact, won — but for all of them. He blinked and shook off Seamus, unsettled, as the roar rose to dwarf everything, even the residual shudder of his heartbeat in his ears. It was nice, though, the cheering. The starry-eyed stares, which seemed to greet him from every corner of the room, as if he'd done something remarkable, instead of merely keeled over and lost a duel. No one seemed dismayed by the fact that he'd failed. It was, if anything, a warmer welcome than he could have expected if he'd won.

He nodded, jerky and awkward, and stepped away. Some of them followed him, babbling about this-or-that maneuver, which was flattering but frankly disinteresting; he wanted his tie back.

It had fallen near the dais, with his bag, near Hermione. She was still seated. She'd failed to rise, applaud, or indeed acknowledge that the bout was over. Not particularly surprising, since she obviously didn't approve. He bent to pick up his bag and caught her looking at him.

Heat seared him. A pink luster shone on her face, like she'd come from a steam bath, and her eyes were distant, lidded, vaguely fogged. Her mouth was parted and it made it look intensely, painfully lovely, and she didn't stir even when he looked at her. Instead she continued to regard him with a sort of shameless and glassy appraisal, the way one considered a painting or a sculpture, which made his whole body feel warm and vaguely objectified.

There was a pulse of want. He forgot where he was and what he was doing, and he almost stumbled. There was a tightness all over his body, like his skin was too small.

And what else was he possibly supposed to feel, when she was looking like that. She looked like she wanted to— she looked like he didn't even know the names for everything she wanted to do.

He stepped forward and picked up his bag. Slung it over his shoulder, straightened up, and looked down at her with his hands in his pockets. At the risk of stating the obvious, it was not a friendly type of expression.

Wasn't that an idea.

A thin and sparkling avenue of possibility opened up in the back of his head.

He jerked his head at the door. "Meeting's over," he said.

“I know,” she said at once, irritated. She shouldered her bag and shoved past him. “Right. Good job.”

“Ta,” he said mildly, and he wasn’t even put out at her tone; there was a sort of giddy pinwheel happening somewhere in his chest, and he wasn’t inclined to let much of anything spoil it. She pushed through the crowd, ignoring several procedural questions from members who wanted her advice, which was so unlike her that it made him laugh.

That was — that was wonderful. That was excellent. That was a development of incredible, unsurpassed quality, and it was to be celebrated. It *would* be celebrated. Someone should get fireworks. He deserved them. He was going to shake Harry’s hand. He was going to shake *Ron’s* hand, too, they were opponents, it was procedure. He could shake everyone’s hand in the room, at that, why not, they’d worked hard, he was proud of them. He was a munificent being of unearthly beauty and talent, and he was in a wonderful fucking mood.

He didn’t notice how the meeting ended, only at once, it had. Daphne was chattering about some flaw she’d hammered out in her Disarming Charm, and Colin bobbing around hollering about how sodding cool it had all been. Neville and Luna were having a pleasant conversation about a species of plant that assuredly did not exist, and the twins had gone off to hide dungbombs in a broom closet for Filch. Hermione’s spine was as straight as an iron bar — which Harry and Ron took for disapproval, and Ron twice apologized to her, though she pretended not to hear him.

The sunlight was fading from the windows, the sky a dusty blue, a cool draft starting to whisper through the atrium. Footsteps clicked distantly on the stone, and the portraits murmured and waved *hello* as evening settled in. The Ravenclaws drifted off to their own common room, Cho with a firm parting kiss to Harry’s flame-bright cheek; the Hufflepuffs, led by a cheerful Cedric, pattered off down the stairs.

As he was waving off the last of them, Harry gasped and dropped to his knees. The remaining Gryffindors lurched to catch him.

“Potter?”

“Harry!”

“Get him up, help him, go on—”

Leaning on a combination of Ginny, Ron, and Daphne, they wrestled him back to his feet, though he still leaned heavily on Ron’s shoulder. His hand was glued to his forehead, his face folded in pain.

“What is it? Talk to us, mate.”

“Scar,” he gritted out. “It’s bad.”

“Does this happen often?” said Ginny helplessly. “Like, d’you have a potion that helps, or…?”

“No,” said Harry weakly, “usually goes away on — on its own — oh, *shit.”*

He buckled again, breathing fast through his teeth, and then shook his head violently.

“It feels — wrong,” he gasped. “It feels… like… angry. There’s this… image? I can see a— a house— I know how it sounds, but— it’s real. It feels real. It’s a house, it’s got three towers, and it’s — it’s ruined, though, it’s falling apart— someone’s emptied it out— it *hurts—”*

“Should we go to the Hospital Wing?” murmured Daphne, ducking down to check his temperature. “You’re very warm.”

“It’ll wear off.”

“I’m more concerned about what happens before it does, my dear.”

“I don’t want the Hospital Wing.”

The group shifted back, clearing a small ring of space. Then Harry yelped and keeled over again, and Ron corrected: “Yep, nope, Hospital Wing, here we go,” and with one of Harry’s arms slung over his shoulder, he began to drag him out of the Room of Requirement. Harry made sounds of protest, but being incapable of higher motor function, the decision was made for him by the man he was using as a makeshift spine. Daphne hurried up to balance him out on the other arm.

“Someone get his things,” she called, “he dropped his wand—”

“We’ll get them!” said Hermione briskly. “Take him ahead! We’ll meet you there.”

She fell back behind the group, which were shepherding Harry up to the Hospital Wing in a potential too-many-cooks situation. Harry, for his part, seemed indignant but also in need of helping, and was grumbling with the irritated note of a man who believed his health to be much less dire than it was. Draco decided to let those with better bedside manners deal with a patient in such a state, let the door slide shut behind them.

Hermione slowly bent to lift Harry’s bag, and tucked his wand safely inside it. She went about packing his things with an absent, thoughtless care, smoothing out the pages of his books, wrapping his parchment scrolls tightly, and folding his seeker’s gloves into thirds before sliding them into their own compartment. It was with a fond, filial smile that she lifted his pocket snitch, and cocked it to the light, before tucking it into the bottom of the satchel and fastening its snap.

Draco leaned against the door, watching her.

“Sickle for your thoughts.”

Hermione blinked, and shook herself.

“A house with three towers… That’s very specific.”

“It could be a fever dream.”

“Or Dumbledore could be right. And that could have been — a vision of something else.”

“You think the Dark Lord was inspecting real estate?”

She exhaled in mild amusement, and glanced at him, her eyes soft and almost yellow in the sheer evening light. It drew something in his chest tight together, like lacing the strings of a corset, a pleasant pressure.

“Alright there?” he said evenly, and she twitched. Dropped her hand from her mouth.

“Fine. I’m fine. Frankly, I should be the one asking you. After that production.”

“Worried, Granger?”

“Terrified. If you’d won, I’d never hear the end of it.”

She shouldered Harry’s bag and approached the door, where he leaned casually.

“That fight was far more involved than it needed to be.”

“I thought you wanted me to be impressive.”

“That wasn’t license to be reckless.”

“Were you impressed?”

“By recklessness? No. It takes rather more than that to impress me, thanks.”

A bald lie. “Such as?”

“Such as good judgment!”

“Good judgment stirs the blood, does it?”

“Yes. And prudence,” she said, voice stilted. “Wisdom. Common sense.”

“That’s what you like?”

“Maybe it is,” she said, finally. She folded her arms and lifted her chin, cocking her head up with an undeniable edge of haughtiness. She was astonishingly, vexingly pretty. “So what? They’re excellent qualities in a person.”

“Inarguably. But one feels rather sorry for him.”

“Who?”

“The fellow you’d like.”

“I don’t… follow.”

He reached out and straightened her prefect’s badge. She let out a sharp breath.

“Well, he wouldn’t get to do that,” he said, “for example.”

When she replied, it was stilted and much-belated.

“Harry is in the Hospital Wing,” she said. “This isn't any kind of time — to be doing this.”

“What's 'this'?”

She shouldered past him, clutching Harry's bag.

“Granger,” he repeated, raising his voice, “what's 'this'?”

But Hermione had already left. He watched the door swing behind her, and the corner of his mouth twisted into a small, slow smirk.

-A very merry Taylor Swiftmas to all who celebrate.

-This chapter went through a lot of alternate titles before settling. Candidates included “St. Potter's College for Juvenile Delinquency,” “SOC101: Introduction to Peacocking,” and “Mating Rituals of the Common Pureblood”, although alas, I did decide ultimately that I should Try To Be Serious. (As Draco might say: not my forte.)

-Draco's understanding of his parents' courtship is what you get when your parents were an era-defining power couple that you, as a practicing Victorian, have carefully declined to think about as people with romantic feelings, or indeed passions of any kind not pertaining to French wines and rare broomsticks.

-Branching off a conversation in this chapter, it's a point of interest to me why (canon) Harry assumed he'd make prefect in fifth year. Specifically, he says he "didn't think about it" beforehand, but if he had, then he would have assumed it would be him (which — dude, literally no one has broken more rules than you, but okay.) His reasons for it are pretty contrived, too; he references fighting the basilisk by himself, without Ron, for instance, which is obviously impressive, but also has zero to do with being a prefect.

-And TBC, it's a totally natural thing for a 15 y/o boy to see his friend get a Shiny and think "why not me tho :/", so this isn't trying to be like a CinemaSins *ding!* moment, I just find it interesting. Harry's competitive streak always surprises me for some reason. Still James's son, as it were.

-So many incredible, jaw-dropping comments on the last chapter: I want to present each of you with a draught of Felix Felicis and a very, very good cup of coffee for breakfast. Or tea, or champagne, or whatever you like your mornings to start with. Maybe all three!

-Next chapter goes up on Friday! Title: "Occlumency." Or, alternately: Draco Malfoy and the Year of A Million God Damn Extracurricular Activities.

Occlumency

Chapter 65: Occlumency

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The strangest thing about starting a secret association was how little it seemed to matter. It made no difference to most of the student body, who still steered clear of Harry and by extension anyone seen with them; it certainly made no difference to Umbridge, whose presence infected the hallways with a tinge of anxious gloom even when it was only a possibility; but sometimes, someone passed in the hallway, and they would offer a tiny grin — and there would be a sting of relief and pleasure, knowing what secret that grin carried. A secret was something Umbridge could not touch.

The memory of a sun-filled Room of Requirement became somewhere to send his mind when the coldness of the world threatened to disappoint him.

Their lives fell into a slow promenade, as daylight grew scarce, and drafts chilled the hallways. Winter rains mowed seas of mud into the castle lawns, which had grown shaggy and wild in Hagrid's absence.

Defense Club met twice more that October, and once in early November, each meeting longer and more successful than the last. Harry had found his stride as a teacher: it laid in doing as little actual instruction as possible, and instead offering exhortations of encouragement while dispatching others to issue critique. When someone needed a full deconstruction or a primer in spell theory, as Daphne and Neville often did, he would tap Hermione; for problems of confidence or aggression, he ushered them towards Ron; and to Draco's disgruntlement, he found questions about technique and execution directed towards him, which obligated him to spend the better part of an afternoon trying to understand why Seamus's *Reparo* blew up everything it touched.

“Neville said you were a good tutor,” said Seamus, blithely unapologetic.

“And if he’s lucky, I might someday forgive him for it,” said Draco, rolling up his sleeve to hide the singe marks.

Hermione oscillated between misery and fervent, overworked relish. Preparing lessons for several other years’ Defense curriculums compressed her preexisting homework routine so closely it should achieve fusion. Often she would stay in the library well after curfew, forcing Draco, as the other prefect with a curfew-exemption, to go fetch her.

“Draco,” she said, before he rounded the corner to her table.

He paused, and then stepped into view. She was alone in the lamplight, surrounded by rows of leatherbound Transfiguration textbooks. Her head remained bent over her notes, which she was color-coding with muggle highlighters.

The way she said his name was particular. It wasn’t a quick, clipped lilt from consonant to consonant, like Harry, or Ron’s drawl, which always carried a faint hint of aspersion in it, like he couldn’t quite believe it was a real name; she said his name with elegance and clarity, with the exacting pronunciation she used for incantations, like a mellifluous charm.

The last exhalation drew her lips into a soft moue, which lingered sometimes, as if she was holding it on her tongue.

“Did you cast a Detection Charm?” He lifted one of her scrolls to the light. Her handwriting degenerated in the places where she had become passionate about the material; she started to press down harder, and the quill blotted. His lip quirked.

She shook her head. “I recognized your footsteps,” she said, boxing a line in yellow.

“Do I have unusual footsteps?”

“No, but your legs are longer than Harry’s and shorter than Ron’s, and you walk quickly, like Harry, but he walks softly and you don’t. Ron shifts his weight more from side to side, which makes his steps heavier than yours. Also, it’s after curfew, and you’re the only one allowed to be here.” She glanced up at him, as if verifying her deduction, and returned to work.

He smiled. “Look who’s clever.”

“I spend most waking moments with you lot,” she said, mildly embarrassed. “We all know far too much about each other.”

“I wouldn’t say so.”

She capped her highlighter and reached for a quill. “Really? Of all people, I thought you’d be most jealous of your privacy.”

“I don’t have any to be jealous of. We live on top of each other. I haven’t had time alone with anyone in weeks.”

“We’re alone now,” she pointed out. A beat of silence followed.

She looked up in alarm, as if realizing for the first time that he was actually there, and she was having a real conversation with him. Possibly she had mistaken him for a stress-induced hallucination.

He braced his arms on the back of a chair, examining the spread on the table.

“I’ve been dispatched to pry you out of the library.”

“You’ll never take me alive,” she said, with a quirk of her lip.

“So this is to be a waiting game?”

“Exactly. We’re both waiting until you give up.”

“Or,” he suggested, “I could petrify you and carry you back to Gryffindor.”

“Go ahead,” she said, offensively unintimidated. “Yesterday I found a jinx that kills all the hair follicles on someone’s body. Do you think Parvati would still fancy you if you were bald?”

She placed her chin in her hands, smiling.

Horrible lovely girl. It would be more dignified if threatening him made her less attractive.

“Love alters not when it alteration finds.”

She snorted emphatically. An upraised finger leveled an objection. “One, it’s ‘love *is not love which* alters, et cetera,” she said, “and two, you are so ludicrously pretentious—”

“Says the girl who corrected me.”

“—as if, three, Shakespeare’s ‘ever-fixéd mark’ that ‘bears out to the edge of doom’ substitutes for ‘thinks the male chaser’s quite fit, actually,’ two things identical in import and fervor—”

“Well, she’s not wrong.”

“—and four — oh, get over yourself, would you please—”

“Not my forte.”

“—and, *four:* where did you read Sonnet 116?”

“We’ve a copy at home. Shakespeare was a wizard.” He drew his wand and twirled it through his fingers, idly wheeling its point through the air.

“He was not.”

“Edward de Vere was a wizard,” he amended.

She straightened. “Don’t even think about it.”

“There’s plenty of evidence.”

“You cannot be an Oxfordian. I’ll skin you.”

“Don’t be such an ideologue, Granger. The magic in *Midsummer Night’s* is entirely consistent with wizardry, down to the correct application of distilled wild pansy to brew what is, clearly, amortentia —”

“You’re mad. That’s completely coincidental, runs against a mountain of counterevidence, and they don’t even drink it, they dribble it in her eyes—”

“Artistic license.”

“That doesn’t make any sense!”

She leaned forward on the table, slack-jawed with disbelief and indignation. Notes forgotten, ink smearing the underside of her wrists. A smudge of ink on her cheek, evidencing a forgetful swipe of her hand. Her hair was twisted up into a knot on her head, and held in place with her wand. He imagined her wrestling it up out of frustration and impaling it on the nearest object.

There was ink on her cheek. Also, on her fingers. She had small hands, pretty ones. There were writing calluses on her knuckles and round short nails that she bit when she was anxious, or sometimes just held to her mouth, pressing a divot in her bottom lip. Pretty hands, and a pretty mouth.

She hadn’t pursued the argument. Her attention seemed preoccupied with the wand in his hand. She wasn’t even scowling anymore.

He stilled it, and her eyes moved.

She took a sharp breath. “You’re provoking me on purpose,” she decided. “You know you’re wrong about this. You just want to distract me.”

“Am I any good at it?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. He smiled guilelessly. Or with the intention of approximating guilelessness, anyway. He could not vouch for the total absence of guile.

“I’m warning you right now, if I don’t finish this because of you, you’re going to long for the days you had eyebrows.”

“Tant pis.” He rounded the table and leaned over her shoulder to peer at what she was writing. She stiffened and shifted away slightly.

“Is that French for ‘allow me to breathe down your neck’?”

“It’s French for ‘get over it,’” he said into her ear. “What are we doing?”

“What are we— *we* are invading personal space! Apparently!”

“In the essay, Granger. Did you decide if transfigured gold counts as legal tender?”

“Would y— no, but it’s ultimately more a question of law than of magic. For one, galleons aren’t solid gold, they’re a nickel-brass alloy with a gold coating, and the composition is a government secret, so all you could do is approximate volume and density. You could make something that looked like a galleon, but a simple charm would reveal it as a counterfeit.”

“How do you deal with the Duplication objection?”

“Oh, that’s simple! Duplication Charms can produce more of something, but they can’t replicate a magical signature, because those are unique to the object. And as to the question of whether you can transfigure a galleon *into* something else and still use it as

tender — well, of course you can, but good luck convincing someone to take a tin cup instead of a gold coin."

"That's very good."

"Thank you," she said happily.

Her eyes were soft from surprise at the compliment, and she'd almost certainly come back to herself in a minute, but until then, it was a pleasure to hold the full radius of her attention, and drink in warmth.

What do you want? I'll do it for you. Fight a dragon or run through a sewer or break the law.

There was nothing to be done about it. The feeling got worse every day, like tendrils of a trawling vine reaching deeper and deeper, twining around each vein and artery, a lattice of greed.

"What?" she said. "Is there something?"

The smudge on her cheek moved when she spoke.

She jumped when he touched her. His thumb glided across the ridge of her cheekbone, lifting the coloration from it, leaving her clear-faced and gaping.

"What are you doing?"

"There was a mark."

She had short, delicate brown eyelashes. He could count them. "I see," she said. "Is it — is it gone?"

"What?"

"The mark," she said steadily. "Is it gone?"

It was.

“No,” he said. “Here.”

This time he drew the back of his knuckles across her cheek, and then touched the spot with the pad of his thumb, leaving a sort of brilliant tingling in his fingers. Her freckles sank into the heat of a blush like stars washing out in a sunrise.

“There is,” she said, “such a thing as a Scouring Charm.”

“There is.” He felt distant and outside of himself, and at the same time, intently, intensely present in his body, every nerve ending firing off some signal of pay attention. “You’re always telling me we needn’t use magic for everything.”

Her eyes skirted over the table, flitting from object to object without seeing them. “You’re not usually the touchy type.”

“I touch you.”

She started.

He had seen her in every kind of frustration known to man or Granger; her endeared irritation when friends begged for homework answers, her snarling vexation at students caught in reckless behavior, and most poignant of all, her hot, piercing, powerless frustration when she smashed herself up against something no amount of good or right could fix. But he had never seen her frustrated like this. It verged on pleasure, like satisfaction chafing on a collar.

“Yes, well. You’re used to me,” she said, a hopeless vye at flippancy. “I’ve worn you down. Most people lack the patience it takes to domesticate—”

“I assure you, it’s quite conscious.”

Her sentence crumbled off on a long exhale.

Her hand moved to her mouth and made a fist before it got there, catching herself.

“If you mean the thing on staircases, and the doors, then yes. Fine. You’re a gentleman. You get points.”

“Have you ever read the rules of etiquette?” he said. His voice was calm. “If you had, you might know that touching between boys and girls is actually rather discouraged, in general. Point of fact.”

She cleared her throat. She still was looking down at the table, her eyelashes brushing her cheeks. Her tongue darted faintly at her bottom lip. “And you’re telling me this: why?”

He shrugged. “What I said. It’s a choice.”

Her eyes slotted closed.

“Fine,” she said, in a clear, flat voice. “I’ll finish it in the morning. You can lay off the charm.”

She moved her chair back and stood up, and he shifted out of her way, watching as she vigorously corralled her notes.

Uncertainty shoved its awkward elbow in. “Granger,” he said, “are you… cross?”

“I’m not cross,” she said, still flat. “I need sleep. That’s all. And that was — crossing a line, by the way. It’s fine, just — so you know.”

“What line?”

“If you want me to do something, don’t ‘turn it on’ like that. I’m not Parvati, or Marietta, and I don’t want to be treated that way. And it’s *fine,* I’m not mad, and I know it’s probably fun, but I don’t want you to do it again. I’m telling you now because I’m trying to be respectful and clear.”

“I wasn’t ‘turning it on,’ it wasn’t manipulative—”

“Maybe it wasn’t meant that way,” she said brightly, clutching her textbooks to her chest, “but I wish you wouldn’t. Alright? That’s all. It isn’t a big deal. We can forget it.”

Absolutely he wouldn’t. For one thing, the promise not to flirt with her was one he had absolutely no intention of making nor keeping. For another, he hadn’t the first idea what she was so unhappy about; he’d never flirted with Parvati nor Marietta in his life, and the supposition was as baffling as her newfound standoffishness.

He *knew* she liked him. At least a little. She could say whatever she wanted, but she couldn’t take away the way she looked at him.

Still, he did know her. Knew her well enough to ease off when the cracks started showing, and to take an olive branch on the rare occasions she offered them.

“Granger.”

She turned around, eyes wide, face fixedly pleasant.

“It really was a very good argument,” he said, this time in a voice he’d use for class.

Her smile eased into something broader and sunnier, commingling pride and relief.

“Thank you,” she said, and perhaps as a show of goodwill, she talked about the Gringotts economy for the whole walk back to Gryffindor.

In retrospect, he didn't know why he'd ever expected her to make it easy on him.

The next morning, Angelina sidled over at breakfast. “Alright, boys,” she announced, planting her elbow on Fred’s shoulder. “Results just went up, but I’ll save you the trip: Weasley, you’re keeper.”

Ron vented pumpkin juice through his nose.

“Ah, no,” said Fred gravely, “Johnson, I appreciate it, but it’s bad optics. Can’t have people thinking I slept my way to the top.”

“She was talking to me, dolt,” said George. “No one’s gonna look at you and think you’re sleeping your way anywhere.”

“Could too!”

“Could not.”

Angelina held up a finger to Ron. She appropriated Draco’s copy of the *Prophet* , folded it in half, and whacked each twin in the head.

“Ow!”

“Oi!”

“Ron, practices are six to eight, weekdays,” she announced. “See Hooch if you need a broom. Any of you seen Ginny, by the way? I’m putting her on reserve; she’s got a good arm, but she’s overeager.”

“She’s at the Ravenclaw table,” crooned George.

Fred leered. “With *Miiiiiiiiiiichael.”*

“Mickey Cee!”

“Brother Mike!”

“Michael Corndog.”

“McCornster.”

“The *stallion.”*

“The stud of Gryffindor Tower. Minerva McGonagall, lock up your girls—”

“Jesus Christ,” sighed Angelina.

“—because the ‘C’ stands for *co—”*

Fred yelped: this time, she’d hit him on the arse.

“Thanks for nothing,” she announced. “Ta.”

“I’m still your favorite player, yeah, Anj?” Fred shouted.

“You’re not even my favorite beater.”

He blew her a kiss.

Harry seized Ron and shook him, which he didn’t seem to register. “Ron, mate! Cracking! Keeper! Bang-on! Congratulations!”

“I’m done for,” he whispered hollowly.

“Good j— what?”

He seized Harry’s collar, eliciting a squawk. *“I can’t play,* Harry! I’ve never done it! I’ve only ever flown with my idiot brothers—”

“Thanks, Ronniekins!”

“—and I don’t even have a broom! I’ve buggered us! Oh my God. I’ve buggered us.”

Draco yawned and flicked his wand. Ron gagged, palpating his throat.

“Keep your prognostications to yourself, thank you. Despair all you like, but do it privately; I have enough of my own neuroses, and yours are comparatively boring.”

He dispelled the charm with another lazy flick.

“Twat!” said Ron clearly, with more composure.

“See? Much better.”

The morning post descended in a flurry of parchment and feathers, scattering parcels all along the table. Hedwig landed in front of Harry with an unmarked brown envelope. While he opened it, Draco caught one copy of the *Prophet* and tossed the other to Ron, who was still gaping at nothing in particular. It smacked him in the face. He didn’t move.

“It’s Padfoot,” said Harry. “I told him about Umbridge, and he says the Map has secret ways out of the castle, if it gets so bad we need to hide out. He thinks there’s still some food left in the Shack — ha! Guess he thinks we should sneak out and set up an underground camp or something—”

Hermione threw down her fork, staring at him. He startled.

“...What?”

“Well, that was stupid!” she snapped.

“It wasn’t stupid,” he said jaggedly, “it was — I was careful, I didn’t put anything important in it, I’m not an idiot—”

“Did you not listen to Mad-Eye? Scratch that. Did you not listen to Arthur? Do you not listen to *me?”*

“It’s a letter! It’s not a threat!”

“Taken by owl! A large, white, *rare* owl, which is registered to you!”

“Ron writes to Arthur!”

“I don’t have to explain why it’s different for Ron.”

“Sure. It’s different. Everyone gets to write their parents but me.”

“You could write to Arthur at the Burrow any time you liked,” she said crisply. “Any time. I’m sure the Weasleys would welcome it. Wouldn’t

they, Ron?”

“Keep me out of this,” Ron said clearly.

“I sent the letter before we talked to Arthur, by the way,” said Harry, “and I wouldn’t have done, if I’d known. Not that anyone asked. I don’t want to get anyone arrested, actually. But just for the record, I reckon it’s pretty cruel what Mad-Eye’s doing to him, locking him in there. Even Moony gets to leave.”

“Moony’s face isn’t plastered over half Britain, for one, and for two—”

“For two, Moony has the liberties that come with being inessential,” said Draco. He turned a page of the *Prophet* . “For a place as old as Twelve, there are all sorts of household wards that don’t activate unless a member of the master’s household is physically present.”

“...Do you mean the wards break if Padfoot leaves?”

“Not all of them. But it’d be noticeable. My mother compared it to the difference between a castle moat and a fully armed battleship.”

“Does that extend to the Manor wards?” said Hermione curiously. “Since it's technically yours?”

“It's held by my mother until I come of age. My father's will was carefully constructed so as to prevent an eight-year-old having sole legal ownership of a mansion. Anyway, the greatest threat to our borders at present are wandering sheep.”

“Change the subject,” muttered Ron. “Toad’s coming.”

Umbridge had sidled down from the faculty table and was swanning along the aisle, peering down at various children’s breakfasts, looking for all the world like she might snatch up a morsel at random and stuff it in her mouth.

A hand descended on his shoulder. Its grip was patentable.

“Hello, professor.”

“Draco.”

Snape loomed. It was one of his hobbies.

“I don’t suppose this is a social visit.”

“You are required in the headmaster’s office. As are you, Potter.”

Harry said warily, “Are we in trouble?” but this was dignified with no answer.

“As you were,” Snape informed the rest of the table coldly. Hermione half-rose to object, and Draco waved her off resignedly.

Harry hurried after them, using his sleeve to scrub gravy off his chin.

Snape wasted no time in steering them up the stairs. They were moving ruthlessly quick, particularly up flights of steps where a bit of caution might have saved Draco a near-hairy encounter with a trap stair. As per usual, Snape moved in silence, without a word of explanation or consideration for his godson’s comfort, but this was no great offense. Draco had resigned himself to a long life of being dragged around and ordered by people who never considered it necessary to explain where or why they were dragging him. It had started sometime around when he’d met Hermione.

He gradually recognized their route. It terminated in a golden griffin statue guarding an old oak door.

Panic kindled: a dumb hindbrain instinct. There was green light flickering in his periphery — it vanished when he turned his head, making his heart trip over itself, like it was always lurking behind him — but he gripped the feeling, throttled it, and shoved it down.

He was alive. And Hermione was downstairs. Probably in the same room where he’d last seen her, a big bright room full of students and teachers.

This was handled. He was handling it.

“Does Dumbledore want to see us?” Harry said.

“Refer to a standing policy on insipid questions,” said Snape, and forced them both through the door.

The headmaster’s office glittered with its celestial assortment of instruments, tinkling gently, while the smell of leather and sweet varnished wood commingled with smoke guttering pleasantly from a stick of incense at the far corner. The Sorting Hat, from its perch atop the far shelf, lifted its head and turned to peer at them as they came in. Snape shut the door behind them.

The headmaster’s desk was empty. Dumbledore was nowhere to be found in his office; the coterie of silver instruments twinkled, and wax dripped from low-guttering candles that floated among the rafters, casting yellow palls over the oil faces of ancient headmasters.

There was a woman sat across from him, and when she turned her head, Draco realized with a start that it was Narcissa.

He hadn’t heard from his mother since September. They were running out of things to talk about that weren’t under a gag order by one or both of them. She was intransigent on any political issue, and therefore a poor recipient for news of his life; she was unwilling to discuss her business with Dumbledore, and therefore incapable of making the reassurances he would have liked.

She was his mother, and he loved her, but he couldn’t talk to her. At one point in his life, that would have seemed like a contradiction in terms.

But no matter what the cadence of their last conversation had been — no matter how great the growing distance between them, no matter the friction between himself and a woman whose ideas about his friends, and possibly life, were disdainful at best — no matter

how much he was certain, on some level or other, he disappointed her — something in him unknotted, a release of unexpected relief.

The last time he had been in this office, there had been a man ready to kill him, and she had electrocuted him unconscious. Relief was a psychosomatic response. It wasn't sentimental. His heartbeat had returned to normal as a rational response to stimuli, and in any case couldn't be helped.

"Mother?"

"Draco," she murmured, rising from her chair. She opened her arms, and he stepped into them with a bewildered warmth. "Dreadfully sorry for the shock, darling, I didn't mean to sneak. Sit. Drink something. Lord, you're so thin. What have they fed you? Water and biscuits?"

"I'm fine—"

"And why aren't your cuffs buttoned? Roll down your sleeves, dear, you're not a paperboy."

"Mother."

"Hello," said Harry. "This is nice. Why am I here?"

"I second that question," said Draco forcefully. Narcissa hadn't glanced at Harry except for a cursory once-over when he came in; her eyes were only for him, but they were tired and worried, and lacked the sort of twinkle that ought to greet a family reunion.

"Potter needs Occlumency lessons," said Snape.

There was a pause.

"Gesundheit," said Harry.

"A thousand pardons," said Draco. "What he means to say is: 'Thank you, professor, for answering my question; would it trouble you

awfully to elaborate on the substance of your response?'"

"Occlumency is a form of mind magic," Narcissa murmured. "It's a defense against Legilimency."

"Legilly… is that something to do with writing?"

"Laws, I'd think," muttered Draco. No one laughed at his spectacular jest. Hermione would have, but she wasn't here. His life was a series of unremitting miseries.

"A trained Legilimens," she said, "wields the power to invade a mind, and can access the thoughts of an unprepared subject."

"They can read minds?" said Harry. But Draco had a more specific concern.

He rounded on his mother. "Can you do it?"

She flicked her fingers dismissively. "A little."

"Have you?"

A wry smile crossed her mouth. "Darling, if someone had been rooting around in your head, you would have noticed."

He jerked his chin at Snape.

"I do not," said Snape calmly.

"One cannot perform Legilimency without opening one's mind to attack. Only a wizard of exceptional skill can maintain mental defenses while executing an assault."

Draco drummed his fingers on the armrest. "Such as the Dark Lord. For example."

"Quite."

The world pressed in on the walls of the headmaster’s office, heavy and small.

“Alright,” said Harry, with unexpected calm. “So what now?”

“Dumbledore,” Snape said, with a taut, complicated inflection, “believes your scar has created a mental link between the Dark Lord and yourself. The episodes in which your scar causes pain tend to overlap with periods in which we believe he, the Dark Lord, feels something passionately. In the past year, I have… personally… seen cause to believe the bond is real.”

“You’ve been with the Dark Lord?” Draco said sharply. “Spying?”

Snape made a noncommittal gesture.

“Why in God’s name does he trust you?”

Snape twitched irritably. “I have submitted to onerous tests of my fidelity,” he said, touching his forearm. “And I offer him pieces of information that Dumbledore does not fear to lose.”

“Such as?”

Narcissa made a small quelling noise. Snape didn't answer.

Draco rounded on her. “Fine. What about you?”

“No,” she said. “I have been spared that duty.”

“The Dark Lord requires only the strongest and bravest,” Snape said silkily. “A crumbling, infirm widow, mind rent asunder from the blow of her husband’s death, would merely disgrace his ranks.”

Narcissa gave a low laugh.

“And Dumbledore couldn’t tell me any of that himself?” said Harry pointedly. “Where is he, anyway? Can’t he teach me the Occlu-whatsit?”

“Entertaining your Defense Against the Dark Arts professor,” Snape sneered. “Or pretending to, in order to spare himself from the trials of dealing with thick-skulled cretins.”

Harry’s eyes glittered. Doom impended.

“But Professor Dumbledore always speaks so highly of you, sir.”

Snape moved sharply, and Draco instinctively stepped toward Harry. But he needn’t have bothered. Narcissa sighed and rose to her feet, and Snape drew back, his hands closing and unclosing restlessly near his wandsheath.

“We begin tonight,” she said. “I am not often free, and so we will work from my schedule. Severus will extract you from any activities may overlap with our lessons. It is paramount that few people know I am here.”

This might have been the most startling revelation yet.

“Mother, you’re not serious.”

“Dear heart, we’ve spoken about contradicting me in public. Besides which, Dumbledore has requested specifically that I offer my services, and it is a service easily rendered indeed, since the alternative is mucking around in the low country — have you any idea how many buggering caves there are in Cornwall, Severus?”

“What the hell are you doing in Cornwall?”

“Language, Draco.”

“You *just* said—”

“Hang on,” said Harry. “Both of us?”

“Yes. Draco will learn with you.”

Draco was surprised to learn this as the next person, that being a boy who was admittedly quite easy to surprise.

“And in what kind of situation, Mother, do you expect your son to need Occlumency?”

“None that I would permit,” she said. “But I should not allow anyone at this school to have an education superior to yours, my darling.”

Draco stared at her. The idea of his mother poking around in his mind raised a host of terrors.

“Why not Snape?”

“I assure you most confidently,” said Snape, “that neither of you desire prolonged exposure to my mind.”

“I don’t want prolonged exposure to *anyone’s* mind,” said Harry. “I’d rather not do this. If you’re asking me, which no one has.”

He was ignored. Draco was preoccupied, and the adults simply didn’t care.

“You have until curfew,” Snape told Narcissa, unfolding himself from the wall. “Good luck.”

Then he was gone.

Narcissa pointed her wand at the door. A deadbolt clicked.

She sheathed her wand up her sleeve and circled the desk. “Follow me.”

At the back of the room there was a vast oaken cabinet with a display of enormous colorful perfume bottles in hues as varied as a dandy’s pocket square collection. At the back of the cabinet there was a mirror, though it was smeared with brassy clouds of age, and dark shapes drifted sinisterly behind the warped outline of their reflections.

She unlocked the cabinet and unfolded the bottom drawers, which revealed a stone basin engraved with runes. It was shaped like a fountain, but the liquid inside wasn't water; instead, it was an opaque silver fluid crowned with puffs of mist.

"This is a Pensieve," she said.

"I know that. There's one at the Manor," he said impatiently; it sat in his father's office, along with his grandfather's collection of pixie wings and a portrait of a noisome great aunt.

"I'm sure you do, darling, but Mr. Potter was raised in squalor."

"It wasn't squalor," said Harry. "We had a television."

Narcissa glanced at him like a dog interrupting a conversation on Proust.

"A mind is a complicated object," she continued. "It is not a library of memories; it is an interaction of impressions, perceptions, and recollections constantly changing in time. The chief instrument of the Occlumens is *focus."* She drew her wand away, and a luminescent strand of silver came with it, emerging from the temple like she had unspooled part of her brain. When she flicked her wand, it sank into the Pensieve like a falling feather. "In a manner of speaking, this is the only thing an Occlumens must do."

"That's all?" said Harry. "I just try to not think about things?"

"Excellent, he'll be a natural," said Draco. Narcissa pinched his ear, and he whined, batting her away.

"You sound like you imagine it will be easy," she warned Harry.

"Well, I dunno. Compared to Potions?"

She slotted the Pensieve into its berth, then turned and pointed her wand at him. "Do you have a lover?"

Harry’s jaw dropped. Then he socked Draco on the arm.

“You *sneak—”*

“Me? I didn’t tell her anything! I didn’t even want to know about it myself!”

“Good. You do,” said Narcissa evenly. “What’s the color of her hair?”

“What does that m—?”

“Legilimens.”

Harry gasped.

He staggered back, his hands flying up in front of his face, as if trying to shield himself from a searing light.

“Cut it. Stop that — cut it out—”

“Mother?”

“I’m n— no.” His voice was shrill, not with pain, but anxiety. “Stop. Don’t touch that. Please. C’mon.”

“Focus,” she suggested, and the corner of her mouth gave a calm, mean little twitch. “You said it was easy.”

“You’re making me think about it!”

“I’m not.”

“Stop!” Harry squirmed as if trying to wriggle out of his own skin. “That’s — that was private!”

“I’m sure it used to be.”

His mother let Harry wriggle for a while longer, making indecent sounds of embarrassment and rage, before her face slackened.

Harry’s eyes snapped open on a gasp.

“Black,” she said coldly, and turned back to the Pensieve. “Her hair is black. And if she had been a double agent, you would have broken her cover.”

A chill skated down the back of his neck, peeling up the hairs there with cold fingers. Harry sagged to his knees, panting.

“So in a sense,” said Narcissa, her mouth curving unkindly, “I suppose one might consider it… *almost* as difficult as Potions.”

“That was Legilimency?” Harry rasped.

“An utterly mild form. I summoned a thought by association — I invoked it out loud — and then skimmed the surface of your thoughts. You could have resisted it by clearing your mind at any point.”

“It can get harder?” he croaked.

“It only gets harder. I gave you a beginner’s grace.”

“Why can’t I just throw you out?” he demanded. “Isn’t there anything I can do to just — close the door? Without having to do the mind-clearing stuff?”

Narcissa cocked her head. Draco recognized her expression as the masked patience of one condescending to the despairingly stupid.

It was one of his favorites, too.

“At the risk of unimaginable insult to five years of education at the finest wizarding institute in the world,” she said, “you have a wand.”

Draco laughed; Narcissa flashed him a thin smile.

“To wit,” she said, “you will have noticed that Legilimency begins with a spell. Severus tells me you have an uninspiring but serviceable

Shield Charm. I trust you can limp through the rest of that idea on your own."

"I can dodge the jinx?" Harry was much cheered. "That's great — I'll hardly need Occlumency at all, then—"

"If you find yourself in a situation where your opponent is easily disposed of, by all means, dispose away. But Albus has asked me to prepare you to face the Dark Lord."

His glee snuffed out.

"Which I cannot do," she added. "As I have told him, and though he is foolishly disinclined to believe it. Even Severus could not forge an Occlumens of the necessary skill from your mind as it is currently, in part because Severus himself cannot fully resist the Dark Lord."

"But Professor Snape—"

"Maintains his cover through a combination of extraordinary Occlumenic skill and a decade-spanning history of unhesitating service," she said curtly. "The first defense against Legilimency is not to inspire the need for it. The second is not to overburden yourself with valuable information. Severus knows precisely as much as is necessary. No more."

"According to who?"

"The person to *whom* he answers," she said, "is Albus Dumbledore. Take that as you will. Enough delay. Try once more; you may know in advance that I am going to seek the name of your owl. Be advised that this is a generosity the Dark Lord will not offer you."

"Hang on," said Harry desperately. "What if I can't do it? Say if I'm stuck, and I can't clear my mind, and I already know I know all the stuff that he's looking for, and I can't throw a jinx. Is there some trick? Like a shortcut? Can't I Obliviate myself or something?"

Narcissa delicately braced her knuckles against her mouth. At length:

“Obliviated memories are inaccessible. Even to Legilimency.”

“So you’re saying if I—”

“However. Self-Obliviation is categorically discouraged by medical professionals. It tends to… take… much more than is intended.” Another pause. “And the memories, of course, become irretrievable. In nearly all cases.”

“But—”

“Of those who survive.”

Harry went still.

“That unsettles you? Good. I don’t want Albus to come whinging that I gave his pupil some funny ideas about lopping off pieces of his own mind.” She lifted her wand. “Prepare yourself. *Legilimens.”*

Harry’s writhing was more subdued the second go around, but inside a minute he still ended up hunched on the floor. Narcissa broke off with a sigh and massaged the bridge of her nose as if she had a headache. Draco folded his arms and shifted his weight, dreading his turn.

“Hedwig,” she said, slightly strained. “Peculiar. Do you have German blood?”

“No idea,” said Harry, pointedly, from the floor. “Funny thing happened to my parents, you mightn’t have heard.”

Draco gave a small snigger. Narcissa ignored it, blinking away some irritant; abruptly, she whirled on Harry with disbelief. “Why were you at Castle Lestrange?”

“I wasn’t. Where’s that?”

“Don’t lie. I saw it, remember. Did you grow up in Cumbria? In the hills, perhaps?”

“Close,” Harry said. “Surrey.”

“Your muggles took you on holiday, then. To Windermere. To Carlisle.”

“Vernon wouldn’t take me to the supermarket,” said Harry placidly. “He worried people might think I was his son, you see. Or maybe he was worried they wouldn’t. I’ve got Petunia’s nose, according to Marge, though she was trollied when she said it, so I’d honestly be surprised—”

“Never mind. I must’ve… it was my memory, I suppose, not yours. Draco, you’re next.”

Admittedly, in terms of plausible places to find Harry Potter, the seat of House Lestrange ranked somewhere between the Slytherin commons and the surface of the moon. Added to which, it had been empty ever since his aunt had been arrested, and with her died the family line. Both of the Lestrange brothers were in Azkaban, and the house would default to some cousin upon their death.

“I am going to seek the password to the Gryffindor common room,” she said. “Prepare yourself.”

He slid his left foot back, reflexively. She smiled.

“Legilimens.”

He didn’t feel his mother enter his mind. It wasn’t a physical sensation: it was as though someone had touched the face of his consciousness and moved it, gently redirecting the lens of his mind’s eye.

He concentrated instead on Slytherin. He thought of the dungeon wall, a door swelling out of the brick, a green vault peppered with

reedy light from the lake.

The scene rippled, and changed: they were moving slowly up the stairs of the dungeons, sliding through narrow corridors rendered in the watercolor concept of memory. He caught them on the grand staircase and turned firmly away, directing his thoughts toward the Great Hall; he could feel the tension as the other presence in his mind tried to split off and peel upward, but he focused intently on remaining in the Entrance Hall, the double-doors, the movement of golden light on the flagstones.

The doors opened, and Hermione stepped into them, followed by a blurry pack of first years. It was the Opening Feast.

And she was crossing the hall, talking animatedly, but when she looked up and smiled, reflexively and warmly — there was a jolt of anxiety, and then he was flying up the stairs, soaring away from the scene.

He caught himself on the third floor and wrestled himself away from the route to Gryffindor. He could feel his mother's pushing, now, and it presented not as pain but as temptation: fleeting thoughts of a familiar staircase, a soft featherbed after a long day's work, a cat curled in the armchair.

Then they veered away, and there was a snippet of sound: a girl's crying; they were outside the Hospital Wing, and the sunrise was brimming behind the windows.

No. That was private.

Firelight on stone walls. Hot chocolate and roasting chestnuts by the grate. Rain washing the old windows. Hermione's prefect badge—

He scrambled for a distraction. Something significant, something his mother wouldn't be able to sweep past.

It came to him by accident, a thought he didn’t even necessarily recognize as his own: his father’s face, gazing gravely from his portrait at the Manor. Steel gray eyes that moved sightlessly over the hallway before him, hair the dull white of fresh snow.

They stopped moving. Hogwarts vanished, shattering into a whirl of fragmented sensations around the still locus of his father’s face — and then there was a warm breeze, a stirring on his cheek, and he was looking at a young man with his father’s face in miniature, tall and dressed in Hogwarts uniform.

For a shocking heartbeat, he thought it was himself, but his tie was green and silver.

The other boy was taller, older, with short hair coiffed in an older style. Lucius.

Memory sketched the rest of the scene only in blurs of gold and green: they were outdoors, and everything smelled of freshly cut grass, and there was something sweet and lemony on his tongue. Lucius was saying something — his voice was familiar and unsettling, like hearing an echo in a silent room — but he was talking to someone beyond the boundary of the memory, his expression politely closed-off.

Somewhere, a woman laughed. It wasn’t his mother.

A low contralto spoke in a murmur: “Hello, Princess.”

There was a clatter of metal. He opened his eyes.

One of the headmaster’s instruments lay in pieces on the floor. Narcissa leaned on the wall beside it. Harry tried to help her up, but she waved him off.

He recovered his senses, and then started forward in alarm. “Mother — I’m sorry—”

“No,” she snapped. “That was — acceptable. Well done, Draco.”

“Don’t.” She lifted a hand. “That was… an acceptable strategy. I did not… find the password.”

“What happened?” murmured Harry, looking equally impressed and unnerved. “What did you do?”

“Draco,” said Narcissa thickly, “launched a counteroffensive.”

“I did Legilimency?”

“It was not a proper attack. You had the advantage of knowing in advance what memory would be likely to distract your assaulter. Such will not be the case often. Nevertheless, you made use of the tools available,” she said stiffly. “The parameters of your task were capacious. You took advantage. Well done.”

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

She ignored it, drawing herself upright, and smoothed her hair. Her expression was all manicured neutrality. “Potter, you may leave us,” she said abruptly. “Come back in two weeks. I don’t suppose I need to tell you that a lack of practice will be apparent.”

““Right,” Harry mumbled. He shouldered his bag and hurried toward the office door. He glanced back at Draco, faintly curious, and then left.

Draco lingered while his mother set about repairing the instrument she’d displaced.

“That was Father,” he ventured, at length. “When he was at Hogwarts.”

She revealed nothing. Her spine was as straight as an obelisk.

“He was talking to someone. And there was a woman’s voice. Near the end.”

“Memory is a strange thing. Association is difficult to predict and almost impossible to control.” She lifted one shoulder indifferently. “What you are describing could have been anything. I don’t know what you heard.”

He was being told to turn back, and he obeyed her, not because he for one moment believed her, but because he loved her enough that the truth mattered less than her comfort.

“Does Castle Lestrange have three towers?”

She stopped short.

“How do you know that?”

“Because Potter saw it in a vision.”

His mother did something she had never done before.

She put her hand on her head, then moved it to her mouth, then turned around. “Damn it. Alright.”

“Mother? What does it mean?”

“It means the Dark Lord is securing the whereabouts of his horcruxes.” She crossed to the pensieve and shoved her wand to her temple, sieving out a memory. “If Potter saw it, and he was never there… unless he lied… but he knew nothing of the place, how could he, not even the name…”

Understanding slipped into place like a socket, and a searingly unpleasant bulb flared to life.

“That was the Dark Lord’s memory.”

She nodded. “Castle Lestrange was the seat of two Knights of Walpurgis,” she said. “Three, by marriage. He would presume, as the diary was stored at the Manor, that they would keep their treasure in their ancestral seat. The warding would make it nigh-impregnable.”

“But no one’s there. It was abandoned after the war.”

“Worse,” she said grimly. “Inland revenue.”

“Pardon?”

“Asset seizure, darling, keep up. After the war, Death Eater assets reverted to the state. The Lestranges held quite a few items of value in their keeping, along with the gold. Most of it was cursed,” she added, flicking the bottle’s contents even with a fingernail, “but still.”

“So the Ministry *took* it?”

“Welcome to the common grave robbery known as the estate tax.”

He ignored his mother’s admittedly hilarious joke. “But if there was a horcrux in the vault,” he said, “that means there’s a horcrux in Ministry custody.”

“Yes.”

“Assuming they haven’t sold it,” she added, working strand after strand of silver from her temple. She pooled them in a bottle that was quickly filling up. “If they did, then Merlin knows where it is. These were valuable artifacts, significant ones. Regulus, apparently, received one of great historic import. Any collector would willingly part with an organ for them.”

“But if it wasn’t — if the Ministry still had it — I imagine it’d be hidden somewhere. Somewhere reasonably secure.”

“I know what you’re thinking. It wouldn’t be in Gringotts. No one really trusts the goblins — I mean the bank’s alright for cash, and jewelry, so long as it isn’t goblin-make, but an artifact of real power? In their greedy little fingers? No wizard in their right mind—”

“What about the Department of Mysteries?”

She hummed. “It’s possible. It would, at least, be secure.”

She turned back to the Pensieve.

“The Lestranges weren’t caught until years after the war ended,” he said, changing the subject. “How did the Ministry lay hands on their estate?”

“They fled abroad. To Romania, I believe, although by that point… I wouldn’t have known.”

Her tone was a closed door.

“It also happens to be the former residence of Quirinius Quirrell,” she said absently. “He was State Alchemist there before he transferred to Hogwarts. Which means the Dark Lord’s revenant was in Bucharest at some point in 1990.”

“And you thought he might have retreated there to find a horcrux.”

“So we thought. It turns out that he ended up there by coincidence; Quirrell was an amateur spiritualist, and he had a fascination with Dark magic. He wanted the prestige of being the one to locate the Dark Lord’s body. There wasn’t one, at the Potters’ home, you see… It was a running challenge among magical academics to locate it, or else explain what happened to it. I believe Quirrell’s approach was to summon the Dark Lord’s spirit and ask it, the arrogant fool... it’s a shame he never lived to publish.” She sighed. “The danger of the Dark Arts, Draco, is that they always give you precisely what you wish for.”

She spoke with familiar strain.

“It doesn’t seem safe. Concentrating so many valuable assets in one family.”

“On the contrary. You must understand the way the Dark Lord thought — thinks. A family as close as ours became each other's collateral. We secured each other’s loyalties. For a time, anyway.”

It reminded him of something.

“Slytherin House is getting married.”

“Congratulations,” she said, descending from the dais. “To Ravenclaw, or Hufflepuff?”

“I’m serious.”

“You know, sometimes I fear you inherited your father’s sense of humor.”

“The whole cohort is engaged. Parkinson and Warrington. Bulstrode and Crabbe. Rosier and Selwyn, apparently, among others. Don’t you think that’s significant?”

“Probably, yes.”

“...Doesn’t it concern you?”

She snorted. “No. For one thing, I have bigger games to play. For another, even if I didn't, it would demean me to care. None of those children hold a candle to what our family was, and breeding mediocrity with mediocrity cannot produce greatness.”

This relieved him, somewhat. His mother had forgotten more about Society intrigue than he had ever known; if she wasn't concerned, he didn't see any reason to be.

“Pansy’s fiancé is a cretin.”

“What a shame,” she said, with a cool and unsurprised sorrow. “Status?”

“Respectable.”

“Wealthy?”

“Very.”

“Then it could be worse.” She brushed off her hands. “My heart goes out to her, all the same. She’s a darling girl. She should have a wedding present from us. Maybe the house in Austria.”

He did not think *darling girl* was how many would describe Pansy.

“Why didn’t you tell me the Greengrasses made an offer?” he asked abruptly.

She arched an eyebrow, an expression dreadfully reminiscent of the mirror. “Would you have wanted it?”

“No!”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Is that why you turned them down?”

“Darling, you don’t even ask my permission to invite someone to my house. Where I’d find the confidence to betrothe you, I certainly don’t know.”

She was good at this kind of insult, the honeyed acid, the thorn sheltered by a blameless rose.

“Anyway,” she added, “I suspect I’d set her up for a jilting and a runaway groomsman, and we’ve problems aplenty without looking more foolish.”

It was a joke, but her tone carried a thread of weight.

“You didn’t answer my question. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because there wasn’t anything to say.”

“Are you sure? We don’t talk so much that one feels the need to cull potential subjects.”

He regretted it at once when she stiffened.

“I — apologize.”

“Quite alright.” But she didn’t apologize, either. “I understand that you must be frustrated with how little I will tell you. I hope you understand that most secrets I keep are not by choice, and the few secrets I do choose, I do not keep because they bring me pleasure.”

He paused. Her mood was gentle. Her guard was low. He wasn’t likely to get a better opportunity.

“Which kind is Andromeda?”

“No.”

It was a flat, hard word.

“Mother—”

“Never,” she said, quietly. “You are the dearest creature in the world, and for your sake I would prostrate on burning ordure. The answer to that question is ‘never.’”

“She’s my aunt. I’ve a right to know her. And here’s another thing, I don’t think it’s for you to decide which members of our house deserve acknowledgement—”

“I never decided.” Her voice was low. “I did not write our customs. I did not write our traditions. Understand that I would deny you nothing. I deny them the privilege of knowing you, of being known by you. That is what they have to suffer for their wrongs.”

“What was Andromeda’s wrong? What did her marriage have to do with you?”

“Draco!”

“And what about Sirius? What did he ever do that I haven’t?”

“Don’t say the names—”

“I *will* if I want to, I’m Lord Malfoy, and I’ll use their names if it pleases me. Andromeda Black. Alphard Black. *Sirius Black:* Sorted in Gryffindor, check — associating with muggle-borns and blood traitors, check — consorting with enemies of the House of Black, *check* — smoked cigarettes, *check,* sorry, Mother—”

“Have pity.”

“Name the difference. Name the difference, besides the fact that you love me.”

“I loved them all.”

He stopped. Silver instruments clinked sadly in the ceiling.

She leaned on the mantle.

“I loved them all,” she repeated, with a thin and acrid dignity. “Every one. And they left me. Do not ask me to say their names.”

“Alright, Mother.”

She screwed her eyes shut.

“You know, I hate it when you speak to me that way,” she snapped. “As if I require handling. I never cared for handling, not when I was well, and not now. I was — I *am* one of the finest witches of my generation.”

“I know, Mother.”

“They used to call me brilliant,” she whispered. “Did you know that? Do you know how *good* — do you ever imagine what I was, before I was this?”

There was nothing to say to that. He hadn’t.

“You don’t. That’s my punishment. You’ll remember me as mad. Even if I live to a hundred, you’ll remember me as your poor mad

mother, and you'll say — 'she did her *best,* dear thing,' but never…" She opened her eyes, distant. "Do you have any idea how a five-year-old child looks at you?"

"I can't help not being five years old anymore."

"You don't know what I mean. But that's alright," she said, oddly calm. "It always happens this way. My mother said so, and I didn't understand it, but now I do. I made my peace with it. She never could."

"You're not making sense."

She didn't seem to care. "The mistake was always being too afraid… You get your cowardice from me. It was never your father's flaw."

"I'm not a coward."

"You are. I'm sorry. But I love you anyway. I love you beyond cowardice. Remember that, when we're apart," she said, and her premise froze the words on his lips. "Remember the love you carry with you, when you go."

"I'm right here," he said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Oh, darling," she said. Her smile was a terrible rictus of love. "They're such pretty words, aren't they? It's a pleasure to hear them again."

-[slides in across the finish line like I'm making a home run] IT'S STILL FRIDAY!

-Fun fact: the end of this chapter approximately marks the halfway point of this fic, since I have an equal number of chapters planned before and after it. Of course, the later books have much longer chapters than the earlier ones, so it's probably not an even split, but in terms of chapters, welcome to: THE MIDDLE PART!

-Please remember what I have said about pining and brain-rattling like a maraca. This is a fic written specifically to indulge my unique flavor of brain worms, and we will proceed as the brain worms direct us. Hold on. I know. Come here. Take my hand. We can do this. You and me. Together.

-For everyone who left a comment: My beloveds. Every week I think "people in the comments aren't going to outdo themselves spectacularly." And then everyone in the comments outdoes themselves spectacularly, and I am played for an absolute fool.

-This week's gift: a really, really fresh bowl of strawberries, with vanilla ice cream and warm shortbread. The kind that's come out of the oven thirty seconds ago. And champagne. The champagne's assumed.

-Next week's chapter goes up on you already know. It's called "Gryffindor vs. Slytherin." And it involves an impromptu choral performance.

Gryffindor vs. Slytherin

Chapter 66: Gryffindor vs. Slytherin

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

November ended with a dry rustle of black leaves on frost-blue lawns, and through swirling drifts of fog, they went down to the quidditch pitch for the first match against Slytherin.

The *Prophet* had run another spate of articles about conditions at Hogwarts, and Harry had been identified as a “lasting problem” in the student body.

The news did not so much change student attitudes towards Harry as redirect attention to festering ideas already planted. Not many people said hello to him when he came into breakfast, except for a few members of the Defense Club, a friend or two, and the Weasley twins, who tried to make up for the lack of enthusiasm by toppling over themselves with elaborate bows and hello’s; but then Umbridge came in for breakfast, cast her beady-eyed gaze over the hallway, and they quickly made themselves scarce. (They had set off dungbombs in the staff lounge earlier that week, and though Filch had twice tried to accuse them, there was an undeniable elegance in the difficulty of tracing a literal piece of dung.)

Cho came over and sat with him during breakfast, and she held Harry’s hand so tightly that he had to fumble through eating his eggs left-handed; when she left, wearing his Gryffindor jumper, she smiled bravely at him and ignored the sweep of whispering that followed her.

Daphne had painted her lips in rouge the color of the Gryffindor kit. She held an umbrella and hopped along cheerfully through the mud, though she leaned now and then on the nearest arm, and her steps wobbled slightly. She passed a group of Slytherins who broke into

whispers, and she produced a rigid smile that could light up a stadium.

Ron grunted and marched on, trailing his borrowed Cleansweep behind him in the mud.

“In any case, *I* envy the both of you for your Occlumency lessons,” Hermione announced. “I don’t fancy anyone rummaging around in my head.”

“Who has the time?” muttered Harry.

There was a cool lull while the wind rattled sadly through the stands.

“Fine,” said Hermione. “Good luck. Be safe. Don’t fall off your brooms.”

She glanced at each of them, lingering last on Draco; and as she brushed past to the stairs, her arm pressed briefly against his.

She whisked it away with the haste of an accident, and hurried up the stairs.

“Thanks,” Ron called after her hopefully. Draco suppressed a twinge of irritation at quite literally nothing in particular.

The stands shuddered under a groan of wind. The locker rooms were warm and candlelit, and it had never been harder to leave them than when standing on the takeoff spot, brooms braced against the gale, as one by one they lifted into the winnowing snap of fog. Angelina led the group in a tight V- formation around the stands, cleaving through curtains of stinging mist. Harry zipped up to hover in the highest quadrant of the field, cutting a lazy loop.

Red scarves fluttered in between green stalks of wool and foam. The stray exhortation of sparks erupted when the players came onto the field, and there were cheers. The quidditch pitch looked like a kind of

war arena in this weather, crowned in coronets of fog, the silver gusts peeled back by the windspeed of the play.

Roars met each player that erupted from the locker room. Applause swelled in long loops around the stadium. In the faculty box, McGonagall perched between Professor Umbridge and Professor Dumbledore, and when the Gryffindor team came out, she tapped out spirited applause on her palm. Umbridge, who was bundled in a puffball hat and a mink coat, glowered like a wet cat.

Theo sat next to Pansy and Astoria, wearing a thick double-breasted overcoat and a green scarf. Astoria had been given a front-row slot for her chair, and she was terribly excited about it.

“Good morning,” said someone who was not Lee Jordan.

It was the sixth year Slytherin prefect, Maude Rosier, who had her chin braced in her palm. “And a dreadful one it is. Can’t hope we’ll see anything impressive in this weather. Johnson has the quaffle… now Montague has it. Whoops, not anymore… there he goes up the pitch, and that’s a bludger from Weasley, don’t ask me which, Gryffindor’s got about twelve of them...”

Draco arced around to Angelina’s right, twisting a corkscrew over the stands, and drew a wave of screams from those who lost their hats in his slipstream. He changed his course when Angelina broke off, drifting into a wider formation that set him whirling under a bludger, only to duck again when Fred cracked it back over his head. There was Goyle’s habit of canting left, his way of always grunting before he hit the ball, giving a faint forewarning when a missile was en route. He caught a pass and volleyed it back to Angelina, slipped under Katie to change guards, and dodged another bludger.

The Slytherins were chanting. This wasn’t odd; the Gryffindor stands had been chanting errantly for Harry and Angelina, on and off, but it was unusual for how many of them were chanting the same thing.

“The crowd’s very spirited,” murmured Rosier. “Lots of energy. That’s Malfoy to Johnson, I mean Bell, sorry. Hard to tell them apart.”

The wind and the crowd battled to deafen him. The reedy strains of a chorus rose through the din.

What shall we do with a pureblood traitor?

What shall we do with a pureblood traitor?

“—and it’s Johnson back to Bell, Bell to shoot — whoops, missed,” said Rosier mildly, as if she couldn’t hear it. McGonagall half rose from her seat, her face a stone rictus, but Umbridge put her hand on her arm.

At the other end of the field, Ron was pale, clutching the front of his broomstick as if it might soon snap off.

Snap his wand and send him walking;

Snap his wand and send him walking—

Harry stopped moving. Draco willed him to discover some untapped reserves of self-restraint — perhaps ones rich from five years of neglect.

Wishful thinking. On the third repetition, Harry shot back down towards Ron, cutting back toward the goalhoops.

“POTTER!” Angelina shouted. She caught a pass and punted it hastily back to Katie, who fumbled it in haste, as Angelina shot off to try and recollect her seeker. “FOCUS!”

“Mm, Bell’s not in a very good position for it,” said Rosier, toying with her necklace. “She’s gotta beat Bletchely. Good luck. Shoots… oh, no…”

Umbridge and McGonagall had raised their voices. Umbridge lifted from her seat, her face dimming with displeasure. A flush colored in the sagging folds of her cheeks. Madam Hooch soared over to the Slytherin stands and began shouting at them, wholly without effect.

What shall we do with a halfblood bastard?

What shall we do with a halfblood bastard?

The Gryffindor stands started to object. Hermione was standing up and shouting, pink in the face; Daphne was tugging fretfully at her robes, trying to get her back down; Ginny was hanging out of the box, her wand out, snarling something that it was a mercy the wind had hidden from teachers' ears. Boos and hisses broke out. The attention was shifting away from the game.

There was a surge of movement: people had come out of their seats, and they were moving toward the Slytherin stands, led by a furious Seamus and Ginny.

Put 'em in his place with a horsewhip, won't we;

Put 'em in his place with a horsewhip, won't we—

"Quaffle's in Slytherin possession."

As if anyone cared. Hermione had grown distracted by trying to keep the others in their seats, and she had two first years by the back of the robes, shouting at them fruitlessly. Daphne was tugging their friends away from the entrance to the box. A flutter of flashbulbs testified to the presence of Colin and Dennis Creevey, who were snapping pictures in between shouts. In the Hufflepuff box, Cedric was trying to maintain decorum, but there was a cacophony breaking out, and he hadn't a chance. The Ravenclaws were stirring in disease, commingled boos and whistles and a bevy, above all else, of uncomfortable looks.

Then Daphne drew up short, staring at the Slytherin stands. Astoria was chanting the words between claps, as if she hadn't the slightest idea what they meant; or, worse, didn't care. Pansy was mouthing the words, but somewhat listlessly, her eyes wandering; Theo's mouth was sealed shut, and he was massaging his eyes.

The quaffle sailed past him, forgotten. Angelina swore and caught it, but he was cutting away, crossing the field, because the Slytherins were warming up for another verse.

What shall we do with a thieving mudblood?

What shall we do with a thieving mudblood?

McGonagall broke away from Umbridge and snatched the microphone from Rosier.

"ENOUGH! ENOUGH — DESIST PLAY —"

He looked for Hermione, found her easily — in the middle of a field of red and gold, her hair thrashing darkly in the wind. She had stopped shouting, and she was watching the Slytherin stands, her mouth parted, rigid not with fear but fury.

Abruptly, Daphne surged away from the stands, wrestling her way through the crowd. She cut effortlessly into a pack of squirming, shouting Gryffindors, hustled along the front row of seats, and vaulted the railing between boxes, at one point lifting Dennis Creevey bodily out of her way by the scruff of his neck. People yelped at her careless show of strength, but single-minded and furious, she ignored them.

She was shouting something; he couldn't hear her over the wind and the singing, but he knew the shape her lips were making. It was *Tori.*

Strap him to an anchor and then drop it,

Strap him to an anchor and then drop it—

“SILENCIO!”

It was Professor McGonagall.

The crowd cut out, and in the ringing peal of silence that ensued, the other shouts swelled to fill its new absence. Gryffindors surged over the barrier, and Slytherins leapt from their seats, shouting, almost chest to chest, red robes and green ones clashing and knitting in the thrashing currents of the mist, like waves of color meeting each other on a field of battle.

Daphne reached Astoria and seized her by the front of her shirt. She gave her a hard rattle, shouting something, and Astoria let out a shrill cry. The two broke into tussling. Ginny and Seamus were locked in a shouting match with Vincent Crabbe, and it wasn’t clear who touched who first, but one of them surged at the other, and Ginny stumbled onto her back foot; tripped — fell — and there was a flicker of shadow, and Harry shot over from the goalhoops, followed closely by Ron, who was bellowing at Crabbe long before he could hear him.

The Gryffindor team was constellating around the Slytherin box, and so was the Slytherin team. Faculty members were wrestling their way through the thick crowd of Hufflepuffs, but it was slow going.

Daphne gave Astoria another rattle and Astoria burst into tears, shoving her away. They were shouting at each other so fiercely that the nearest seats all peeled back, and stray magic rattled the seats beneath them, lifting the banners in gusts of cross-current wind. Theo stood up and tried to say something to Daphne, and she shoved him. He stumbled away; Pansy sprang up, snapping something at her, and Daphne snapped right back; they were arguing as he had never seen them argue, claws out, with a brute earnesty in their faces that seemed almost ill-fitting on features so acclimated to a sneer.

Astoria shoved Daphne’s chest and spat something. Daphne staggered back, stricken.

Then she slapped Astoria across the face.

The girl screamed. Crabbe rose from behind Astoria’s seat like six feet of towering marble.

He grabbed a fistful of Daphne’s hair and wrenched her back, and her shriek of pain pierced through the din.

At which point Ron leapt from his broomstick, hurtled into the crowd, and tackled him.

It erupted. The crowd, as one organism, had a seizure. Colors bled into each other. There were screams; spells glittered like stray veins of electricity over the crowd. Draco fumbled for his wand and cut a long arc around the fight, but there were spells flying, and he couldn’t see well enough to land anything, and his heart was in his stomach. Harry plummeted into the crowd with no such reservation, and the fight swelled to enfold the Gryffindor stands, which surged at Harry’s intervention like a cavalry charge.

Hermione was hurrying along the stairs, trying to get to the Slytherin box, and he set his jaw, following her carefully with his eyes. As if it would kill her to stay still. As if it would actually kill her, for once, not to run away from the danger instead of into it.

A spell veered wide from the crowd and nearly struck him. He slid into a dive into the stands, almost skimming a seat, and clipped the end of his broomstick on a railing. It tore out of his hands and he tumbled down, landing hard on his back, the breath driven from his lungs in one brute punch.

Steps thundered. He rolled aside to avoid being crushed underfoot. Then he shoved himself upright, gripping his wand, and cast a Shield Charm in time to block some careening Knockback Jinx — Colin Creevey bobbed under his arm, shouted *“Expelliarmus!”* and with an

unfortunately flawless form, ended up ripping a wand from some Slytherin seventh year's hand; Draco was mildly impressed with the quarter of his brain that wasn't furious — Hermione was nowhere to be found, nor Harry nor Ron, buried as they were in the fighting.

"Enough!"

A roll of petrification swept over the crowd. Bodies stilled like they had been cast in stone; limbs knit together in abortive wrestling matches were laid still, like the casts of ancient Pompeii, a whole landscape of childish brutality turned to a kind of grotesque oil painting.

Umbridge lowered her wand while it was still glowing. She lowered her mouth to the microphone.

"The match is canceled. Both teams are suspended until further notice. The Gryffindor team will report to my office this evening for detention. The Slytherin team will report tomorrow. You may all leave."

The spell broke. The crowd dropped, and students went tumbling to the ground as their momentum resumed itself. An outcry went up to complain of the decision — but now patrolmen came hurrying down from the doors, and students dissipated in haste, squawking here and there where a patrolman's arm wrenched them apart.

"You may all leave!" cried Umbridge. "Some of you will be retained for discipline at the discretion of the patrolmen. The rest of you will be escorted back to your dorms, where you will remain for the rest of the day! Thank you for your cooperation! Good day!"

They filed out, marched in quick-moving streams up the aisles. The patrolmen stood watch by the doors, their wands out and glowing.

He was full of a nauseous, oily outrage, one made unendurable by the mere fact that he *hadn't deserved it.* He had kept his distance. And yet his back still ached with a depth that he knew would bring

black bruises up his shoulders tomorrow, no less bruised for his restraint, and its ache suffused him with a directionless anger — because if he was going to be punished anyway, he at least should have gotten a few curses in for it. He could have jinxed Crabbe on his back, or treated him to a second version of the Boiling Curse he'd given Warrington; if it didn't make any bloody *difference,* then he might as well indulge the pit of white anger at the bottom of his stomach, because it was going to eat him one way or another.

The Gryffindor team was hurried off the pitch by patrolmen. Efforts at conversation received sharp censure, so they walked in silence. In the Entrance Hall, the castle was dim and silent, marked only by the echo of their footsteps. Fred came over and silently slung his arm around Ron's shoulders. George slapped his back. Katie leaned her head on Angelina's shoulder.

They climbed the stairs to the Pink Lady with a somber dignity, like returning soldiers, only the war had been fruitless, and they hadn't even won.

"Boys? Draco? Harry?"

Footsteps echoed on the stairs. Hermione came flying around the banister. When she saw them, she buckled in relief. "Oh," she cried, "Harry — Ron, thank God— I couldn't, I thought — where's — *Draco!"*

Alarmed at the urgency of his name on her lips, he turned, and just in time: she raced up the last flight of stairs and leapt on him.

He caught her, and let out a strangled noise as she wrapped herself tightly around his chest. He had to hold her up to prevent both of them falling down a flight of stairs.

She put her head between his collarbones and breathed, deeply, as if she was filling her lungs for the first time in years. He took the

chance to give her a once-over: she seemed unscathed, save the mud on her cheeks and the wind in her hair.

“Hello, there,” he said, and his voice was low. “Did something happen to me that I should know about?”

“I saw you fall into the stands—”

“‘Fall,’ nothing. It was a calibrated midair dismount. Look it up.”

She gave a strangled laugh. “Don’t even try. I didn’t know what happened — you could’ve broken your neck and been trampled, or shattered your ribs and punctured a lung, or something else, I don’t know, everything was a mess. I just couldn’t *see* you. Sorry. It all sounds silly now.”

“Not to discourage you from the fawning, and the affection, and the whatnot,” he said, “because it’s obviously quite appropriate, and I deserve it; but it’s been my personal experience that I’m extremely hard to kill.”

She gave a huffy laugh, and her breath was hot and shivery on his neck.

“You deserve something,” she muttered, and before he had time to wrestle his thoughts back from the gutter they’d gleefully vaulted into, she had unlatched from him, and was wrestling Harry and Ron into a squirming three-way affair. “Don’t get me started on you two. Ron, what were you thinking, jumping off your broomstick, it’s good luck you didn’t break your back. Daphne screamed herself hoarse, and I expect when she sees you she’s going to do it again, look forward to that — Snape took her to his office — I saw Umbridge talking to him on the way in — and you, Harry, you’re lucky McGonagall covered for you; she said she saw you get hit before you jumped into the stands, which is, I’m pretty sure, a lie— oh, my God. All of you are mad. I *hate* quidditch.”

She breathed raggedly.

Draco touched her back to steady her. When she didn’t pull away, he kept his hand there, lingering.

“Alright, there.”

Her hair brushed the tips of his fingers. The contact was a tether to the world of the safe and the real. It drew down his pulse to a comfortable rhythm. Calm sank through his body like it flowed from his fingertips.

He spread his fingers along the small of her back. She gave a little twitch, something less than a shudder, more than a sigh. Her shoulders sank.

“It’s alright,” she said, and her voice was oddly calm. “It’ll be alright. It will. You’ll see.”

“Yeah?” said Harry tiredly. “Hope you’re right, then.”

She held out her hand, and he took it. Ron put his arm around Harry’s shoulder and ruffled his hair, almost violently. There was a moment — a not terrible moment — where it was the four of them in an unbroken chain on the staircase, and if they could have ten good minutes of it, then the rest of the day would be very nearly endurable.

Then there were voices in the hallway, and more students came around the banister. One of them was Pansy.

“What are you doing here?” Angelina called guardedly. “Students were sent back to their dorms.”

“Is the Tower so crowded you’re down to sleeping on the stairs? Don’t bother retorting, I don’t care. I’m meant to cart you all to Umbridge’s office.”

“They already know they have detention,” snapped Hermione. “Give them a minute to change out of their uniforms, at least.”

Pansy smiled with teeth, a thorny expression. “If she wanted you to have a minute, I think she would’ve said so,” she said sweetly. “And I don’t remember you being on the team, Granger.”

“I’m—”

“Astonishingly, I still don’t care. Johnson, gather your people. Umbridge made it clear that she’ll hold captains personally responsible for tardiness.”

“Understood,” gritted out Angelina.

A hand appeared on Pansy’s shoulder, and another student emerged from the stairwell. It was Theo.

“She’d like to see us,” he murmured to Pansy, with a brief, cold glance at Draco. “Five minutes.”

“What? Now? It can’t wait?”

“It could, but it shouldn’t.”

“Lost me at *could,* Teddy.”

“It’s about the thing.”

“The thing? Or the Thing?”

“The other thing.”

They shared a brief flurry of gestures and frowns.

“God!” Pansy burst out. “Have it your way. Five minutes, but tell her I need to piss first.”

“That’s a funny joke.”

“So is the bladder infection I’m going to name after you.”

Theo’s lip twitched. He squeezed Pansy’s shoulder — darted a wholly uncharacteristic kiss on the back of her head — and slipped away without a word to anyone else.

“Rat-faced bastard,” muttered Fred. “Should’ve let him fall and snap his neck in fifth year.”

“Woulda, coulda, shoulda,” said Angelina darkly. “C’mon.”

As they moved down the stairs, Hermione’s hand darted out and caught Draco’s sleeve. He turned, and found her face drawn, her knuckles tight on his cuff.

“Be careful,” she said, too quietly for anyone else to hear, and spoke quickly. “If she gives you lines, write with your offhand, so it doesn’t hurt your right; and don’t press hard, it draws more blood; and if Harry gets angry then do something to shut him up, you know how he gets; same with Ron; and say as little as possible, if she asks you anything; and—”

“Granger, I know.”

“—and come straight back to me, when you’re finished,” she said, still gripping his sleeve. She was so pale that light might very well pass through her. “I have aloe, and Dittany, and Blood-Replenishing Potion. And plasters. And I’ll ask the house-elves to bring some food up. But come right back. I’ll wait in the common room.”

“We’ll be late.”

“I don’t care. I’ll wait for you.”

It was too much; if she kept talking in that high, tight voice, as if she were going to winnow away the moment they all left, he wouldn’t go at all.

He drew a gentle pressure on his cuff, and she released it, leaving her hand curled fretfully in midair. When he took a step back, she

half-stepped forward, and snatched his wrist back. Her wand whispered out of its sheath and she tapped his right hand, quickly. A rush of cold tingles flowed up the skin of his hand, and he flexed his fingers, suppressing a wince.

“What—?”

“Numbing Charm,” she murmured.

His throat tightened; she avoided his searching look.

She gripped his hand with a tight, bruising press, and then let it go, tucking her wand away. She stepped back and took a short breath, lifting her eyes; they were dark and intense, and her mouth was set in a fierce line.

“Well, go on,” she said imperiously. “It’s only a detention. You’ve had them before.”

It was like her voice still echoed in the shadowy atrium of the stairwell: *Come back.* The tone lingered. It had been high-pitched and unlike her usual orders, which never showed so much uncertainty, or so much fear.

“Don’t worry,” he said, senselessly, because it sounded like she needed it. She made a little sound of disbelief. “I’m sure we’ll manage without you for an hour, somehow.”

“Hope springs eternal,” she whispered, and when he turned away, the ghostly, fretful smile was still plastered on her face.

The sun was near to setting when they reached the Defense classroom. A harsh lamp was suspended over each desk, like a soldier’s formation of miniature suns.

The corporal of this ghastly light assembly was Umbridge, stationed at the front of the room in a pink jumper and shimmery lilac cloak.

One of the patrolmen stood behind her. In her face there was nothing, not even the usual simper or smile of malice that she offered when given the opportunity to introduce discipline. For once, she made no effort to smile at the sight of them.

“You are late. Fifty points from Gryffindor.”

Angelina choked. “We aren’t—”

“You are.”

“You said you wanted us here at four, and here we are, it’s three fifty-seven—”

“You are contradicting a teacher. Another fifty points.”

Angelina’s jaw dropped. The team’s loud protests cut off, replaced by a reverie of shock and silent loathing.

“You will find,” said Umbridge, “that in this room, you are late if I say you are late. It is four o’clock when I say it is four o’clock. And when I *tell* you something, you will *do as I say.”*

Her voice rattled the windows. Katie trembled.

“Sit down,” she said.

Angelina took a deep breath. She led the team down the aisles and took her seat at the front of the room.

“No,” said Umbridge suddenly. She pointed at another desk. “That one.”

Angelina stopped, halfway into her seat, and looked up at her incredulously. “Is there something wrong with this one?”

“You will not speak unless I tell you to speak. You will sit there.” She pointed, again, at the desk.

Slowly, Angelina moved. She had no sooner settled down in the other desk when Umbridge spoke up again.

“No. Sit at that one.” She pointed at another desk on the other end of the row.

Angelina exhaled shortly. “You just told me to sit here.”

“You are refusing a teacher’s order. Fifty points from Gryffindor.”

Fred opened his mouth, and George slapped his hand over it, expression grim. Umbridge watched the movement, her eyes flickering with chill amusement.

“Professor,” said Katie hoarsely, “please — what’s the point—”

“You will not speak unless I tell you to speak.” She pointed. “Miss Johnson. Move.”

Angelina closed her eyes. Three long seconds passed. Then she got up and walked over to the indicated desk.

“Good,” said Umbridge softly. “You see? Is it so very hard, Miss Johnson, to do what I ask of you? In silence?”

Angelina shook her head at the desk. Harry was shaking. Ron put his hand on his shoulder.

“You may say ‘No, Professor Umbridge.’”

“No, Professor Umbridge.”

“Good girl,” said Umbridge. She gestured to the rest of them. “You may take your seats. You will not need to speak. You will find all of this very easy,” she added, gently, “if you can simply learn the lesson that it has taken Miss Johnson so… very… long… to commit to mind.”

They filed in. Umbridge strolled down the row, examining each of them in turn. As she passed, she placed a quill on each desk. Each quill was the size and shape of an eagle feather, but studded with a long, serrated black nib. It reminded him of a steak knife.

On her way past, she reached out and pinched Katie's lip piercing, twisting it until Katie gasped. "You will remove this," she said softly, and kept walking.

When she reached Ron, she paused.

"What time is it, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron slouched.

"Bout four."

"What was that? Speak up."

"I said it's about four."

"No," said Umbridge calmly. "An understandable mistake, Mr. Weasley. But no. It is seven o'clock in the morning."

Ron wrinkled his nose. "The clock's just there," he said. "You can check—"

"I say it is seven in the morning."

"I… alright."

"Now I will ask you again," she said. "What time is it?"

"I mean, I dunno what you want me to say," said Ron, aggravated, "because obviously you think it's seven, but it's four, the clock's right th—"

"You are lying. Fifty points from Gryffindor."

“But it’s *not,* you’re mad, it’s r—”

She hit him.

Ron’s cheek snapped to the side, with a wheeze of shock. Fred leapt to his feet, and it took Katie and George combined to wrestle him back down, both of them hissing frantically.

“You are a liar,” she said sadly. “It is not a hard lesson I am trying to teach you, Mr. Weasley, and it makes me sad that you cannot understand it. I am afraid that even the best educations are wasted on those who do not want to learn. Isn’t that right, Mr. Potter?”

Ron gaped. She walked past him, to Harry’s desk, and then leaned down on her knees, staring into his eyes.

“Mr. Potter,” she whispered, “can you tell me what time it is?”

Harry stared at her, stone-faced, and said nothing.

“I would like you to tell me what time it is.”

Harry said nothing. Draco’s chest constricted.

Umbridge slowly placed one of the red quills on his desk. She patted it, almost tenderly, and slid it towards him.

“Pick it up,” she whispered.

“It’s seven o’clock,” said Draco quietly.

Umbridge straightened up, gazing at him. A beatific smile stretched her cheeks open.

“Isn’t it?” he added, ignoring the way Harry had turned his head to stare.

“Thank you, Mr. Malfoy,” she said quietly. “Yes, it is.”

And she retreated from his desk without setting down a quill.

“Lines,” she called. “I want you to write ‘It is seven o’clock in the morning,’ at least one hundred times each; and Mr. Potter will write it two hundred times, since he seems confused.”

She moved over to her office door and opened it. His teammates raised their quills grimly to the parchment before them, and with a chorus of winces and gasps, eked out the first painful scratches of their lines. Draco watched with a stomach in revolt as blood bubbled and welled from Harry’s right hand, spilling down Ron’s wrist, laced the knuckles of Fred’s left fist. Katie let out a grunt of badly muffled pain.

And he knew what the difference was. He knew, because he had lived with them for five years, what they had in common. He knew that Katie’s father owned a department store in muggle London, and Angelina’s parents were solicitors, and he knew why. And because he had lived with them for five years, he also knew why it felt like a knife slowly performing an open biopsy on his gut, to sit there and be the only man on the line free of scars.

There wasn’t dignity in it. He was no glutton for pain, but there was something disgusting about being the only man to walk out with a clean hand. He was tough as any of them. He could take his goddamn stripes.

He looked down at his own empty desk. Then back down the row of bloody hands.

“Professor.”

“Yes, Mr. Malfoy?”

Harry paused, eyeing him from his periphery.

“Draco,” Ron muttered. “It’s fine. Don’t—”

He closed his eyes, and prepared himself for regret.

“You haven’t given me a quill,” he said.

Umbridge paused, and then dimpled at him from the door.

“Oh, Mr. Malfoy,” she said kindly. “You are sweet to remind me. But I only have six quills to supply. You will have to use your own! I should think you can afford them.”

Fred let out a snort of laughter.

“...I see.”

She inclined her head. “Of course, if you don’t happen to have one, you may come into my office, and we’ll see if I can’t find a spare.”

“That won’t—”

“Come,” she called, and slipped behind the door. Draco slowly pushed back his chair and stood up.

“Oi. Draco.”

It was Ron. He had paused in his scratching, and the blood had slicked his knuckles red, giving his solemn stare a decidedly unnerving air.

“If something happens,” he muttered, nodding at the door, “just shout.”

Draco nodded shortly, and went into the office.

If one assembled a decorating committee of several artistically committed six-year-olds and a grandmother, they might have come up with something slightly less elaborate than Umbridge’s office. Doilies and handspun tea cozies abounded in frankly tasteless abundance, while taffy-pink drapes and a fluffy magenta carpet leant the whole room a kind of maddeningly monochromatic aesthetic that

gave an impression of a funhouse. Extravagantly expensive sets of china and satin pillowcases flourished on bejeweled sideboards and, most appallingly, a zebra-print chesterfield. It would have given Narcissa seizures.

“Why, sit down,” she said, easing herself into a plush purple armchair. “I’ve been on my feet all day. These heels!” She laughed. “The things women put up with!”

He gave her an odd look. She blinked inquiringly at him.

“You seem confused, Mr. Malfoy.”

“I thought we were finding a quill.”

“Oh.” She grimaced and leaned down to wriggle out of her heel. “No. I do apologize for the to-do, but you understand; I must have discipline, and if a child doesn’t have it drilled in early, it has to be whipped in later by force. It’s not their fault, the poor dears, they simply can’t be asked to understand. Hence—” She gestured, imitating a quill. “The lesson.”

“To understand what?”

She giggled. “Such a wit! Just like your mother. I was a few years ahead of Lady Malfoy — I watched her Sorting. I’m sorry I couldn’t make it to the wedding, you know, but my friends who went said all the best things.” She smiled, and Summoned a tea set from the cupboard. “Libation, Mr. Malfoy? It’s herbal.”

“No. Thank you.”

“Have some anyway.”

He leaned back in his chair, twisting his signet ring. Her gaze snagged on it, and lingered while she poured.

She settled back in her chair, cradling her cup.

“So,” she said. “We’ve been bad, haven’t we?”

He did not answer that, and refused to.

“Your association with Mr. Potter,” she clarified, pleasantly. “It’s regrettable.”

He still hadn’t heard a question, so he said nothing.

“I must say, I was surprised to hear that someone of your breeding had fallen in with him,” she added. “Rita Skeeter seemed convinced that you were *terribly* cozy. Not that I blame you. It must have been incredibly lonely, being in Gryffindor by yourself for all those years. Often the most dangerous people are terribly charismatic.”

Harry was charismatic. Specifically, Harry had the charisma of a large dog that believed it was a Bichon; i.e., endearing, indeliberate, and patently un-manipulative.

“Potter and I have a history,” he said, guarded.

“Indeed. And I do not begrudge you the friendships of your past. But you must understand that Mr. Potter is leading you down a dangerous path,” she said, with sincere concern tightening her face. “Ask yourself: how often have you found yourself in harm’s way for him? How much have you suffered? And do you expect, honestly, that it will stop?”

“I don’t take your meaning.”

She leaned on the desk. “I mean that Harry Potter is a dangerous boy,” she said. It was the most serious he had ever seen her; there was no dimpling, no simpering, no tiny coughs. “He is positioning himself against the Wizarding government. He and Albus Dumbledore are in open defiance of the Minister. If you stand at his side for much longer, you will make yourself a suspect character in the eyes of your government, and you — with deepest respect, Mr.

Malfoy — have not cultivated the allies you would require to endure that status comfortably."

"I'm not a political figure. I'm a student."

"That's not something you really get to choose," she said indulgently. "Power changes what you are. Lord Malfoy is not *Draco* Malfoy, if you can understand what I mean… even though you may be both at once. Harry Potter is not the Chosen One, but we must treat with both persons in the same individual… Potter understands this, I think. It's why he's attempted to collect you."

Suggesting that Harry Potter had dedicated any thought to the nature and origin of power was easily the funniest possible way of revealing that she knew nothing about him.

"To *collect* me?"

"Yes. You lend him legitimacy; it bespeaks his worth to have the scion of a noble family at his side. Two noble families, no less! I myself doubted that Skeeter's critical bent was well-founded, on the grounds that she had named you as his associate! Your name tells people who do not know him what his name means."

"My name hasn't been terribly useful for my purposes," he said curtly. "And it's not done much for his, either."

"Of course not, my dear." She rested her chin in her hand, smiling. "Because you haven't laid claim to its greatest tools! The power of a title — and I thought I would be the last person to explain this to *you* — lies not in what you own, but *whom* you own."

"The people I own?"

"A figure of speech. Your 'people.' Your connections. Your friends. As it were."

"As it were," he repeated.

“Mm. Your name will hold certain doors open to you for as long as you live. But they are not ones that Potter can follow you through.”

She added, slyly: “Would you like me to show you where they are?”

He tapped his fingers on the desk. He wondered how many lines the others had done yet.

He wondered how she got the bloodstains out of the wood.

He thought about Hermione’s fluttering bandage — about her sitting in that classroom, by herself, under the cruel lamplight — and his unease crystallized into something hard and cold. His fingers stilled.

“Why Hogwarts?” he said. “Of all positions. Do you have a passion for teaching?”

His tone seemed to indicate what he thought of that answer, because her eyes narrowed slightly.

“Education is a means to an end,” she said simply. “I do all I do knowing that it is for the betterment of young people. My own happiness… I am quite used to putting second for the needs of others.”

“So you don’t like it, then.”

“Who would?” she said mildly. “You see what I deal with in that classroom. If you seek gratification from your career, I urge you, do not work with children.”

“But you took a post that required you to do it.”

She sighed. “To have influence is to have enemies,” she said. “I was assigned to the Bureau of Education. Between you and me, there are some at the Ministry who sought to keep me away from London.”

“Shacklebolt?”

Her lip curled. “I bear no love for Kingsley,” she said, “but the members of the Wizengamot are ultimately quite irrelevant to the real work of the Ministry. Elections come, elections go; but the civil service endures. No. My appointment might best be understood as punishment for Lord Nott’s embarrassment and scandal last year… Lord Selwyn and Archibald Rosier have tried to strip Albert of his staunchest allies, and populate his cabinet with feckless, aging fools. If it weren’t for Rufus — auror friend of mine, well-liked in the Wizengamot, my own choice for head of Law Enforcement if something can be done about Thicknesse — I would have been posted somewhere even further beneath my qualifications. At least here, I can keep an eye on Dumbledore.”

“You make it all sound quite turbulent.”

“Oh, transitions tend to be. I don’t bother about it too terribly much; heel-dragging is the mark of the small-minded. It's a sad thing, but so many people are so very small, Mr. Malfoy. And they need to be ruled.” She drew a picture frame from a drawer and placed it in front of him. “But you know that already.”

It was a pair of very young people, no more than eighteen or nineteen: one, a young man, his beard shorter, his cheeks pimpled, but for all that, no less recognizable as Albert Runcorn. The other had a mousy brown bowl of hair and an awkward, eager grin, sparkling with a guileless excitement that he had never seen once in the face of the woman she’d become.

They were pressed cheek to cheek. They held up a pair of Ministry passes: Umbridge, a student intern for the DMLE, and Runcorn, a legislative aide in the Wizengamot.

The wind piped through the windows, rattling them, and a dull splatter of afternoon rain glazed the pane. Across the grounds, trees knelt under the arm of the wind, crowned by the downpour, which left the eaves gurgling deeply like a quartet of bullfrogs. A lark fluttered to the window and alighted on the sill, warbling sadly in the rain.

“Do you have another one of those quills?” he said abruptly. “I’d like to take a look at one.”

“Perhaps a career in entrepreneurship, instead of politics,” she said indulgently, but she went to a drawer by the bureau. Inside, he glimpsed a wide bed of dark red feathers.

She removed one and held it out. He took it carefully and rotated it in the light.

“They’re lovely,” he said, and it wasn’t a lie. The tip fused seamlessly into the dark red spine of the quill, which sprouted a feather like a red plume, light at the edges, dark at the heart. Its tip was crooked, and when he drew his thumb across it, one of the edges caught and dragged the skin, leaving a faint white line.

“They’re horrid,” said Umbridge tonelessly. She shut the drawer and locked it with a tiny key. “Brutal things. But necessary. If a lesson cannot be learned easily, it will be taught hard.”

He flipped the quill over, testing the heft.

It was a brutish enchantment, more cruel than cunning. It took after its creator, in that sense. In fact, the charm oughtn’t even require any pain; it was a riff on the Everfull Inkwell charm, routed from the nearest vein, but clunkier, opening up the scars in the shape of the words being written — he could already think of ways to do it better, cleaner, and that was without having the blueprint in front of him.

He wondered what he could make them do, given enough time. He wondered what he could make them do to *her.*

He could see Hermione’s hand split open, a weeping mess of blood and skin, and thought of a hundred things that weren’t half ugly enough.

“That’s quite enough lecturing for one night,” she announced. “You may return to write your lines. Try… ‘I will conduct myself according

to my station.' Let's say… fifty times. I have to give you *something,* after all. How's that? Seem fair?"

He froze. He lifted the Sanguine Quill, questioning.

"No! No, gracious dear, just the normal ones," she said, laughing. "To think what your blood is worth — I daresay it's cheaper to write in gold."

She leaned over the table and extended her hand. "Yes, let's say fifty," she said, "and that the next time we speak to each other, you will have thought carefully about whether someone who loves you would ask you to endure what Mr. Potter does."

"You're letting me off easily."

"They really have treated you abhorrently, Mr. Malfoy, if it surprises you," she said mildly. "Friends should make each other's lives easier. You may not believe it, because of the person I suppose you think I am — who I must be, because of my station — *Dolores* is not always *Professor Umbridge,* you see. But I am, and have always tried to be, a very good friend."

He lowered the Sanguine Quill to the table.

"Say you understand," she repeated.

"I do."

With a nauseated reluctance, he grazed her hand. As they parted, her fingers slipped along his, lingering on his ring.

On his way out, he wiped his hand discreetly on his shirtfront.

-Don't have many notes today because The Fuckening is afoot in my life at the mo and it's all I have in me to get this up on time. But I love you, and I hope you're well. My heart is in your hands, and you take

such great care of it. I hope that you set your playlist on random shuffle and you get all the songs you need for the vibe you're at, in exactly the right order.

-Next chapter will be up in a week if the demons don't get me, wish me luck; title: "The Night Patrol."

-In which our favorite prefects will do what prefects do, and patrol. At night. Together.

The Night Patrol

Chapter 67: The Night Patrol

Educational Decree Number Thirty-Six. All quidditch teams are disbanded, pending approval from the Hogwarts Special Inquisitor.

Angelina almost resigned her post from rage, but kept it when Fred swore that he would seize the captaincy and force everyone to play nude if she abdicated. Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff were reinstated immediately; the Gryffindor application was “pending” every time Angelina went to ask.

Educational Decree Number Forty-Two. Students found in violation of school rules will be sent directly to the Hogwarts Special Inquisitor for appropriate disciplinary procedures.

Lee Jordan was almost expelled for dangling Slytherin second-years in the rafters; Goyle was sent to the Hospital Wing for quadruple stomach ulcers after eating something Fred gave him; Ron had to get four stitches in his eyebrow after picking a fistfight with Graham Montague, which Draco had to break up, nonplussed, with a *Relashio,* a Shield Charm, and a handful of red hair.

Educational Decree Number Fifty-One. Students failing to comply with appropriate norms of dress for their age and sex will be disciplined at the discretion of their Head of House and the Hogwarts Special Inquisitor.

Katie lost forty points from Umbridge each day she refused to take off her piercings, and far from being cowed, she and Seamus made a point of giving themselves new ones every night. Draco saw them conspiring in the common room before breakfast, boiling safety pins with the grim solemnity of soldiers preparing war paint.

Hermione, who usually prosecuted any violations of dress code with vigor, feigned blindness to this, and slipped a Sanitizing Charm behind her back at them.

Educational Decree Number Fifty-Five. Students will not linger in the hallways between classrooms unless accompanied by a prefect.

Cedric spent his passing periods leading groups of students to and fro from the library, his shoulders square, a brittle set to his jaw. His Head Boy badge gleamed on his chest, bright and clean and never more useless than when Filch confiscated Padma's pet weasel, which was carried off, squeaking helplessly, to wherever non-regulation pets went, while Padma sobbed into Ernie Macmillan's shirt.

Educational Decree Number Fifty-Six. Students will not use magic in the hallways under any circumstances.

Graham Montague kicked Justin Finch-Fletchley down a flight of stairs, and Colin Creevey was given a week of detentions for Stunning him in retaliation. Draco and Ron had to wrestle Harry away from Umbridge as he shouted himself hoarse, racking up a two-hundred point demerit and a month's detentions of his own— but only they knew that Harry had taught Colin that spell.

The next day, both Justin and Susan Bones approached Draco, privately and separately, to ask about dark curses. When he inquired as to where they came by the impression that he knew any, they seemed suitably embarrassed, muttering something about names and reputations and how fire was fought, on occasion, with flames.

From pity and amusement both, he taught Susan the jinx for boils he'd used on Cassius Warrington. She picked it up inside an hour, which was far quicker than he'd have expected from anyone under the auspices of Helga Hufflepuff. When she made the test rat erupt in tiny black bubbles, and he experienced a difficult flicker of emotion.

“How’s your aunt these days?” he said.

Susan lowered her wand, grinning. “Oh,” she said, “she’s fucking furious.”

Educational Decree Number Fifty-Eight. Students will not raise their voices in the hallways above an appropriate level.

Crowded hallways were silent but for the shuffle of footsteps and the furtive susurrus of whispers. George Weasley came back one night with hands so caked in blood it soaked his sleeves, his face drawn. Ginny screamed and ran to him, while Hermione swore and dove for her muggle sewing kit.

“You have to close your mind,” Narcissa sighed, later that night. “Stop imagining what I say. Do you understand? See nothing. Think of nothing. *Feel* nothing.”

“You don’t think I’d like to?” Harry spat, hauling himself off the floor. “You think it’s fun, do you, being in my head?”

“Draco has managed to progress admirably since our last session.”

“Yeah, well, maybe he can be the Chosen One for a while, and give me time to catch up!”

Draco folded his arms and lowered his head.

Harry swiped at his forehead with the back of his hand and barked: “Fine. Let’s go again.”

Narcissa eyed him up and down. “If you require a moment to compose yourself—”

“Death Eaters wouldn’t give me a moment, right?” His tone was edged. He shook out his arms and squared his shoulders, like he was about to duel her. “Again. Hit me. Hard as you can.”

She pursed her lips. “Potter, this is not supposed to be easy.”

“Story of my life. Cast the stupid spell, would you? I’ve still got a detention after this.”

She had him on the floor in two minutes, but as he lay groaning, she offered: “Better.”

Educational Decree Number Fifty-Nine. Students will not purchase or possess non-regulation periodicals, papers, publications, or written content that is untruthful or inappropriate for children.

The *Daily Prophet* printed page after page about unrest in the north. The circles under Harry’s eyes darkened to the shade of a midwinter sky. At night Draco heard him tossing restlessly in bed.

The only time anyone saw him smile was in the Room of Requirement.

Educational Decree Number Sixty. Student groups of four or more persons will not assemble outside of common spaces without the permission of the Hogwarts Special Enquirer.

And still— and still.

In the third stall of the first-story boys’ bathroom, dropping a sickle on the floor would cause the disembodied hand of Seamus Finnigan or Dean Thomas to appear with a small firecracker.

Fred and George passed out small kits of emetic candies that, if gulped down in an emergency, could reliably get you out of class. In the back of the library, Romilda Vane and Parvati Patil pulled crumpled-up editions of *The Quibbler* and the *Daily Looking-Glass* out of their shirtfronts and pressed them between the pages of romance novels. Ernie Macmillan had a habit of leaving his answers to the week’s Defense Against the Dark Arts homework lying out on the Ravenclaw table while he went to the loo, a fact that he announced, loudly and with gusto, so that aspiring plagiarists might be “well warned” not to “trifle with anyone’s academic integrity” while he wasn’t looking. Shouting the name *Weasley* in a scuffle brought

the nearest one hurtling over, and if it was Ginny, you'd probably win. Sometimes just shouting *Weasley* was enough to make the other bloke run away.

Draco spent Defense Against the Dark Arts making notes for improvements on a Blood-Replenishing Potion, and when he swept out of the classroom, he felt the eyes of a hallway settle on the back of his head. He shook it off, kept moving. Hermione put her hand on his wrist, and he let her keep it there. Threw a sneer at anyone who tried to stare.

It was Lavender Brown, of all people, who had the idea of offering topical glamours to make it look like the back of one's hand was scarred. The fashion caught on quickly in the Tower, spread through the Defense Club to Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, and the flash of a wounded hand in the hallway became a sort of allegiant gesture, a symbol of esteem and fury.

"I actually thought it was tacky," said Hermione, when Padma Patil subtly twitched up her sleeve at them on the way to Transfiguration. "But if everyone's got them, it doesn't feel shameful. And you can see how many people…" She trailed off as Michael Goldstein passed by, flexing his hand. "I think Lavender's done something really clever."

"Does she get to know that?"

"Of course not."

He held the door for her, and touched the small of her back as she moved through. She brushed a piece of dust from his shoulder. Neither of them looked at each other.

It was homeostasis, of a sort. Tiny incidents of contact offered costless comfort, of the sort that was in none too great supply, and at no greater cost than a willingness to ignore what was special about it; he was allowed to touch her in stairwells and doorways, and she

was allowed to fix his prefect's badge and straighten his tie, and if no one said what it meant, then it didn't have to mean anything at all.

Of course, Harry and Ron didn't take her elbow while checking a corner; certainly no one else was at liberty to reach out and straighten his badge, at least if they wanted to keep the hand that did it. But in the Gryffindor common room, while Harry brooded in the corner, and Ron sat in a four-headed huddle over Arthur's latest letter, there was no one to notice or find it unusual if Hermione inhaled sharply, as if remembering something — twitched — and put her hand on his knee. He turned a page of his book and silently allowed her to keep it there.

From trial and error, contact with Hermione was prolonged if he allowed her to believe he hadn't noticed.

On a Saturday morning in early December, fires burned in towering grates around the Room of Requirement, shedding warm coats of gold on lacquered floors. Diamond chandeliers cast buttery light on a promenade of children firing Knockback Jinxes and Snare Hexes at each other, while a few older students experimented with variations on *Incarcerous.* Harry had summoned the Room, this time, which meant it resembled less a cathedral than a classroom — the Transfiguration classroom, in fact, though the resemblance was too faint to be intentional.

Draco flicked up Colin Creevey's wand grip, shoved Dean's arm onto the proper line, and strolled up the aisle, ignoring the chorus of greetings sent in his direction.

Hermione and Daphne circled each other on a piste. Hermione hesitated, lurching on her front foot, and then leapt forward and lashed a glittering *Expelliarmus* from her wand, which Daphne skittered back and let splash harmlessly on the floor. She replied with a soft, weak Trip Jinx that Hermione effortlessly deflected from a Shield. Hermione bit her lip, eyes skittering over Daphne's guard, and then quickly dropped her Shield, fired a white dart over its edge, and reactivated the Shield before Daphne could deflect. Her sleeves

were rucked up, and her hair was twisted high in a red resin clasp, spilling in a corona around her flushed temples.

“You’re hesitating.”

Hermione jumped.

“How long have you been lurking around?”

“Long enough to know you’re hesitating.” He shed his robe with a casual roll of his shoulders. “You’ve got an excellent Shield Charm and you know it, but sooner or later, you’ve got to try to land a hit.”

“I made attempts.”

“And barely gave them a chance. You’ve hardly cast a spell before the shield’s back up. You’re not pressing the attack, because you’re already thinking about how you’re going to get back behind your defense.”

“I don’t want to hurt her.”

“With a Trip Jinx?” he said, amused. “Even Greengrass isn’t quite so feeble as that. Nearly, but not quite.”

“I resent that!”

“I can only hope that’ll lead you to do something about it,” he called. To Hermione: “Come here.”

Warily, she did — crossing the piste with short, delicate steps to stand in front of him. He eyed her up and down, taking in her guard — lingering, harmlessly, on the place where her tie had slipped loose, and the top button of her shirt hung in a single concession to exertion, revealing a soft triangle of skin at her throat — he cast the image into a familiar and increasingly crowded quadrant of his brain — and he stepped forward, then thought of something.

“Greengrass. Go bother Abbott. She needs a sparring partner.”

“Certainly,” Daphne murmured.

He gave her a flat look, and Hermione twisted around to glare over her shoulder, but Daphne smiled guilelessly and sashayed off, her wand dangling idly from her fingertips.

“Daphne,” called Hermione, flushed. “It isn’t — oh, what did you do that for?”

“What? Did you want her to watch?”

“Watch *what?* Did you have something in mind she oughtn’t see?”

“No, but you don’t like to be corrected, and I didn’t think you’d enjoy a spectator when I did.”

She opened her mouth, paused, and then closed it. Her eyes softened in a dark, shiny way, but she blinked it was gone. “That’s — true,” she said, with halting gratitude. “I wouldn’t. Only she seems to have the wrong impression.”

“Well, let her have it, then.” He ignored the little intake of breath she gave when he stepped closer. “It won’t be the only thing she’s wrong about.”

There wasn’t a meaning in it, nor in the way she startled when he lifted his hand. The corner of his mouth lifted.

“Steady on.” He took her shoulder and pressed his foot against hers, driving it back, until she slipped almost involuntarily into the duelist’s stance. “That’s better. Start there.”

She complied. “I won’t have time to fix my footwork if someone’s shooting curses at me.”

“And you won’t land a curse back if you don’t. Move your offhand— here.” He caught her wrist and twisted it around to rest behind her left hip, fingers lightly curled. Her chin sprang up, and he found

himself caught in a frozen stare, her mouth parted and inexplicably wordless.

She cleared her throat. He withdrew his hand.

“Point your front foot forward. Wand-arm out front.”

Her lips closed, and she pressed them together. Slowly, she extended her arm and held it with the tip high, arm arrowed unnaturally straight. Her eyes flickered at the point and back to his face.

He cocked his head, calculating.

“Slacken your wrist.”

With an obliging little nod, she pronated it.

“No. Like this.”

He caught her wrist with his hand and twisted it, bringing her palm upwards. Her wand rotated into a grip she already knew perfectly well.

“Crook your elbow.” He took hers in hand and brought it lower, then drew it towards himself. “Extend it. Lean forward.”

“I am,” she said, though she wasn’t.

“Lean more.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said, after a moment.

He gave her a long, intense glance, which she returned evenly, her shoulders straight.

“Fine,” he said. He gave her elbow a sharp tug, and she jerked forward, almost stumbling against his chest, until she caught herself on his shoulder. When she dropped back onto her heels, he was

standing inside her guard, her wand-arm held firmly in his hand — if they were dueling, her position would be horrendously dangerous, he could more or less do anything he wanted — but she had twisted her face up towards him, and her expression was a guarded, smug little thing, a veiled glint of satisfaction that glowed through an innocent stare like light through a screen.

A flare of heat broke down his neck.

“How does that feel?” he said quietly.

“This?”

“Mm-hm.”

Her tongue probed the inside of her cheek. The light in her eyes was capricious.

“Better.”

“You sense the difference?”

“If you say so,” she said, “Frankly, I still don’t see why it matters.”

He made an irritated *tch.* “It matters because it’s proper. And useful.”

“Oh, I suppose so.”

“I’m serious. If your guard isn’t set correctly, you’ll be caught wide open by the first duelist who knows his lines. Besides which, the stance keeps you balanced when you’re throwing jinxes, and it means you’re pointing your wand straight instead of whipping it around from the side, which improves accuracy and form. What are you looking at?”

“Hm?”

“Hello? Are you listening, or shall I save my breath?”

“That’s a good answer,” she said, without answering him. “I still think it’s silly. People in battle don’t stand ahead of you and wait their turn. And to your question, I was thinking about our waltzing lessons.”

“And is there a reason you found that more interesting than the man standing in front of you?”

“It reminded me. Dancing and dueling. They’re both a sort of game, aren’t they?”

“It would put me significantly at ease if you offered a pretense of taking this seriously.”

“Mm. Counteroffer: suppose you pretend I’m taking it seriously, and I pretend it’s serious.”

“Granger—”

“Malfoy.”

“I — don’t do that.”

“Sorry. Wide open.”

She smiled, and it was hopelessly sweet. Her mouth was a small round flourish of satisfaction. When she laughed, it was knowing, and shy, and he had a great difficulty not taking her by the collar and kissing her.

Whatever his expression did, her smile flagged, replaced by something more tentative, almost fearful. But she didn’t move.

He pivoted away from her sharply, because if he didn’t, he was going to do something incredibly stupid in a room full of people who were entirely too invested in his business. Already he noticed Parvati and Hannah Abbott hurrying to resume their practice match, badly disguising their previous postures of interest. Daphne, perched three deep in a bench with Lavender and Romilda Vane, flashed him a backwards glance of some freight.

“OI! Draco! Need advice.”

Ginny came trotting through the crowd, ducking stray spells here and there, her ruddy ponytail swinging jovially. Hermione stepped off the piste, slipping her wand into her sheath, and turned away to re-do her hair clasp. Draco rubbed his eyes, resenting the existence of most persons in the room, and possibly all.

“Question about the Blood-Boiling Curse,” she announced. “Can’t get it right for the life of me. I’ve been testing them out with Nev in the greenhouses, going after slugs and aphids, but they haven’t got a lot of blood to boil, so— sorry, are you two in a match?”

“No.”

“Not presently,” said Hermione, with a slight edge. “Is there a reason you’re interested in the Blood-Boiling Curse? It’s extraordinarily painful.”

“Yeah, and I’m not boiling a bloke’s blood because it’s fun, am I?”

“I mean that there are easier ways to debilitate people, and less painful ones.”

“Setting them on fire, for instance.”

“Shut up, Draco. Ginny, I’d recommend a Binding Spell.”

“Take it under advisement,” said Ginny easily. “What’re you two scheming about, then?”

“We do not ‘scheme.’”

Ginny ignored this, as she should. “Because the twins and I were thinking. We ought to do something to Slytherin. Something nasty. To get them back for what they said at the game.”

“We’re not retaliating,” Hermione said. “Slytherin House isn’t your enemy.”

“Yea? Count the Slytherins in this room.”

“One,” said Hermione fiercely. Ginny scoffed. “One, and don’t roll your eyes, she counts.”

“Yeah, she’s fine, but hasn’t got a lot of company.”

“There could be a hundred girls like Daphne in Slytherin.”

“I don’t think there *are* a hundred girls in Slytherin.”

“And certainly not like me,” said Daphne, ambling over on Neville’s arm. She used a handkerchief to daub beads of sweat from the line of her brow. “I’m a prize. What are we talking about?”

“Ginny wants to start a war,” Hermione said.

“Ginny wants to *win* one,” muttered Ginny, scuffing her shoe on a flagstone.

“Against Slytherin? Gracious. Not likely,” she said mildly. “I mean, down with the ship, of course. Rah, rah. But you’re not going to beat Teddy Nott with *Expelliarmus* and Knockback Jinxes, I’ll tell you that.”

“By which you mean what, exactly?” muttered Draco. The memory of Theo did nothing for his mood.

“Only that *he* learned how to duel from a Death Eater. Namely, his father. There’s a reason everyone in the dungeons respects him, it’s not just because of his Ministry connections,” she said plainly. “And Draco’s seen Pansy Parkinson use blood runes with his own eyes.”

Wind whistled in the eaves behind the frosted glass, and the light in the room seemed to change. She shifted her weight in the ensuing silence.

“What?” she said. “You knew all that already.”

“Thank you, Daphne,” said Ginny pleasantly.

Hermione rubbed her face. “I don’t know why you’re asking me,” she said tiredly. “It sounds like your mind’s made up, so why do you care?”

Ginny traded an uncertain glance with Neville.

“Reckoned we ought to check,” he offered. “You’re in charge, aren’t you? It was your idea.”

“That’s — partly true, but I’m not — I don’t give orders. I — we suggest things, we teach, but — I’m hardly a commanding officer.”

“That’s debatable,” said Daphne mildly. “Call it what you like. You do know there’s not a person in this room who wouldn’t do anything you asked of them.”

Her remark carried his attention to the room at large, instinctually: the high sweep of its vaulted stone ceilings, the light scintillating from the small diamonds of the windows, and the mad, frenetic medley of students trading spells under the auspices of both: Dean and Seamus having a spectacularly pyrotechnic exchange that was more fireworks than jinxes, cackling each; Padma Patil and Ernie Macmillan were crouched together, drawing a runic circle around a suit of armor; Fred and George sparred two-on-two with Lee Jordan and Cedric Diggory, of all people; Justin Finch-Fletchley was dangling Dennis Creevey from a table by his ankle, while Colin giggled and took pictures; Lavender and Parvati were crouched together over a cauldron of Blood-Replenishing Potion and a wizarding magazine, whispering noisily; and among it all there was a roar of conversation and laughter, a sound that bled together and fused into a great wavering note, as if despite including scores of very different voices, it was drawn up and down by a single current of breath.

Harry stood at the fore of the room, his arms folded, watching. Ron leaned with his arm on his shoulder; he shouted something to Fred

and George, and their response made him laugh. A soft smile drew the tired folds of Harry's face, and he lifted his chin to shout back at them.

"I — doubt that — very much," said Hermione haltingly. "Everyone's here for Harry. And each other. *I'm* not any kind of reason, and I wouldn't expect anyone to follow me."

Daphne smiled.

"Wrong on at least one count, I think," she said. He narrowed his eyes at her, and she continued, guileless: "Harry's dreadfully dear, but if I thought we were counting on his brains to make it through, you wouldn't catch my dust trail out of here. If you ever consider resigning, let me know well in advance, so I can go beg for my room back in Slytherin."

The snows came down in a probing gray veil, and then all at once, overnight, in a blinding sweep of white. It was the time of year when Hagrid usually could be found dragging a giant Christmas tree out of the forest, or guiding the hippogriffs back into their paddock. But because Hagrid was gone, the trees in the hall were conjured by Flitwick — silver with red tinsel, strangely cold, despite their festivity — and it was Grubbly-Plank who conjured a wooden lean-to for the hippogriffs, brandishing a wand whose like Hagrid could never use, and then trotted back to the castle.

From the library window, Draco watched it come down. It was dark, and the snow dimmed the further it floated from the window — black grains bleeding into darkness at a distance, but bone-white when it piled against the glass.

Hermione had found a table by the corner. The Runes textbook floated over her journal and a scheduling chart. Two quills hovered at her elbows, waiting to be of use; as he watched, she grabbed one out of midair, stabbed it through a troublesome twist of hair, and then

used the other to scrawl something on her journal, which lifted obligingly to meet her quill, even as her eyes never left the page.

Ron was paging through an O.W.L. prep book with a pencil, chewing pensively on the eraser, one hand buried fretfully in his thick red hair; Harry slouched back in his chair, fidgeting with a pocket snitch, all work forgotten. A lamp guttered in the center of the table, wax puddling.

“Anyone know the counter-charm for hiccoughs?” announced Ron, ruffling his hair. “I’m stuck.”

“Those quizzes are meant to teach you how much you know, Ron. Giving you the answer won’t help.”

“Yeah, but I know what I know already, don’t I? And I know I don’t know this.”

“You know the counter-charm for hiccoughs, you taught it to Lavender last week.”

“After Draco taught me that morning. And I don’t memorize that stuff, there’s no point.”

“The test *is* the point.”

“That’s the problem,” he groaned, slouching. “I don’t care about the test, Mione, and I know saying that makes you twitchy, but it’s all so much… *rubbish.* It’s not like I’m ever gonna be out there mowing down Death Eaters and suddenly need the counter-charm for hiccoughs.”

She snorted. “‘Mowing down’ Death Eaters? You’re fifteen.”

“Fred and George aren’t much older, and they’re going straight into the Order. They’ve already talked to Moody.”

“Fifteen to seventeen is a world of difference. And Molly would skin you.”

Ron grunted.

“You’re all assuming we have a choice,” said Harry. He flipped up the snitch and caught it. “We might not.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Hermione after a moment.

“I mean it’s not like we’ll be safe at Hogwarts. Viktor wasn’t.”

Hermione flinched. Draco lifted his eyes from his page, cutting a look at Harry.

“Viktor was seventeen, too,” she said tautly. “And he still made a choice, in the Maze. He could have run.”

“Run where? The cup was still cursed. If he hadn’t come with me, nothing would have changed. Except he’d be alive.”

“Mate,” muttered Ron. “Do we need to talk about this?”

Harry pitched the snitch fiercely into the air. “As opposed to what? Pretending it didn’t happen? I reckon enough people are doing that, don’t you?”

Hermione set her quill down. “That isn’t true,” she said calmly. “You don’t know how that fight would’ve turned out, if he wasn’t there. Possibly we’d all be dead.”

“Granger—”

“What? It’s true enough. And Viktor liked you, Harry. He made a choice to follow you, just like everyone else. Don’t deny him that.”

“He didn’t *follow* me,” said Harry, with surprising force. Draco slowly closed his book. “Nobody ordered him around. I got kidnapped, and he got roped in. It was stupid and pointless.”

“It wasn’t pointless,” said Hermione frigidly. “I don’t know how you can say that about someone’s death.”

“Because it was!” he exclaimed. “Saying it or not saying it doesn’t change anything, I’m sick of people acting like it does, and — and it makes my skin crawl, y’know, when people go around praising it like it was some noble thing to do—”

“He *was* noble.” Hermione’s mouth was a white line. “He wasn’t some lamb to the slaughter. He *did* care for you. He was intelligent and selfless, and he wouldn’t have done any of it if he didn’t believe you were worth it.”

Her tone chastised him, but he only slunk low in his seat, chin dipping in a surlish pout.

“I don’t want to be worth it,” he muttered.

“Bully for you,” she said crisply, and bent her head to her work again.

Draco raised an eyebrow, and Ron shook his head; then he shifted his hair back and scratched the center of his forehead. He shot a meaningful glance at Harry.

Scar.

“It’s ten to curfew,” Draco remarked, dropping his quill into the inkpot. “An appropriate time as any to retire.”

“Great idea,” said Ron at once, shutting his book. “I was sick of this an hour ago. Fancy a stop by the kitchens, Harry? Could get the house-elves to make some chips.”

“Can’t. Gotta practice Occlumency,” he said dully. “Then I’ve got the Potions homework. And I promised Dean I’d take a look at his Combustion Charm.”

“And how’s that coming?” Hermione said coolly, underlining something. “Occlumency?”

“Ask Draco. He’s the one who can actually do it.”

“Mother believes there’s been great strides made this term.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “By you.”

This was true. Tactfully, however, he replied: “You’re leagues ahead of where you started.”

“Funny, because she still acts the same.”

“If she thinks you’re doing well, she won’t mention it. That’s how you know you’re doing well.”

“And what if she tells you you’re doing godawful? What’s that mean in Malfoy?”

“That she likes you, probably,” said Ron.

“She would never use the term ‘godawful.’ It’s pedestrian.”

A pair of giggling students darted through the stacks, stumbling over each other. At a distance, it was hard to make them out, but there was a whirl of dark curls, and the green of a Slytherin tie, and a boy with sandy hair. A door creaked, and their whispers winnowed out into silence.

Harry grunted and threw back his chair. He plucked the pocket snitch without looking from where it hovered behind his head, and shoved it in his pocket.

“I’m going to go see Cho.”

“Now?” Hermione checked her watch. “It’s ten to nine.”

“Yeah, so?”

“It’s five to ten,” she said, with a glance at Draco, “and if prefects don’t catch you, Filch will.”

“Yeah, but it’s you two on patrol tonight. It’ll be fine.”

“I — I resent that implication, frankly! The fact that Draco and I are prefects is *not* license to flout the rules!”

“Are you joking? You broke half a dozen school rules just this afternoon!”

“Which is more than enough risk for one day, and for a better reason than sneaking out to visit Cho Chang,” she said pointedly.

Harry glanced at Draco and muttered something. Draco narrowed his eyes and unfolded his legs.

“What was that?”

“Nothing! Honestly! Like it makes a difference! I’ll take the Cloak. Keep the Map, if you’re worried.”

Hermione made her lips thin. “I am,” she said, “since I happen to know what happens if you get caught.”

She twisted her right hand up pointedly, and the gauze slipped free of her sleeve, dangling.

“Yeah,” said Harry, agitated. “And I’ve got one to match. Two, actually.” He jerked his thumb at his forehead. “All anyone seems to want me for is this one, so maybe now they’ll care twice as much.”

“Harry!”

“That’s not true and you know it,” said Ron. “We’re right here—”

“I mean other people! Anyone from the Order, for instance, funny how no one wrote me once I started learning Occlumency—”

“That’s a coincidence,” Hermione said. “It’s not like they haven’t been busy, and you started Occlumency lessons around the same time Umbridge closed the Floo. Arthur called you, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, and hasn’t since! ‘Bye, Harry, don’t write, see you at Christmas’!”

“He’s been busy!” Ron exclaimed.

“Pretty busy, is it, in the Muggle Artifacts office?”

Anger propelled Ron upright. “You *know* what Dad’s been busy with, git! And they’re worried about Umbridge monitoring the Floo!”

“Really! That’s why they won’t let me write to Sirius, right? They’re worried about the Floo?”

“I don’t know what you even think you’re saying,” said Hermione, dumbfounded. “No one’s conspiring to keep you from your godfather —”

“Sure. Sure, yeah. Okay.”

“What *are* you implying?” said Ron, with more irritation. He rose to his feet, too, which put him several inches over Harry; the height seemed to level out the playing field of the conversation. “D’you really think my dad didn’t come as soon as he could? Seriously? He’d run here on foot if he had to, you know, if you called—”

“I didn’t *ask* for that!”

“You don’t HAVE to ask for it,” said Ron loudly, “that’s the POINT, you ingrate—”

“Sorry, then! Yeah! I guess I am ungrateful, but I don’t want a bunch of people lining up to die for me,” said Harry savagely. Hermione flinched. Draco shifted to his feet, his expression cold. “Had enough of those! Sorry! Not taking applications, tell everyone I said thanks —”

“Harry, what the *fuck?”*

“I don’t want an army!” he shouted. “I want people I can bloody talk to! I’m sorry if that puts your noses out of joint, but it’s what I want. Not that anybody particularly seems to care!”

Ron was wide-eyed and slack-jawed with some unnamable kind of anger; his hands were fists. Draco took a half-step between him and Potter, fingering his wand, contemplating the easiest way to disengage without hurting either of them if someone swung.

“Harry,” said Hermione quietly, “is your scar hurting?”

Harry’s head snapped to her. His chest heaved as a visible swell of anger moved through it. *“None of your business!”*

He strode past them, shouldering his bag, and swung into the aisle.

“Don’t wait up for me,” he snapped, and was gone.

In the guttering candlelight, Ron gave a sudden bark and kicked Harry’s chair. It tipped slowly over on its side, a tragedy of anticlimax.

“Wanker! That bloody wanker! Self-absorbed — mean-spirited — *impossible* sodding arsehole—”

Hermione gave a hollow laugh. Ron looked at her wildly, interrupted in his mutterings.

“What?”

“Oh, not — you’re more than entitled to say it, but it’s just — that’s really not true, is it?”

Ron ground his hands into his eyes. The tension in his shoulders seeped away.

“No,” he muttered. “It’s not.”

He tossed himself down in the chair, his spine a glum slouch. Draco pointed his wand discreetly at Harry’s chair, and righted it.

“He acts like he’s the only one making sacrifices,” Ron muttered.

“I know.” Hermione was fidgeting with the gauze on her wrist, twisting a tourniquet, then letting it go. Apropos of nothing, she said: “I wonder if I shouldn’t have pushed so hard about starting the Defense Club.”

“Why not?” said Draco.

“Hm. I — well. I think I assumed,” she said slowly, “that the pressure would be… fun for him. Like it is for—” She glanced up and gestured between them: *You and me.* He nodded. “You know, I was so frustrated that we didn’t have anything to do, that Umbridge was here and the Order was out there and we weren’t even being taught to fight, only to stand still and watch as everything got worse, I wanted to feel like I was doing something. You know — I can’t fight, and I’m not rich or pureblooded or powerful, and I can’t save anyone, but we can still *do* something. You can always do *something.”*

The candlelight made her glow, softly, with a light that seemed almost to emanate from within. She spoke with her hands, and they cast birdlike shadows on the far walls, waltzing to the rhythm of her low, passionate voice. He watched her and marveled that anyone had ever found it easy to ignore her.

“But the pressure was part of it. It makes it feel like we’re doing something serious. Even if it isn’t, really.” She shrugged, faintly embarrassed. “Harry’s not like that. It’s not pleasant for him, that sort of intensity, I think it reminds him too much of… well, his life, I suppose. I always forget that difference. He’s… not like us.”

“Not like you, maybe,” admitted Ron. “All that spy stuff with the Order scares the hell out of me. It’s one thing for Harry, you know, with Remus and Sirius, they’ve always been these big action hero types, but… I dunno mate. My dad’s a bureaucrat.” He scrubbed his nose, his expression bleak. “Bill’s cool, but he’s not a soldier, he’s… he’s a cursebreaker, he does puzzles that blow up if he’s wrong, and I just

— when Harry said that, about them dying, it hit home to me, like — he's not wrong. They could."

There was a creak of floorboards somewhere in the library. The castle sighed and shifted on its foundations, rattling like giants playing timbrels in the walls. Draco flicked another *Muffliato* at the aisle, for good measure.

Hermione folded her arms. "There's not any real fighting yet," she said. "It's all politics and spycraft. It's a whisper war."

"What's that mean?"

"It means nobody's going to die," she said, and cut herself off, with a telltale disjoint, before she could reach the word he knew she'd wanted: *Yet.*

But even for that, the bodies of Viktor Krum and Barty Crouch were too long cold for her to sound convincing. Their presence emanated silently through the library's floating dust.

"And your parents *were* soldiers, actually," she said suddenly. "In the first war. Remember? You could give your father a little credit. And your mother, for that matter. You know, Mad-Eye once told me there were only three people who ever beat him in a duel—"

"Don't — please don't talk about it," said Ron, hoarsely. "I'm sorry. I know I brought it up, but this — this is worse."

Draco inclined his head silently toward the flames, and the warmth of the fire suffused on his face, while the chill of the shade cooled his back.

"My mother is working with Dumbledore," he said. He didn't know why he said it, but when it was there, he turned it over in his head, and found that there was a hollow where his regret was supposed to be.

He was used to that hollow by now. It was his familiar. He gave it a suspicious poke sometimes, when Harry or Hermione said something especially redolent of muggle, or Ron made a crass joke, or anything happened that ought to have made his mother curl her lip. But it remained empty. The emptiness unnerved him. He didn't like the idea that he was walking around with a cavity inside him; a man was supposed to have beliefs. Convictions. His father had. That was what a family motto was for. *Vincit semper.*

But he didn't have any. What he had were a single-digit number of people around him who were simply not allowed to die, and he didn't really think that counted. He'd flushed all the other beliefs because they kept getting in the way of that single-digit number, and he wasn't ashamed of it, but it gave him pause, because it made him feel — incomplete, somehow. A half-man, cleaved at the limb, a philosophical amputee.

He'd cut himself out of something awful, and it was good, it was — it was necessary — but sometimes he worried that the cut had taken too much. For if he'd been wrong — meaning *Lucius* had been wrong, meaning fifteen generations of his forefathers had been wrong, if the things they'd gone to war and died for were so much chaff in the wind of history — then how could anything be true? How could you trust the same heart that had almost ruined you?

Hermione's voice tugged him out of reverie.

"Is she?" she said curiously. "What's she doing?"

He debated his liberty to speak. His exact words to his mother had been *I swear to share confidence in this with none but Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape,* which didn't actually specify the extent of the vow. Certainly it extended to the secret of the Dark Lord's immortality, but she hadn't clarified whether her involvement was included.

"I don't know." That was true; she never shared her whereabouts. "Her connections with the Death Eater movement give her…

valuable knowledge."

"Blimey! Your mum's a double agent?" Ron seemed to highly approve.

"She wasn't an agent in the first place, thank you. She wasn't a Death Eater. She still isn't. She wouldn't — make a good spy." *She's mad,* he didn't say, and was therefore perhaps among the few people in the world that Dumbledore could never, under any circumstance, ask to keep a cover. Her mind was a vouchsafe of her freedom. Wasn't that a delicious irony.

"I thought you said you didn't know what she was doing," said Hermione.

"I don't. But she wouldn't take the Mark."

"You're… confident about that," she said, carefully, but the challenge settled there, however delicately, all the same.

He grappled for the means to make her understand. "It's not something done lightly," he gritted out, finally. "It's permanent. Irrevocable. You'll die with the scar of it on you, I—"

I've seen it, he might have said.

He began again:"My father would never let her."

"Let her?"

"No — it wasn't — he protected her. One of them had to take it, so he did."

"You make it sound like it wasn't his choice."

"It wasn't."

"I thought he was a believer."

“He was. But you can’t refuse the Mark, when it’s offered to you, and — I don’t know how to explain this in a way that makes sense to you,” he said, and tried to sound patient. “The Death Eaters are not a group it is possible to walk away from. It isn’t the Order. You’re there because there is no life outside of it. No one has ever betrayed the Dark Lord and lived.”

The candlewax whined and cracked like the shuffle of fingerbones.

“That’s not true,” said Ron suddenly, and they both startled.

“I assure you that it is,” said Draco, with a touch of acid. He lifted his hand and cocked his signet ring. “Or I wouldn’t have this.”

“Yeah,” said Ron steadily, “no, didn’t work out for your dad, and that sucks — being evil is a raw deal, no question — but you’re still forgetting someone.”

“Who?”

He paused, and said emphatically: “Snape.”

“That’s right! He did, didn’t he?” said Hermione, relieved. “He betrayed Voldemort, and he lived.”

Draco drew his hand back into his lap, tracing the shape of his crest on the gemstone. His finger knew the grooves like they were etched into his skin. He could draw them sleeping, backwards, deaf and blind. “Snape survived, and continues to survive, as the thrall of Albus Dumbledore,” he said tonelessly, not quite disagreeing. “Technically, he’s never left the Dark Lord’s ranks, and the moment he tried, he’d be as doomed as anyone else. If his cover breaks, he’s dead. He’s still not free.”

“That’s still not the same as being a Death Eater,” argued Ron. “Dumbledore’s not making him kill muggles.”

“Morally, yes. I suppose you could argue his soul’s better off for it,” said Draco, and struggled to keep the scorn from his voice. “But in terms of free will, hardly. Whatever reasons he had for betraying the Dark Lord, the luxury of choice wasn’t one of them.”

“We know his reasons,” said Hermione suddenly. “He was in love.”

This was so unlike her, as a retort, that his fingers stilled on the ring. He raised his eyes, slightly incredulous.

She tinged pink and said, crisply: “With Lily Potter. That’s what Sirius said, remember? In the Shrieking Shack? He turned coat because her life was in danger. Lily Potter.”

The concept was too bizarre; Draco sidelined it, settling it in an uncomfortable mental corner with everything else he didn’t know about his godfather.

“Who hated him,” said Ron mildly, “so we’re clear. I mean, ups to him and everything for doing it, whatever his reason was, but it’s not exactly this big damn love story, mind you — she was married by that point, actually, to another bloke.”

“As was Guinevere,” said Draco.

“Yeah, and that one caused a few problems, too, I think,” Ron said promptly. Draco flashed him a cool glance. Hermione huffed in amusement.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “My point is just that it *is* possible. Whatever his reasons are, whether they matter or not, he *did,* and so people do have a choice. Can we agree on that?”

“Fine,” he said, curtly. “But my father didn’t, and sometimes people don’t. So long as that’s clear, too.”

She tilted her head sideways at him, spilling dark hair down one side, baring her neck to the firelight.

“Maybe,” she said.

“‘Maybe’?”

“Maybe, yes.” She smirked, obstinate and smug and unfairly lovely.

“Meaning ‘no.’”

“Meaning maybe,” she retorted. “I’ll think about it. If you can come up with a better argument in the meantime, let me know. We’d better get going if we want to finish the patrol before midnight.”

Harry had been right: they were slated to sweep the third floor. Draco rose and offered her a hand, and she took it, wheeling herself to her feet with a sharp tug. When she came to her feet, she remained there for a moment, her hand balancing lightly in his; then she removed it quickly and drew her wand, using a Collection Charm to sweep their arrayed notes into her journal.

“Right. Guess that’s you two off, then,” said Ron. He stretched, lacing his hands behind his neck. “Suppose I’ll wait up for you, then? In the common room?”

Hermione paused in gathering her books. “Are you sure? We won’t be back until eleven.”

“I’ll be awake, anyway. Hey, you two hungry? Want something from the kitchens when you get back?”

“No, thank you, and I’ll thank you twice not to do what I’ve just got done yelling at Harry for,” said Hermione, with mild amusement, shouldering her bag. “Which is to give Umbridge another chance to catch you breaking the rules. Go get some rest. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“If you say so. Here, let me take those back,” said Ron suddenly, and reached for her bag. “What’s that, two stone? You don’t want to be

hauling all that around on patrol. I'll drop them off with Lavender, she'll take them up."

"You don't have to… but I suppose… that's very nice," said Hermione, blinking in surprise. She yielded up her bag, and Ron shouldered it, grinning good-naturedly. "Thank you, that's — very kind."

"No worries."

"I mean it, you don't have to. And I'm sorry for what Harry said, earlier,

Draco nudged in his chair with one foot and stepped into the aisle, pointedly ignoring both of them. It wasn't for him to be irritated that Ron was doing her a kindness. That was one of the privileges that friendship did not afford, even a particularly unique friendship of parameters undefined. That was something one needed a sort of claim to do.

Out of everyone committed to the understandable masochism of caring for Hermione Granger, Ron was probably the most irritating. He was an earnest, well-meaning, natural-born pureblood of whom Hermione probably knew very few: pure of heart, mind, and intention. When he claimed loyalty to something he sank his teeth into it like a trapjaw and let go never, the same as the rest of his fervent, scrappy clan. It was only out of some grim perversity that he continued to watch as Ron plucked the quill from Hermione's hair, making her giggle and grab for it back: an unfathomable taste for ideation about the ease with which Ron touched her hair, and admired her work, and said in loud clear terms how impressive he found her, even though there was nothing particularly remarkable about being impressed by Hermione. It was woefully easy to be loved by Ron.

Even Hermione, who always seemed to take his attention as half a joke, seemed flustered by the intensity of his praise, or his affection, or his generosity. Ron gave as if there was no end to giving.

Draco took as if there was no end to taking. So he took his leave, and went to stand by the front desk.

Hermione caught up with him belatedly, wearing the ghost of a flush and rearranging her hair.

“Ready?” she said brightly. “We’re rostered for the third floor. I could kiss Cedric for that; Padma has the dungeons, and she says it’s frigid down there at night.”

He made a noncommittal noise and opened the door.

“Now what’s the matter with you?” she said, with exasperation that made clear she would tolerate only good answers.

“Envy,” he said coolly. Hermione tripped and caught herself on the doorframe, and he turned back to offer her a hand down the step. “I feel rather snubbed. Ronald’s made no offer to carry my books, and I fear his intentions with me are unchivalrous.”

Her face quickened into relief, and she took his hand. Imagination furnished it with a quick squeeze as she stepped down, and she stood close to him in the hallway while he shut the door.

“It’s true,” she said seriously. “I’m afraid he’ll never marry you.”

“And I was so ready to be a Weasley.”

“Don’t lose hope. George is a bachelor.”

“Granger dear, I’m titled, handsome, and fathomlessly rich. I think I can do a bit better than George, thank you.”

“Mm. What about Fred?”

“Oh, in a heartbeat.”

She burst into laughter. Her hand flew to muffle the sound, but it tripped out between her fingers. Predictably, hopelessly, helplessly,

he smiled for her; and whatever bitterness he felt was lifted up and carried away, if momentarily, on the rising current of their wings.

“I don’t think Harry meant what he said. About Viktor.”

The inner hall of the third floor had rich wood paneling that skirted the wall, lacquered to a liquid sheen under the glaze of torchlight. Suits of armor bent to salute them as they passed, their steel plates rattling; tapestries swayed gently in a subtle draft. It was dim, and quiet, and the only people awake were the ghosts that moved now and then through the walls, their pale silhouettes flickering at the end of corridors.

Hogwarts was haunted. It didn’t do to forget.

Hermione took a girding breath. Her wand dropped a thin beam of *Lumos* into the embroidery at her feet, sweeping their way.

“Do you think?”

Draco didn’t reply.

“Because if he did, then he didn’t know Viktor at all. Which he might not have, I suppose. A lot of people didn’t know him. He wasn’t easy to talk to.”

“He seemed,” said Draco, “nice enough.”

“He was.” They turned a corner and passed the grand staircase, sweeping down the next row of classrooms. “He was — extremely nice. But he wasn’t very good at making friends. I wish Harry had known him better, they would have got on. And I think he would’ve adored Ginny, actually.”

“Why so?”

“Oh, just a feeling. Quidditch, flying, sports. And she’s high-spirited, which he would have admired. He said he liked passionate people.”

He shot her a look that made her twitch.

“Other people, I mean. In general. Not just — it wasn’t like that, with him and me. We went to the Ball together, and that was the only time — well, and we kissed once, but that didn’t count.”

He made some sort of sound, which she interpreted as leave to keep going.

“I don’t count it, anyway,” she said. “It was a few days before the Third Task. We were both too busy to see each other, me with Harry, and him with his preparations, but I came to see him a few times on the Durmstrang ship, and he would walk me back to the castle; and the last time, I thought it would be nice, since we’d spent all this time together, to — I mean, that’s what people do, when they’re seeing each other, isn’t it? It would be — a perfectly ordinary thing to do. And even if not, as a gesture of friendship—”

“A *friendly* kiss.”

“It was! Listen, just because you and *your* date had some sort of physical imbroglio—”

“It wasn’t anything physical. Greengrass is a friend. Before that, she was a stranger. Never anything else.”

They turned another corner, and ventured down a narrow hallway.

“You can say that if you like, but you did kiss her.”

“I kissed her, the once,” he said tartly, “for pedagogy.”

“For pedagogy!” It was delighted and teasing.

“We were fourteen years old, and I was her date to a ball. It was an avenue of intellectual exploration. It was,” he said, mimicking her,

“‘what people do.’ As I’m told.”

“And what were your findings from kissing the *great* Daphne Greengrass?”

“I’m under the impression it’s impolite to tell.” He checked a corner, ignoring the heat of her eyes on his back.

“She told first, so it cancels out.”

“Is that how it works?”

“No,” she admitted, a bit embarrassed. “I’m just being nosy, I suppose.”

He snorted and stepped ahead of her, which was doubly successful, because besides hiding his face, it meant he didn’t have to see whatever hers was doing. “It was brief. Happy?”

“That hardly tells me anything.”

“Merlin. How much detail do you want?”

“Well,” she said defensively, “did you — you know, enjoy it?”

“As much as I’ve ever enjoyed a kiss, yes.”

“Oh.” She walked in measured silence for a while, her wand steady. “Is that a high bar, then?”

“Are you asking me if I’ve kissed someone and enjoyed it?”

She cleared her throat. “Suppose I am,” she said. “Of pedagogy.”

He’d been in a traincar, in the thick, terrible heat of June, and he’d been holding a girl in his arms, and she’d leaned up and kissed him on the cheek.

Nearly on the mouth, but not quite; just close enough for him to think about it for a summer.

“Not in the sense you're thinking,” he said.

“Really? You haven't?”

Hermione sounded surprised. Momentarily, she added, stiffly: “I don’t know why I reacted that way, I — I thought otherwise.”

“What? *Why?”*

She wet her lips. “Because you — obviously you grew up a bit, and the other girls are — I mean, Parvati asked if you wanted—”

“She did *what?”*

“But I told her you wouldn’t be interested.”

“Patil? Really.”

“Yes. Are you upset? I can tell her you are, if you are, I mean I assumed because you’d never actually had a conversation longer than three sentences, or mentioned her ever, at all, you probably wouldn’t like to sit across from her in some stuffy tea shop in Hogsmeade and listen to her rave about muggle novels—”

“I like muggle novels.”

“Not enough to get through lunch with Parvati,” said Hermione, with vague conviction. “And I’m sorry, but she’d never survive your mother. She starts blubbering when I scold her for leaving hair in the shower; Narcissa would have her on the floor in ninety seconds.”

This seemed admittedly probable.

“I’ll thank you not to terrorize my admirers, Granger, there’s little enough good taste to go around as it is.”

“I didn’t terrorize her,” she said indignantly. “I saved her time.” She paused. “I did not terrorize her,” she amended, “much.”

He did not smile; it was difficult, however.

“I don't encourage her,” he said. “I don't flirt. There's a difference between having attention and courting it. As I'm sure you're aware.”

“You... don't.”

“No.” He turned around, under the pretense of checking over his shoulder, and found a view of her full, alert, studious face, focused on him like he was a particularly fascinating kind of Arithmancy problem. “Not usually.”

“So you... but— oh.”

He raised his eyebrow at her. She had stopped walking and was staring at him.

“Yes?”

“When you flirt with... people,” she said slowly, “what do you mean?”

His heart continued to assert an increasing weight on his ribs.

“What I say,” he said, succinctly. “Don't you?”

She wet her lips. “Yes,” she said, haltingly. “I — mean it.”

The heavy object blossomed in his chest, its weight dissipated into heat and smoke.

“You do.”

She'd said it. She'd said it, out loud, irrevocably. She did mean it. He hadn't been wrong.

“But I'm not — I don't — I'm not used to— those of us who aren’t tall quidditch players don’t— I'm not used to people — fancying me, you understand. I don't — there's so much of friendship that's like fancying someone anyway, and I don't know — I don't get the rules to this, I just sort of assumed — and anyway, it's not like *you're* the most obvious person in the world—”

Sometimes he wondered how she didn’t walk into walls.

“Respectfully, Granger, I beg to differ.”

“But I still think you're — possibly unaware of the extent of the circumstances,” she said tightly.

“Which are?”

“I don't — I don't know, I'm not good at — I don't have a lot of history with fancying people, I — as I said, I kissed Viktor,” she added, “but I don’t think I did it right.”

He almost did walk into a wall, then. Twice. First at *fancying people,* and then *did it right,* which snared him in the crosshairs of two different kinds of confusion.

“I mean it was fine and everything, but I suspect I messed it up a bit. It wasn’t...” She hesitated. “I suppose eventually, if I’d had more time… anyway. It doesn’t matter now.”

He ground out the flicker of resilient bitterness at the bottom of his chest. “...I doubt you did it wrong, Granger.”

She made a noncommittal sound.

“I suspect he would have agreed with me.”

“It wasn’t a thing,” she said, after a moment, in a tone that was some distance away. “A real thing, I mean. We were both too busy — I was always with you and the boys, and he was a champion, and he was going to graduate anyway, so… But I think I would’ve gone to

Bulgaria, when he invited me. And I would've brought my parents. He could've met them. I think he would've liked them. And I don't know what would have… you can never know how things would have went, but it could've been something. Or maybe it wouldn't have been, but at least I would've known."

He didn't mention that Krum had invited him to Bulgaria, too. He doubted that was the summer she was imagining.

"But then I wouldn't have been able to come to visit you," she said abruptly. She held her head straight ahead and did not look at him. Her wand rolled endlessly between her fingers. "And I wouldn't have seen the Manor. So you see, many things would have been different, if Viktor hadn't died."

"You still would have seen it."

"Eventually," she said. "After I went to Bulgaria. Do you think that would have made a difference?"

"...In what?"

"I don't know. Just that I might be a different person. If Viktor had lived."

"You could have been a thousand different people, in other lives, if other things had happened to you." His voice was low, effortfully smooth. It rippled in thin echoes in the corridor. "You're here. They're not. You have the right to make decisions they can't."

"But—"

"You also have the duty."

Hermione exhaled slowly.

"Speaking from experience?" she murmured.

He inclined his head. His heart hung heavy in his chest, an insistent pressure on his ribs.

“A great many things would have been different, if Lucius Malfoy had lived,” he said. “Possibly it was a better world than this one. But I don’t live there.”

She stopped walking, and he turned to face her with a graceful movement of the heel.

“If my father could see me, he would loathe me,” he said coolly, and it was remarkable how little it stung; the words passed through him cleanly, with only a pinch of pain, like a wound that cauterized itself. “But that stopped being my problem when they put him in the ground.”

Hermione’s mouth was a soft line of doubt.

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do.”

“You don’t.”

“I care for you more than I care for his memory. I mean that.”

His echo hung on the vaulted ribs of the ceiling, sending ripples of his casual apostasy out into the fathomless night.

She made a noise like the breath had gone out of her, half-laughter, half-pain, and her eyes closed.

“You can’t,” she said, “you don’t understand—”

Something shrieked.

A sound like shearing metal rent the air. Running water erupted in the distance. The portraits shuddered from the impact. The castle groaned.

Hermione started, but Draco was faster. He darted to the staircase and scaled it, footsteps beating a groan out of old wood. Hermione flicked a Detection Charm off her wand and it went skittering into the darkness, landed on something, and gave a high caterwaul. He veered right and took three steps before his foot splashed in something, and he saw a black mirror of water filming the hardwood.

Something was moving in the darkness: splashing at the end of the hallway, a figure under the low bars of torchlight.

“Who’s that?” she called. “Stop there!”

Draco threw a Petrificus down the hallway, but there was no one for it to hit. A tapestry of Dedlig the Gilded fluttered in the draft from the window.

“Damn,” Hermione snapped. “Check the bathroom.”

A pair of Siphoning Charms stemmed the flow of water from the doorway, and he toed open the door. In the dark bathroom, light glimmered from a bevy of floating candles above the floor, and the torches glittered dully from the high stone walls. Water babbled thickly on the floor, ankle-deep, and the sound of drowning drains rose in croaking echoes, like a chorus of frogs.

“It’s one of the taps,” said Hermione. Watery acoustics turned the echoes of her voice to vibrato. She dropped to her knees near one of the sinks, which had been shattered in half, and water sprayed ecstatically from a shorn pipe, like blood from a jugular. It splattered her face and her shirt, and she winced.

“I suppose this is someone’s idea of a prank.”

“Some prank,” he said, picking his way disdainfully through the flood. “A bit of a mess, and no audience. The twins have higher standards.”

She picked up a bit of shorn ceramic, hefted it, and then tossed it back into the soup. “Hm. It’s all shattered here, the faucet isn’t

cleanly snapped… You can take off a faucet without breaking the whole sink like this. It might have been a misfired spell. Or accidental magic."

"In the bathroom? On a weekend?"

"Why not? It's private and reasonably ventilated. And — ergh — it's got a built-in drainage system," she said, gritting her teeth, and layering another Sealing Charm over the broken pipe. The water slowed to a weak splutter, but the pressure increased from the thinner outlet, and it struck her cheek, splattering her hair. "So they can rinse any evidence — which might be what they were trying to do—"

"Mmhm."

"Not that they did a very good job of it," she added, twisting her wet hair out of her face, and wrestling it into a quick knot atop her head. "It's a hack job. But that person didn't look young, did they? I couldn't make them out."

"No."

She nosed a bit of broken porcelain with her toe. "It's just a strange thing to do," she said. "Flooding a bathroom. I can't think how you'd do it by accident, and I can't think why you'd do it on purpose."

"Granger."

The water was coursing over her shirt, slicking it to her shoulders. The imprint of her underthings pressed through the fabric, clear white under an increasingly translucent sheen of pearl-gray, and clung to her waist. Her hair was dark and stringy where it floated in front of her face, and beads of water darted here and there, like shining clear gems studding her fringe, her eyelashes, the ridge of her cheek.

He was warm. He wanted to touch his mouth to the place where the rivulets fell on her neck.

He wondered, not for the first time, if fancying someone wasn't just a culturally venerated way of going mad.

"Your shirt," he said, with difficulty.

"Hm? Oh — *oh."* She fumbled her robe to cover it. "I… sorry."

"Not your fault."

"I can't really help it."

"No."

"Yours is the same. You're — a bit soaked through." The pipe was still guttering.

He stepped past her, reached over her with his wand, and cast a charm. A skein of spongy black webbing knitted itself over the pipe's mouth, and the water shut off.

They were standing very close together.

"What's that charm?" she said. Her voice seemed loud. "I don't recognize it."

" *Sfongari.* It conjures a spongiform leech. Absorbs moisture."

"Oh, that's marvelously useful. Is that sixth year curriculum, or seventh?"

"Neither." The spell had come from Snape's notes. It was also intended to be cast on someone's skin. "Found it in a book at the Manor."

"Can you teach me?"

“If you like.”

“I would.”

Her eyes were still somewhere low. Then she said, in a normal voice: “You're looming.”

“I know that.”

“Why?”

“What?”

“Why are you looming?”

“Guess,” he said. The heat in his chest had reached the skin, which was numb, tingling.

She bit her lip, staring at him.

“We can’t do this,” she said. “We really can’t do this.”

“Do what? Have a conversation?”

“You know what. I — don’t make me explain to you why we don’t stand this close to each other.”

“Why not?”

She took a sharp breath, and said something that would be running through his head up until the minute of his death, probably, and then for whatever he got beyond.

“I think about this all the time,” she said, and gave no sign of having casually ruined him. “I — about you. And me. Because it would change — it would change a lot, if not — everything. And I wonder, sometimes, if you have any idea how much I need you. Sometimes I think you don’t. Know, that is.”

“I beg your — I — what?”

It had been his formal opinion, though not one that he liked thinking about, that Hermione Granger rarely needed anyone at all. The idea that he made the list was both pleasant and startling in equal measure, a forked tongue of lightning down the spine.

“Well, I do. Need you. I feel — when you’re there, it’s—”

“It’s what?”

She tore her hands through her hair in aggressive frustration. “Never mind, it sounds ridiculous.”

“I sincerely doubt that.”

“Being around you makes everything possible,” she said softly, and then glared at him, which was a study in dissonance if he’d ever had one. “So please, don’t — I know you like to flirt, and I haven’t really stopped you, but — we can’t do something that would make it impossible to — listen. We have something. It’s a good thing. We know what it is.”

A lie in at least two senses; once again, he had no idea, whatsoever, what they were about.

The one consolation being that she seemed not to know either.

A headache was mounting behind his eyes.

“If it went away,” she said, parceling out her words slowly, “something — bad would happen to me. I think.”

“It doesn’t have to go away. It won’t. I won’t.”

“The thing about that,” she said, “is you can’t know that. Actually. And I’m this — would you believe me if I said it was a compliment to you that I refuse to take chances?” She closed her eyes and gave a sort of half-wince. “I’m — being careful. I’m not very good at it, I’ve never

tried to do it before. I've been reliably informed that I'm not very good at being careful with people, actually."

"If you are, I'm worse."

"You're very careful with me," she said.

"I'm your friend." The word rang hollow; she gave another pithy, halting smile. "Comes with the job. I'm reliably informed."

"Yes," she said, a touch melancholy. "The best I ever had, or ever will."

"...I don't like the way that sounds."

"It's true. I never had a friend like you before I came to Hogwarts, and don't think I'll ever meet one again. I don't think I'd want more than one, if it feels like this."

"Feels like what?" he said, feverish.

She hesitated. Then, with the quick, daring movement of someone breaking a rule, she stepped forward and — he nearly had a heart attack — and fastened the button of his shirt where it had come undone during the duel. Her neat, deft little fingers slipped it through the buttonhole. When it lay flat, she smoothed his collar with her hand, and his throat alit with warmth wherever her hand moved.

"There," she said, with a timid, proprietary satisfaction. "That was bothering me for hours."

She glanced up at him from under her eyelashes, and it probably wasn't intentional, but if she didn't want him to kiss her, she needed to stop looking like that quite soon.

"I want to do *that,"* she said, with slight frustration. "But for everything."

Very soon. Extremely, extremely soon, she needed to stop.

“A compulsion to fix my clothes?” It was rough.

“A compulsion,” she said, with a clear, high, but clearly waning bravery, “to keep you.”

“Keep me what?”

She paused. Her eyes dropped from his.

“Nothing,” she said. “Just… keep, I guess.” She paused. “I don’t know if that’s how other people feel about their — good friends. I haven’t, but I gave up on being ordinary a long time ago.”

“It isn’t.”

“No? I hope it isn’t unnerving. I’m not crazy, the feelings are just — complicated.”

“It has always been apparent to me, if not to most people,” he said slowly, “that we have a very complicated friendship, and we operate on parameters that are entirely our own.”

“Yes. It’s not the same friendship we have with other people.”

“It’s not one most people have with other people.”

“But so you’re not worried about… I mean, it doesn’t unnerve you?” she said hopelessly. “What I said about keeping. Because it is normal, really. Or it can be. It doesn’t make you uncomfortable? Because I could stop, if it was too much. Or something.”

If she knew the fucking half of it.

“It isn’t.”

“Oh. I’m glad,” she said, awkwardly pleased. She fidgeted with her hands, glowing.

“No one else?”

“What?”

“You don’t feel that way about anyone else, you said.”

“No,” she said automatically. “I mean, I care for other people, but it isn’t the same as… it isn’t the same feeling. There’s something very discomfiting about it, actually. It isn’t something I think I’d choose to feel. Is that insulting? I hope it’s not insulting, but it’s the truth.”

“It’s *never* the same with anyone else,” he repeated, fierce with satisfaction. “That’s what you said. You wouldn’t do that, with the collar, for anyone else.”

Her mouth twisted in a sly way. “You’re vain,” she said. “You’re terribly vain. I wish that irritated me more, you know, it would be easier if it did.”

“What would be easier?”

She gave him a half-cocked, knowing look, and he returned it with an even, unabashed challenge. The lightning in his spine continued to flicker.

She straightened her skirt and adjusted her prefect’s badge. She ran a Drying Charm over her shirt, and then pointed her wand at him. “Do you want one?” she said. “Here. We’ll have to report this to Umbridge — actually, *you* do that, since you’re her new favorite, and tell her I just ran away or something, like the scared little muggle-born I am. I don’t want to deal with her idea of a follow-up investigation.” She flinched. “God, I don’t want to know what she’ll do when she finds out about this. Do you suppose we could just lie?”

“Not successfully.”

“No. She’ll want to blame someone in Gryffindor. I’ll tell them to start preparing alibis. Fred and George will be targets, obviously… Katie, too, she’s been dress coded four times this week… you know, I could have sworn girls were allowed to wear pants — and Seamus,

God, even *I'm* not sure it wasn't Seamus — maybe we can all just hide until the train comes, wouldn't that be nice?"

Her smile was wry and weary.

"We could," he said. "You'd miss Transfiguration."

"A bad blow," she said seriously, "but I might just survive it."

"McGonagall wouldn't. She'd assume her favorite died, and lose the will to live."

"Harry's her favorite."

"Difference in kind. She looks at him like a stray kitten she's taken to feeding. She *smiles* at you."

Hermione beamed at the ceiling, muttered something about flattery, and threw a Drying Charm at him.

"Meet you in the common room?" she said.

"You will."

"To debrief?"

"As per."

"Lovely," she said. "Thank you. I — thank you."

She smiled at him: timid, grateful, apologetic. Then, after a moment, she spun around, and darted across the bathroom.

He didn't see it coming: it landed without warning, a furious, hot press of her mouth on the corner of his, landing just ajar to his cheek. Warmth all over, her skin everywhere, softness where moments ago there had been empty air. For a second, he was simultaneously numb and on fire.

She sprang back.

“Thanks,” she said, insensibly, her voice light and giddy and taut. Hermione backed off, flushed and slightly mad-looking, the madwoman he was unfortunately, hopelessly attracted to.

“That's not fair,” he said, roughly, after a moment.

The corner of her mouth twitched. “No,” she said, and for a second, her grin was very much like his. “Sorry. I — I'm reliably informed that it isn't.”

And with a soft, high flutter of laughter, she swung out of the bathroom, her hair a dark cowl of soaked curls.

And when the door swung closed, it felt like he was walking around with something strung up in his chest, a cat's cradle of tendon and string. He threaded his hands through his hair, and finally, he couldn't resist the urge to laugh.

The feeling was spreading off his skin, catching, crackling; it felt like the moment he opened his eyes, he'd find the whole castle on fire.

Policy of Truth

Chapter 68: Policy of Truth

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The decree went up on the last day of classes before the winter vacation.

All students remaining in the castle will report immediately to the Hogwarts Special Inquisitor or a member of the Hogwarts Inquisitorial Squad for their end-of-term Performance Review. Students with special permissions may instead report to their Head of House.

“Hogwarts Inquisitorial Squad?” said Ron. “Filch got a promotion?”

“Hope it doesn’t mean Ministry people,” said Ginny grimly. She shouldered between Ron and Harry to peer at the sign. “She’d love an excuse to haul in more patrolmen. By the way, if you need the twins, they said to tell you they’ll be on the lam — they’re hiding out in the Room until the train leaves.”

“Hey, that’s not a bad idea,” Ron exclaimed. “Think they’d mind if we popped up, too—?”

“They said you’d say that. They also said, ‘Tell him to piss off and find his own hidey-hole.’”

“Bugger them! I helped them set up the bloody thing, least they could do is help— anyway, it’s not their hidey-hole, if anything it’s Draco’s.”

“We have a policy about invoking my name in intra-Weasley disputes.”

“I have a policy about you being a pill,” said Ron.

“It’s not Ministry people,” said Hermione. She wasn’t listening to them, wisely. “It’s other students.”

Ginny, who was somewhat less accustomed than the others to Hermione manifesting knowledge spontaneously from thin air, gave her a curious stare. “How’d you figure that, eh?”

“Because Theodore Nott,” she said, “has a different tie on.”

“Wha—?”

Wordlessly, Hermione touched Ginny’s shoulder and turned her to face the stairwell.

At the foot of the staircase, Theo leaned with his hands in his pockets. His tie was not the usual green and silver, but a sharp black tie with a gold tie pin in the shape of an IS, with a spear of ivy crosshatched. A queue of first years and second years flocked around him, waving permission slips.

“Anyone have a special permission?” said Hermione at last. “I don’t.”

Draco raised the small pink scroll that had been delivered at breakfast. He was the only one.

“Right. That’s… to be expected, I suppose.”

“Always wondered what getting flayed would feel like,” said Ron. “Oh, hullo, Harry.”

The other boy had come trotting down the stairs, silent. There were dark circles under his eyes, and he walked with a slouch. He read the announcement in silence, scowled, and turned his back on the notice board.

“Harry?” said Ron in alarm. “Harry — hang on, wait up a minute—”

“Blimey,” muttered Ginny. “Did a skrewt crawl up his arse?”

“We had a bit of a row,” said Hermione stiffly. “ Draco — don’t forget, we’ve got another patrol tonight. Prefects sweep the castle before the last train.”

“I remember.”

“Lovely. See you then. Say hello to Professor McGonagall for me.”

She touched his arm, absently, and then shouldered into the crowd and made quick work getting away. Ron offered Draco a curious, somewhat wary stare, and loped after, his long legs easily catching up.

Draco watched her retreating back, distracted and restless, and deeply unhappy about the orbital pattern of Ron’s hand hovering around her elbow. Then he snapped at a passing Ravenclaw first year for forgetting his tie, docked him five points, and stalked off for the Transfiguration classroom.

There were no classes in the afternoon. Students were straggling through the Great Hall under the weight of vast leather-buckled trunks and stiff lacquered hatboxes down to the main atrium. Throngs of students in heights of agitation and impatience thronged between these mountains of luggage. Draco struggled his way through and found Ron and Hermione tucked in at the end of the Gryffindor table, along with Harry, Ginny, Daphne, and a number of people from Defense Club. He thought of griping at them about the ill-advisedness of sitting together, but thought better of it. Umbridge and Filch were still conducting interviews in their offices, and the club had enough of Gryffindor in it that it was difficult not for them to sit together.

“There he is. How’d it go with McGonagall?” called Ron.

“Entirely dull. We had tea.”

“Lucky you. We stood in line for three hours. I’ve got blisters.”

“Lucky *you,”* said Hermione curtly. “They’re going alphabetically. At this rate, I doubt she’ll make it to ‘Weasley’ before the train leaves.”

“Has anyone we know been interviewed yet?” said Ginny, through a mouthful of beans on toast. Draco eyed her and mimed shutting his jaw with one hand; she grinned at him and took a larger bite before continuing. “Do we know what she’s doing? She can’t have everyone on the quills, right?”

“No idea.”

“Seamus might know. He would’ve gone in not much before Hermione.”

“Think I saw him go in with Filch.”

“Anyone seen him since?”

“I could go ask Michael, he’d know—”

A flurry stirred the students at the door. Cho pushed her way through the crowd, throwing elbows like it was a quidditch final, and with a shrill cry she threw herself down at the Ravenclaw table, nearly bowling Ernie Macmillan off the bench. Her face was mottled with tears.

There was a collective pause. Harry was the first to rise, shoving back his seat, and then Hermione leapt up to follow him a heartbeat behind. Draco rose and made three.

At the Ravenclaw table, they were greeted with mixed warmth. Ernie, Terry Boot, and Michael Corner received them with friendly nods, but Marietta scowled and drew her arm closer around Cho, who was shuddering into her shoulder.

“Cho,” said Harry, as if at a loss, and she flinched.

“Oh, hullo, Harry… I… Hermione… Draco.”

He slipped out of the crowd with a nod and came to stand behind Hermione, his hands in his pockets.

“S-s-sorry,” she said. “I just got out of the interview—”

“We gathered,” said Hermione impatiently. “What happened?”

“No, she — she didn’t touch me. Or h-h-hurt me. B-b-but she sat me down and asked me a q-q-question, and I d-d-don’t know what happened, I couldn’t s-s-stop talking—”

“What do you mean, you ‘couldn’t stop’? What did you say?”

“I mean she started asking — where I w-w-was last night, and I told her — I told her I was at quidditch practice, which was t-t-true — and then she started asking about H-H-Harry, and if I liked him, and I started telling her everything— I mean literally, actually everything, like, stuff I wouldn’t even tell my M-M-Mum—”

“She wanted to know about your love life?”

“No,” said Harry. It was the first thing he’d said since that morning. “She wanted to know about me. Isn’t that right?”

Cho swallowed and nodded.

A pit of ice opened in his stomach. Cho knew everything. She’d been to every Defense Club meeting since the beginning of the year.

Draco leaned over the table. Ravenclaws shifted and cringed out of his looming shadow.

“What exactly did you tell her?”

Cho’s eyes grew moonlike and dark with apprehension. She wet her lips and sent a panicked look at Hermione, then Harry.

Hermione touched his arm. “She didn’t say anything about the club,” she said quietly.

He caught her eye. “No?”

“No. I’d know.”

He wanted her to say more about that, but Cho interrupted. “I didn’t rat,” she cried, hoarse and somewhat indignant. “Especially not about the you-know-what. I said I answered her questions, not that I started blabbering anything secret that came to mind — I’m not *dull.”*

“Neither I nor Veritaserum cares if you’re dull or not,” he snapped. “What I *do* care about is whether you’ve said something that could get us expelled. Or imprisoned.”

“You think it’s Veritaserum?” Hermione whispered.

“What else?”

“She’s seeing hundreds of students. She’d need liters of the stuff. Not even Snape would keep that much on short notice.”

“Perhaps she’s not giving it to everyone.”

“...She knows Cho is seeing Harry.”

“And took the opportunity to see what he was doing.”

Cho sat up rigidly, cheeks flaming. “I didn’t say anything that could hurt Harry.”

“What did she ask about, then?” said Draco coolly. “Which broom closets you like to snog in?”

“She asked me about my *mother,* you arse.”

Hermione frowned. “Why does she care about your mother? She’s got nothing to do with anything.”

Cho gave a humorless cry of laughter.

“Because her mum’s on the editorial board for the *Prophet,”* said Marietta, raising her voice. “Cho’s only brought it up a dozen times. But I guess maybe other people’s families don’t matter as much as meeting logistics, to some people.”

“What do my parents do for a living, Marietta?” Hermione said coolly. The other girl balked and fell silent.

Hermione raised her eyebrows at her, and then turned back to Cho. Draco’s mouth curled in an amused sneer.

“What did she want to know about your mother?”

“I dunno. What she was writing, I guess. I mean, you know *Prophet’s* been rough lately, the editorial board’s really s-s-stepping on them, and you know what they’ve been p-p-publishing—”

“Drivel,” supplied Draco, shortly.

“Yeah, but that’s not *her* fault. She’s pretty fair, compared to everyone else. She knows Harry’s my boyfriend — I mean, everyone does, it’s humiliating—”

“Is it, now?” said Hermione crisply. “Is it terribly humiliating to be seen with him? *I* find it perfectly easy.”

“Hermione,” Harry muttered.

“I didn’t mean it like that! I’m not embarrassed of Harry! Obviously! But that doesn’t mean I like my name being in the papers!”

“No one *likes* it, Cho,” said Hermione, bridling, “but it’s not like they’re writing anything nasty about you. I’m sure having a parent on the editorial board makes certain of that.”

“It’s still not been easy for me, you know! I get hate mail! Someone sent me an envelope full of bubotuber pus the other day! And people stare at me funny in the hallways,” she ran on, “and Umbridge *hates*

me, and I get detentions for every little thing, and I never asked for any of it!"

"None of us did," Hermione said tartly. "I'm sorry about the bubotuber pus. I had someone send me a little rag-doll with pins in it, and I agree, it's dreadful. But all of us had a pretty bad run in the papers last year—"

"Wow! Good for you!" Cho snapped. "It must be nice to be as brave and tough as you are, Hermione—"

"For God's sake, what do you want us to do? Wave our wands and make it go away?"

"I wish you'd be nice!" she cried. "I wish people would be *nice* to me, and don't act like that's such a stupid, silly thing to want! I want you to admit that it's not easy to stand up in front of all your friends and know they think you're dating a murderer!"

Hermione went still. She stepped forward, abortively, and stopped when Draco caught her shoulder.

"Murderer?"

"No — I didn't mean that. I mean, I know the truth, and that it wasn't — that he died because — I mean, not Harry, but — oh, Hermione, I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to bring up Viktor."

"It's fine."

"No, it isn't. I know you probably think I'm really selfish and stupid, sitting here whinging about popularity when someone died. And you're right. It's stupid. I'm being stupid and silly."

Hermione was expressionless. "It's fine."

"It isn't."

The bell groaned, and benches screeched with the force of hundreds rising to their feet. It mercifully smothered the silent dregs of the conversation.

“Cho—”

“Drop it,” snapped Harry. He worked his jaw like he meant to say something, but then thought better of it, and shook his head. “Would you just… drop it? Please? Listen. Draco, do me a favor. Go tell Ron and Ginny that they’ve got to find a place to hide until the train leaves tonight, and don’t drink anything Umbridge gives them.”

“I’m not an owl.”

“Did I say to deliver it personally, dolt?” said Harry. He spoke in a different register, a lower one, more businesslike and far less interested in dispute. “Get some of those first years in your fan club to do it, if you want—”

“I do not have a ‘fan club.’”

Hermione snorted.

“Not my problem. Now, where can we hide people until the trains leave?”

“I don’t know, I left my pocket dimension in my other trousers. There’s thirty of us, I don’t know what kind of palatial broom closets you hide in—”

“You wouldn’t need one,” said Hermione suddenly. She was drumming her fingers on her arm in the particular rhythm that meant her mind was running a few hundred miles an hour. “There are at least seven secret passages out of the castle. One’s caved in, of course, and another one’s by the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, so it’s likely buried under the swamp, but there’s one on the first floor, by Gregory the Smarmy, and another by the West Well,

and one on the Hieroglyphic Hall— it's the one everyone uses for snogging—"

"Granger," said Ernie, scandalized. "I didn't take you for the type."

"I liked you better when you raised your hand," said Draco, and Ernie nearly swallowed his tongue. "What are you doing here, anyway? This is the Ravenclaw table."

"I'm — sharing notes — with Padma," said Ernie, strangled. Padma, unhappy to be invoked thusly, sipped her pumpkin juice with a powerful air of minding her own business.

"The *point is,"* Hermione said, "there's at least four we could use. We could go in groups, ferry everyone out, and then hide out in Hogsmeade."

"For hours?" said Marietta. "Until the train? What do you expect us to do?"

"Bring crayons," said Hermione in annoyance. "I don't know. The plan itself is simple; the real difficulty is a coordination exercise. We can't all use one passage at once, they're not big enough, and we'd be bound to attract attention. We need rotating shifts — and someone who knows the passages has to lead them, me or Fred or George… ought to do it alphabetically, too, so that the students first called by Umbridge will be first out."

In clipped tones, Harry said, "I'll tell them."

He turned to leave. Hermione caught his arm. Then she turned to the Ravenclaws, and said haltingly: "Sorry, could you—"

"The bell rang five minutes ago," Draco interrupted. "Make yourself scarce. Or useful. Preferably both, but I have realistic expectations."

With a shriek of benches, the Ravenclaw table emptied. Marietta shot Hermione a final glower as she went, but she still hurried out of

the hall.

“Harry, I’m—”

“Cho was right, you know.”

“What?”

“About being nice.” He set his jaw, and spoke with difficulty. “You were right. You’re always right, so it doesn’t — cost you — anything — to just let someone have it.”

“Harry—”

“It’s fine. Yeah? Yes, you’re smarter than I am. You’re better at this than I am. You’re the brains, and I’m the great useless idiot with the scar on his head who keeps mucking his way into danger and forcing other people to jump in front of curses for him. I know. I do know, actually.”

“That’s not what I think!”

“Whatever. I can’t win arguments with you,” he said tiredly. “I never have. Just… you didn’t need to go after Cho, and you didn’t need to snap at Marietta, and you really didn’t need to throw that thing about Padfoot in my face. You can admit that, right? Everything’s miserable enough without you biting our heads off.”

Hermione tightly folded her arms around her chest, holding herself like a small and delicate explosive.

“I’m sorry I said those things,” she said. “I shouldn’t have done. But my life hasn’t been completely un-miserable either, if you’d noticed, and I’m not the only one who’s been nastier than usual.”

Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes.

“I know,” he said. “Yeah. Sorry.”

The Great Hall had nearly emptied out, and the distant susurrus of footsteps on the grand staircase filled the atrium with echoes.

Hermione made a noncommittal noise. In fairness, Draco couldn't think of anything to say to this, either. What could one possibly answer? Yes, it was hard? Yes, he lived a life in which people his age could and did die, and there was not a night he went to sleep without green light flaring behind his eyelids? That those were the lucky nights when he slept at all?

"It'll be better when you're home," she said. "With family."

Harry made a funny expression: not quite a smile, not quite a grimace. Maybe it unsettled him, too, because he abruptly rubbed his mouth like he was trying to get it off.

"What?"

"Nothing, I… You know, I used to have that thought, when I was with the Dursleys," he said. "'It'll be better when you're home.' All the time. Only I was always talking about Hogwarts."

It was a slow, wretched afternoon. Queues that babbled distantly from the hallways outside Umbridge's and Filch's offices, and the chilly atria threw eerie echoes at the slightest footstep or groaning stair. Through the frost-embroidered windows the grounds were monochromatic and silent, lit in the dull blues of an overcast afternoon. The lawn was like a sheet of marble before the sculptor's first stroke, unbroken, unformed.

At one o'clock, Hermione had led a group of first years from the Defense Club down the passageway behind Gregory the Smarmy, most of whom could barely speak for the excitement of getting a prefect to sneak them out of the castle. Fred and George led a cohort of older students down the West Well, a long and winnowing passage that had to be rappelled at several points, while another group with Harry and Ron in it departed from the Well an hour later.

Draco, being one of the few at liberty to move freely about the castle, was stuck with the job of lookout, which he loathed completely. It involved a great deal of nothing important, only wandering around the empty hallways and flicking Trip Jinxes at members of the Inquisitorial Squad whenever they had the misfortune not to see him around the corner.

At five, he levitated his trunk down to the Entrance Hall and left it there for the house-elves to ferry onto the train. Then he walked to the library, fingering the Marauder's Map in his pocket. Now and then he ducked into an alcove to check the Map, following the peppery trail of dots drifting through the secret passages. HERMIONE GRANGER floated in and out of the edge of the map near Hogsmeade, along with dots marked POTTER and a whole confusion of WEASLEYs. She and Ron were meant to come back and meet him by the statue of Gregory at five-thirty in order to lead the final group, which included Luna, Padma, and Zacharias Smith.

Luna and Padma were dutifully waiting at the statue on time, their robes drawn up and wands out, but Smith was nowhere to be found. This would have been substantially more irritating if Hermione and Ron hadn't been equally late, and Draco checked the map increasingly as the minutes ticked past, eyeing the dark jots of their names at the end of the tunnel.

"Gosh, I hope they're alright," mused Luna. "There were all sorts of wrackspurts wandering around in the air earlier, I don't wonder that it's slow-going."

"What's a wrackspurt?" said Padma, who was knitting idly while they waited.

"It's a malign spirit. They hover around people in emotional distress and cause bad decisions. We've been swarmed with them all year. Look at Draco, for example."

"Piss off."

“You see?”

“Oh, dear,” said Padma. “Do I have them?”

“A few, but that’s because you’re visiting your grandmother for the holiday, and it makes you anxious. What’s the moon phase, again?”

“Waxing gibbous.”

“ *Definitely* anxious, then. But you needn’t worry, it’s going to go well.”

“Oh, good,” said Padma happily. She turned to Draco. “Luna’s top student in Divination, you know. She’s better at reading astrological charts than Trelawney.”

Hermione would have regarded this kind of statement as a dueling-caliber insult, but he kept that to himself.

The hall was drenched in shadow, alive with the echoes of settling floorboards and skittering footsteps through the distance, torchlight, ghosts, and cool whistling air.

The hardwood under their feet vanished into an inky pool of darkness at the far end of the hall. Oil portraits murmured softly from the walls above them, and their wands poured dim *Lumos*- light in shallow puddles around their legs, casting the underside of Luna’s face in silver, her eyes in dramatic sweeps of shadow.

When the statue moved, the shriek made them all twitch.

Hermione emerged from the passageway, her face daubed here and there with soot, her hair crowned with a tawny cap of sawdust. She wriggled out, face bright from exertion, and stepped out of the way from Ron, who grimaced and massaged his neck as soon as he emerged into a hallway that could accommodate his height.

“Sorry we’re late. There were patrolmen at the other end of the passage, and we had to wait for them to leave, it was completely

awful on the nerves, I think Harry almost jumped out and jinxed them —”

“Where’s Zacharias?” said Ron, peering around.

“Lying at the bottom of a stairwell with a broken neck,” said Draco curtly, “or worse, if he knows what’s good for him.”

“Don’t say that. He could’ve run into the Inquisitorial Squad.” Hermione grabbed the Map. “Did you check the Hufflepuff dorms?”

“I say, what an idea.”

“Fine, silly question. Filch’s office? Umbridge’s?”

“Have you tried checking the grounds?” called Luna. “Zacharias likes an evening walk.”

“In pitch darkness?” muttered Hermione, rifling through the Map. “With the train leaving in thirty minutes?”

“No, she’s right,” exclaimed Ron, pointing at a blotch of ink moving swiftly over the Great Lawn. “Look. He’s just here, by the carriage depot — lazy bugger, bet he wanted to catch a carriage instead of walking.”

“Then he’s an idiot, because carriages are long gone,” snapped Hermione, checking her watch. “They would’ve left at four. He’s going to be out there, all alone, in the dark, and they’ll have locked the Hogsmeade gates at sunset. What a *nitwit!* Ron, show Luna and Padma back to the train station, we’ll meet you there with Zacharias.”

“Don’t love the splitting-up part of this plan,” said Ron in alarm. “Least favorite part of this plan. Right after the bit where you’re stranded in an empty castle with Umbridge and Filch. If she catches you—”

“So we’ll take the Map. It’ll be fine.”

“I still don’t like it.”

Draco felt distinctly peeved on at least two different fronts. Then Ron stepped past him and touched Hermione’s elbow, and a whole new front of irritation opened up at once.

Hermione didn’t appear to notice, being preoccupied tying up her hair.

“I’m a prefect,” she announced, as if that explained the whole matter. “Don’t worry about me. And anyway, I’ll have Draco with me, I’ll be fine.”

At first, she didn’t seem to realize what she’d said. Draco, whose whole chest had flooded with a buoyant, incandescent wave of pleasure, schooled his expression in order to avoid smirking.

Evidently he hadn’t succeeded, because she glanced at him and then scoffed. “Not that I couldn’t handle myself, I might add!”

“Never doubted it in the least.”

“I mean it! I could do it perfectly well on my own, I know the castle better than you do — oh, would you stop *smirking,* I didn’t say you were bloody Lancelot, you’re just handy with a wand—”

“A bit more than *handy,* thank you.”

“Handy,” she repeated firmly. “Useful. Not wholly inept. That’s all. Which is more than I can say for *you* lot, who ought to get going, or we’ll all be buggered!”

With a warning mutter of discontent, Ron clambered back into the passageway and led the girls down the narrow, ashen chute. Hermione watched them go, and then closed it with a brandish of her wand, slotting the statue back into place.

“Well,” she said, turning to Draco. She wiped her hands on her skirt, apprehensive, and there was a beat in which they regarded each

other with the twin expectant stares.

Dirt from the passage smudged the rise of her cheek, covering one of his favorite freckles, and it bothered him. He wanted to remove it. One touch was all it would take.

She blinked first, and gestured to the corridor. “Let’s hurry up. I’d like to get out of here.”

The grounds were deathly still, shadows pooled under the white antlers of jagged and naked branches, shrouded in the smell of rich wet soil and the cool, fresh wind off the moors. The trees arched to and fro in the arms of the wind like skeletal creatures nodding to a silent symphony. The dark windows of Hagrid’s cabin reflected the icy pinpricks of Lumos-light, sparkling in the darkness like landlocked stars.

Their wands cast narrow fans of light that reflected almost blindingly from the snow, turning the path ahead of them into a dull sheet of black-and-white film. Snow fell slowly in a trickle of salt grains, coalescing on their shoulders and hair. Their boots crunched on loose snow and frozen pebbles. Hermione held the Map in one hand and her wand in the other.

“Does Veritaserum have an antidote, by chance?” she said. Her voice fell like velvet on the snow.

“Not one that’s nearby. It’d take three weeks over a cauldron, not to mention a small fortune at an apothecary.”

“Which means I’m going to spend my afternoon hiding in a broom closet somewhere. We got off on pure luck with Cho, by the way — if she’s dosed everyone in the Defense Club, we’re absolutely scuppered, I like Seamus alright but he’s not exactly the soul of discretion—”

“She can’t dose everyone.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’d need more of the stuff than exists on the planet at a given time. Veritaserum is diabolically complex. Snape’s one of maybe a hundred people alive who could render a passable batch, and that only yields a few doses.”

“Hm. I suppose.” She stepped away and ventured a few steps down the hillside, and then turned back at him, and with a sort of quick, darting glance, touched his arm. “It’s slippery here. Watch out.”

Her hand stayed there as they picked their way down the slope. Her small fingers were cold and tight on his arm.

He could have pointed out, in the interests of fairness, that there were charms to make the surface dryer, or more even, or to lift their steps. But he didn’t, and she didn’t use them. When she slid her arm through his at the bottom, he kept silent on the subject, as if the silence was giving them both permission to do something that couldn’t happen outside of it.

At the depot where the carriages usually waited, Zacharias was nowhere to be found. Hermione put away the Map and swept her wand over the surrounding trees, her light darting over a ribbed vista of white wood and coal-black bark.

“Zacharias?”

“Don’t go yowling for him, someone could hear.”

“There’s no one out here. It’s pitch black and snowing, everyone sane is indoors.”

“I quite agree. *Ow.”*

“You deserved that. The Map ends just here, I think, but he’s gone… He must’ve tried to walk to Hogsmeade to catch the train. Here, this way.”

The shadows melded and coupled behind them in sinewy ropes. Light from the castle sent a pale spill over the hillside, glinting here and there on a frosted leaf, a jeweled twig, a glittering snowbank. Wind moaned through the branches, and then went abruptly silent, as if it had been drawn into a void.

Something tightened in his inner ear. It was hard to describe, but magic — even benign magic — had an energy, a tension. If one cast a spell often enough, one gained a sense for what it felt like. *Muffliato,* for instance.

He pivoted on his heel. Four silhouettes darkened the hillside under the castle, framed by the black brackets of trees. Their overcoats stirred silently in the wind. For a heartbeat, he thought they were teachers, but their frames were too small.

Hermione lifted her wand. Light paved the faces of Theo, Pansy, Blaise, and a tall girl with black curls who could have been Blaise's twin. It was Tracy Davis, one of the girls that Daphne had rowed with in the Three Broomsticks.

"I have to admit, I enjoy this angle," called Theo. The gold pin glinted on his tie. "I didn't give you half enough credit. I'm beginning to understand your obsession with the high ground."

Draco found his voice carried quite easily up the hill. "Some of us prefer not to make our home in the dungeon."

"Some of us weren't invited to."

Blaise yawned. "Lord help us, they're doing subtext," he murmured to Tracy. "Let's go get a drink, perhaps they'll be ready to get on with it when we get back."

Pansy drew her wand. Though she was the shortest of anyone present, the angle of the hillside drew her shadow into a forty-foot creature.

Hermione twitched her wrist. Her Lumos faded.

“Granger was supposed to report to Professor Umbridge’s office this morning,” said Pansy.

“The train’s leaving soon,” said Hermione.

“You’ll be put on a carriage to London next morning.”

“Actually, I rather think I’ll be taking my train,” she said.

Pansy pursed her lips. Then she turned to Draco. “Tell her why she needs to come with us,” she ordered. “She isn’t going to get flayed or anything.”

“Parkinson, I don’t know who you think you’re taking that tone with, but it’s certainly not me.”

Pansy’s face crumpled with childlike frustration: a girl who hadn’t got the doll she wanted. She ground her heel into the earth. “Come *on!”* she whined. She whirled on Theo, and addressed her next to him: “Do something! It’s cold! I should be in front of a fireplace getting my feet rubbed, not slogging after delinquents in the woods!”

“Hear, hear,” said Tracy. “You heard the woman, Theodorus. I’m bored of this.”

“Shut up, Trace,” said Pansy at once. “Nobody asked you to come.”

“I wanted to be involved.”

“With whom?” said Blaise innocently. Tracy threw him a breezy smile and a brutal elbow. He keeled to one side with a grunt, and Pansy sprang clear, grabbing Theo for balance.

Draco blinked. Memory flared like a camera’s flashbulb, and he was staring at a brilliant vista in southern France, while a dark-haired girl watched a dark-haired boy do giddy loops on his broomstick in a sun-flushed azure sky.

It vanished, and it was a snowy evening in Scotland, and the light was pale and thin.

Theo drew his wand. So did Blaise, massaging his abdomen, and Tracy.

Draco rolled his wand across his fingers and stepped into a duelist's position. Hermione gave an irritated huff, and her fingers closed around his offhand in a cold band.

"Draco."

"What?"

"There's four of them. And two of us."

"Which will make what I'm about to do much more impressive."

"Draco!"

"This is the part where you start running."

"Oh, like hell."

"Granger," he said, verging on a snarl — Theo was starting to climb down the hillside, now — "they're coming after you, not me. Run."

"Yes! Let's!"

"I'll catch up."

"No, you won't! You're going to pick a fight," she snapped, "because Theo's up there and you're pissed at him, and you've been spoiling for a fight with him since June!"

"That's not why."

"Yes, it is! You want him to hurt, and so do I, but one of us has to *think clearly—"*

He wrenched his arm out of her grasp, and she made an outraged sound when he broke free of her.

“Hermione, run.”

She gave a shriek of exasperation, wheeled away from him, and lashed her wand into the air.

“Confringo!”

Blue flames blossomed into the air like a tide of dragonbreath, radiating waves of rippling heat. They seared back layers of snow at a touch, sending clouds of billowing steam up from the hillside. Blaise and Tracy sprang back with high, panicked yelps as boiling steam surged from the ground at their feat. Fog and steam and smoke fused into a thick white bloom that erupted between them and the Slytherins, blotting out their silhouettes and the lights from the castle, plunging the whole world into darkness save for the flickering blue of her firelights.

He couldn’t see; visibility was next to nothing, and the world tasted of smoke. He coughed into his arm, ducking back from the row of guttering flames; and something closed around his hand, and wrenched. He was hauled back into the forest by the arm, and fumbled into a run, towed along behind a madwoman’s headlong deadsprint into the shadows.

“What the devil are you doing?”

“Solving a problem! You might try it!”

“You *set* the *lawn* on *fire!* You little maniac—”

“And your solution was shoving me behind your back and trying to fight everything that moved!”

“What can I say,” he snarled, “I learned from the best,” and he overtook her, racing through the stinging cold.

A jinx slit the air behind them, red-white and sizzling. Hermione cried out and slipped, tearing her hand free, and when he turned back there was another jinx that made him leap aside. It was pitch-dark without Lumos to light the way, and he could barely see in front of his feet on the ice-slick ground, let alone the branches that seemed to come soaring down from the darkness and swing for his face. He lashed up his wand and cast a Shield, catching a jinx in an explosion of sparks. Hermione scrambled to her feet and took off again. He threw two Stunners back into the trees and then followed her.

The total darkness made his nerves smolder with fear. Hermione bobbed in and out of view between the trees, her hair a dark blur against the gray sheet of snow. Flying spells collided with underbrush and trees and detonated small explosions of wood behind them. Muffled voices echoed harshly through the trees, like the shrieks of hunting birds.

The path swung down through a gorge and up a hill on the other side. A Stunning Spell cut between them and soared overhead, its red gleam illuminating the sharp bend in the earth.

It happened inside the space of a heartbeat, in the time it took him to check over his shoulder for someone following: there was a yelp, a loud skitter of falling rocks, and when he turned, Hermione had vanished.

“Hermione? *Hermione!”*

He threw himself to a halt. His lungs screamed from the strain and a sudden inability to draw enough air.

Lights flickered off in the distance, drawing away. Footsteps drifted out of earshot. He waited, but no answer came.

“Herm—”

“Flipendo!”

A bolt of force collided with his legs. It threw him backward and dropped him on his back. He threw up his wand and thrust it into the darkness, heart hammering.

“Stu—”

“Expelliarmus!”

His wand leapt out of his hand and soared into the awaiting fist of Pansy, who stepped out of the trees and caught it neatly, her small, haughty lips peeled in a sneer. She tugged down her sleeve, under which a crust of blood winked, tellingly.

Pansy was no great hand at charms, but she had her tricks.

A gold tie pin slitted her coal-black tie, the same color as her short, choppy hair. Without the trappings of Slytherin House, Pansy seemed older. Her cloak was tattered along the undersides with mud, slightly singed. He couldn’t recall when he’d seen her in such disarray.

They regarded each other in dull shock for a moment.

“You idiot,” she said bitterly, breaking the silence. “You could have just come with us.”

“There is no world,” he said, his voice uneven from exertion and anger mixed, “where I take her to Umbridge. None. That you would think otherwise for a moment speaks to how very little you understand about me, or indeed anything.”

“Merlin’s sake! Umbridge? This is about *Umbridge?”* She threw up her hands, which each gripped a wand, hers and his. “Are you serious? She’s a nothing, a sycophant, a middle-class bureaucrat, she’d wash my boots with her tongue if I told her to!”

“Maybe word of this hasn’t reached the dungeons yet, but your school’s under martial law.”

“Because your quidditch team was suspended? Because you have detention? I wake up praying for days like that! Some of us have *real problems!”*

“Like planning a wedding? Dress fittings? Choosing napkins?”

“Oh, go fuck yourself, Draco.”

“You first.” This was not a slice to the jugular as much as a fumbling paper-cut to the thumb. “I can name people who wake up praying for your problems, too.”

Twigs shattered behind them. Pansy whirled, and Tracy’s broad silhouette came trotting out of trees.

“You got him! Good *shot,* Pan-Pan!”

“Gag yourself, please,” said Pansy at once, politely. “Call me that again and I’ll show you what your tongue looks like when it’s not connected to the rest of you. Did you get Granger?”

“No, Theo went after her. Blaise thinks he sprained his ankle in the fire, so he went back.”

“God, he’s such a pantywaist.”

“I was proud he even came.”

“Quit gloating, you’re still one too. Now run and get Teddy, make yourself useful.”

“What, now?”

“No, actually, how’s your Tuesday — yes, *now,* moron!”

Tracy scowled at her and sauntered out of the clearing. “I’m telling him you were mean to me.”

“Good! It’ll cheer him up.”

“I hate you desperately, Parkinson.”

Pansy lifted her wand. Draco braced himself, but the point drifted away from him, and settled on Tracy’s retreating back.

“Bully for you,” called Pansy. “Someday, I might even care. *Stupefy.”*

There was a muffled cry, and a thud.

Pansy pointed at Draco. “Stay,” she ordered, and then darted into the woods in the direction Tracy had gone. Moments later, she returned, picking her way through the underbrush with the awkward distaste of someone more used to parquet and marble.

“Got her,” she declared. “My Stunner’s quite bad, unfortunately, so we’ve only got a minute. If she asks, I’m going to tell her that was you, so be a good fellow and don’t rat.”

“Because I’m flush with reasons to do you favors.”

“Yes, because I’m about to do a mammoth one for you,” she snapped. “I’m going to let you go. Alright? Look at me, I’m a humanitarian. But first I’m going to ask you for something, and you’re going to nod your head and say yes like a good little boy, or I’ll park you here while Teddy and I drag your mudblood back to the castle by the ends of her bloody big hair — *don’t* you try and hit me, either, you shit, I told you I’m being nice. Here.” She dropped to a crouch, placed his wand carefully out of reach, and withdrew from her breast pocket before a boxy envelope sealed in emerald wax. It was unaddressed.

“You’re going to give this to Daphne,” she said flatly, holding it out. He gave it an unimpressed sneer, and then gave her another. “You’re — no, yes, you are. You’re not going to open it, either — don’t be offended, I’d be nosy, too — but the sealant wax is jinxed to slice your fingers open. I thought of everything, you see. Don’t let her do anything dramatic like pitch it out the window, and you know she’ll probably try to, the silly goose. And once you’ve made her read it,

you'll tell her to burn it, and you're going to *watch* her burn it, because I adore her, but she is a lying, simpering little viper who could find a way to cheat in a coin toss."

"And you're that plus presumptuous," he said. "You don't seem to get how this works. I'll be doing you a favor if I don't jinx you into a pile of ashes."

"One thing I like about you, Draco, is I can count on you for a laugh."

She stuffed the letter into his robe pocket and then scrambled back, putting a clearing's worth of distance between them.

"When I give you your wand back," she warned, "promise you won't try jinxing me or anything."

"Absolutely not."

"Fine. But when you Stun me, try not to pitch me into a tree or something; please recall that *I* hit you with very easy jinxes to undo, and there's an Eyeball-Melting Jinx I've been dying to try for ages."

"You're a saint."

"I keep saying it, but no one believes me. Catch."

She pitched his wand at him. Unfortunately, she had a terrible arm, and it flailed awkwardly into the dirt some distance from his hand. He leaned over and snatched it up, then dispelled the jinxes on his legs and ankles with two sharp flicks. He stood, brushing dirt and snow from his robes.

"Answer me something," he said. "You want to get a message to Daphne? You have an owl. You also have legs and a passable mastery of English. Explain yourself."

She gave him a flat look. "The post's being watched," she said. "And even if Daphne were talking to me these days, which she isn't, the

castle’s not safe for that. The walls have ears. The ears *in* the walls have ears. There’s no such thing as a secret at Hogwarts.”

He considered this explanation, and accepted it. He nodded.

He stood up — straightened his shoulders — and then whipped a curse past her ear, glittering in barbed red.

She shrieked and balked, throwing her arms over her head.

“That’s for threatening me.”

“Was that supposed to *hit* me? That was a proper curse! A real one! Stun me, I said!”

“I heard you.”

The Stinging Jinx snapped her head around. She shrieked, clutching the swelling ridge of her bottom lip.

He crossed the clearing briskly and plucked the wand out of her hand, pitching it into the forest.

“That was for ‘mudblood,’” he said. “The next one will be worse.”

Her stare was one part anger to many parts shock. “Tha’ *hurt,* you twat,” she garbled out.

“Stupefy.”

Pansy folded into the dirt.

He turned on his heel and swept out of the clearing, his cloak stirring a billow of snow in his wake.

The path winnowed wearily up towards Hogsmeade under a glacial ribbon of frost. He slit open long flanks of forest underbrush with *Diffindo* and stepped through them, moving quickly and making little noise. He couldn’t hear Hermione or Theo and he didn’t know if that

was better or worse than the alternative. His pulse beat hard and fast, like someone had a hand around his throat, and it tightened with every heartbeat.

Slick slabs of thick mud ran up to Hogsmeade. Somewhere, the train crooned. He ran up the path and then swung around the corner, breaking onto the last straight-away to the Hogsmeade gates and the train station. The path was empty: a muddy track up to a distant bead of yellow lamp-light, dappled in woods.

He lit his wand and swept it around. Seconds raced by with cruel haste, like the cold wind snaking across his neck.

“Hermione?” he said. He loathed how his voice sounded, flat and small, crushed into almost nothing by the vastness of the forest. He hated the desperation in it, the *need.* It was constricting, consuming. It was hellish.

The sky was so dark that he couldn’t tell where it ended, and the trees began. The trees creaked, murmuring to each other in low conspiracy.

Suddenly there was a sound, an echo of a voice, rippling from between the trees. He cut a path through the brambles with a Withering Charm that ripped back vines like burning paper.

A watery silver light hovered at the base of an oak tree the size of Gryffindor Tower. Images of will-o-wisps, fairy creatures, the things that lured lone travelers away from safety, and into the dark — but on approach, it resolved into the plain, cold beam of Lumos.

“Draco?”

“Hermione.”

She was braced against one of the vast roots, her arm cupped in the cradle of her lap, knees bent and crushed against her chest, as if to make herself as small as possible. Her cloak pooled around her,

shockingly dark on the snow, like a radius of oil. Her wand was gripped tightly in the wrong hand, and in the thin light it took a moment to notice the dark red stain — the weak light turned it nearly black — soaking through the white of her shirtsleeve.

“Hermione—”

“Fine! I’m fine,” she exclaimed, eyes widening, and scrambled up — he didn’t know what his face looked like to make her move up like that, but she was halfway to her feet when he caught her and all but shoved her back down again. “I’m fine! It looks worse than it is—”

He stripped back her both and sleeve with a carelessly forceful movement, ripping both. “What,” he said tautly, “and where?”

“Just the wrist. The arm. It’s a superficial wound, more blood than you’d think, honestly, I’ve already healed some of it myself.” She was talking too much to be convincing.

“Nott did this?”

“No. Well, not exactly. He threw some sort of jinx, and I blocked most of it but I lost my footing and fell, and I must’ve cut myself on a rock or some broken ice or something. Of course, then I was in the bush and my light had gone out, so he didn’t see anything.”

He drew her arm into his lap and glided his wand across it. The blood coursed off her skin in dark ribbons. Underneath it lay a long, deep, but relatively thin cut across her forearm.

“I lost him, though,” she said, thick with triumph. “It didn’t take ten minutes, altogether, after we were separated. And I’m pretty sure I got him with a Horn-Tongue Hex, which probably wasn’t as useful as some other spells, but it was the heat of the moment and I chose the nastiest thing I could think of. To be honest, I doubt he was trying that hard to catch me, though that’s not terribly surprising, they’re none of them known for their love of hard work—”

“You’re rambling.”

“Yes,” she said, “well. It hurts.”

His hand flexed on her wrist, but he set his teeth and made it still. “Brace yourself.”

“For wh– OW! Ow ow *ow* ow *stop it.”*

Episkey wasn’t enough for a deep cut. He had to pull the skin back together, which required a different kind of spell, and then put in a row of stitches; not good ones, but ones that would hold until they could find someone qualified to do better ones.

Hermione was squirming unhappily, and almost kicked him in the legs. Briskly, he caught her knee and flattened it, then knelt across her, pinning her down.

“That stings,” she said breathlessly.

“I know. You’re alright.” In want of a better bandage, he flipped her hand over, tugged his handkerchief out, and folded it across the shiny raw scars. “You’re going to be alright. It’s fine.”

She set her jaw. “Did you — *ah* — did you run into the others?”

“Parkinson and Davis. I dealt with them.”

“What does that mean? Where are they?”

He carefully pulled her arm away from her body, inspecting her for other cuts or injuries. She seemed well, not to mention a bit unnerved at the inspection; she withdrew and folded her arms over her chest, eyeing him.

“They’ll be fine.” He would revisit the idea at length later. “Can you stand?”

“Yes, because I’m fine,” she said pointedly, rolling to her feet. He slipped an arm around her waist to guide her up, partly because it was an excuse to do so, and because he was skeptical of her claims to being unaffected; she swayed when she stood up, and he ran a mental calculation on the amount of blood that she could have lost before he came. Not as much as she would have if he’d been faster, at any rate. He was slow, a slow idiot, to let Pansy prattle at him for God knew how long.

“You’re such a fusser,” she muttered, though that didn’t stop her from sneaking an arm around his shoulders to lean on him. “You’d think I lost a limb. You’ve come back from quidditch matches in worse shape than this.”

“That is a bar one clears by crawling.”

She stood up gingerly, using him as a sort of brace. He caught her other arm. She was warm, radiantly warm, although he’d been in the cold so long that his hands likely would have taken pleasure in anything that wasn’t freezing. Their breath was white silk in the air.

His heart still ran at an unusual pace, but at least it didn’t feel like he was about to give himself a stroke anymore.

She started to pull away, then stopped, turned back into him, and put her head against his chest. He caught the back of her head with his hand and held her there, assuming, for an alarmed moment, that she was about to collapse.

“What? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter. Why do you assume every time someone touches you, it means they’re in peril?”

“Because they’re touching me. Ergo, they are in peril.”

“I touch you,” she retorted.

She was irresistibly contrary.

“You live in a state of peril,” he said. “You can afford the risk.”

She broke into a giggle.

The train interrupted them with an urgent groan. Hermione froze. He lifted his head.

“Fuck.”

“Fuck,” she agreed, spinning around.

She broke into a run. The snow burst up in white artilleries at their feet. Branches snapped on his arms and face, thin stinging whips on his skin. The train gave another shout, and smoke burst from its pipes like the trilling mouth of a volcano. With a groan of machinery, it thrust itself into motion.

He tore out of the woods and broke onto the clean pavement of the station, desolate and empty. The train rolled away, gathering speed. Hermione gave a cry.

The end of the train glided past them. The platform was running out in front of them. He jumped and caught hold of the rail at the viewing deck, and the jolt almost tore his arm from his socket. Hermione shouted and jumped after him — he caught her by the waist, pulling — and then she was scrambling over the railing, tumbling to the ground, letting out a thin high sound that he recognized as relief. He hurled himself over the side and then dropped to one knee on the safe side of the railing, breathing quickly, as the station shot away behind them, and the train soared off into the Scottish highlands with both of them onboard.

The lights of the station receded. The gas lamps became a smear of oily yellow in the darkness. The air was a grainy blur of snow, washed white in the light from the train. He stilled for a moment,

breathing in and out, while the carriage rattled with each bend and sway in the track.

By and by, Hermione gave a shuddering gasp and then sat upright, reaching for his arm. The train hit a bend and jolted them both, sending her scrabbling for purchase on the rail.

“Oh, God — Christ, thought — make — were… alright?”

“What?” He could barely hear her over the shriek of the wind outside the train.

“Are you alright?”

“Fine.”

“Good! God — can’t — believe!” Every third word was stolen by the shriek of the train. That was why he didn’t immediately realize she was laughing. Her face shone ruddy from exertion and adrenaline, her hair stirred to complete wilderness by the wind. There was a feral kind of joy in it, along with the fear and the relief, and he pitied the fool who forgot that she *was* a Gryffindor, and had always been. When the train hit another bump she caught the front of his robes for balance. He caught her wrist. Her gaze flickered, caught, and held him.

“You—alright—” she repeated. He didn’t hear her, but he could see her mouth the shape of the words.

The train dove into a tunnel, and the light plummeted. The wind died, and suddenly he could hear her again. She was saying: “—to take a car from Aberdeen, and *I* would’ve had to drive, would’ve killed us both if you didn’t try to do it first—”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Who cares!” she exclaimed, flinging out her arms. “We made it! It’s Christmas, we *won,* and we’re going home!”

He returned her smile, thinly. “Steady on. You’re going to set something on fire.”

“I already did!”

“Well, that’s Granger for you, can’t go five minutes without immolating something.”

She shrieked in laughter and hugged him.

Nothing felt real; there was an unreality to the light and the cold and the rattling train, dreamlike, an impressionist’s tundra. One moment he was speaking, and she was watching him in exhilaration, her shoulders rising and falling as she struggled to draw breath. Her beam was electrically bright and glassy.

Athena glaukopis. Lady of the shining eyes.

“Admit it was clever,” she said. “It was good. Wasn’t it? I didn’t — I didn’t freeze up. I was good. Tell me it was good.”

“Needy little thing, aren’t you? Like to hear the obvious?”

“Yes. Yes! So what? I want to hear you say it.”

“As you like,” he said, helplessly compelled. “Here’s the obvious: that went improbably well; it’s fucking freezing out here; the Channel is wet; and you, Hermione Granger, are a very clever girl.”

With a high, happy chirp of laughter, she jumped up and kissed him.

There was a long blank second where there was nothing in the world.

Her mouth was warm and slightly parted and she made a gentle noise of surprise, which was a shot of pure energy into the white clear center of his drifting brain. He floated.

The train sailed out of the tunnel in a sudden douse of wind and moonlight.

Before she had time to find her head, he took her waist and pulled her into him and kissed her back. Her hands on his neck were cold and insistent and pulling him down as he pulled her up, like a mermaid drawing him down into dark, warm waters. The snow-capped crag of the moors vanished. Annihilated by disinterest. He bent her back over his arm and kissed her the way he'd wanted to yesterday and last week and all year and possibly forever, nudging open her mouth and locking it into his, moving together like they'd been doing it for years. She was shaking and had one hand in his hair, gripping it and the front of his shirt like she was backed over a cliff and for some reason that made sense, it all made sense, for once there was nothing in his body that didn't make perfect, spectacular, brilliant sense.

It was almost more urgent than it was pleasant. It was good, but it was serious, it was important, it was vital that he continue it for the rest of his life. He turned his head and kissed Hermione Granger again, and the second time was better than the first. The third made them both look childish.

She broke off and jumped apart, breathing hard.

"Sorry," she gasped, while he stared at her with not one single thought in his entire fucking head. She raked her hair back from her face. Her shirt had wrinkles where he'd touched it, like it remembered him. He looked forward to having thoughts about that, sometime, when he resumed having thoughts.

She smoothed her hands down her neck and exhaled, blinking. Abruptly, she shook her head.

And then Hermione — daring, clever, sensible, and meticulous Hermione — threw open the door to the carriage and ran away.

Hey, guys. Sorry about the wait. I... yeah, I don't have more than that right now.

Taking any hopes, prayers, or survival tips.

Miss ya. Love ya. See ya soon as I can.

In the Black Midwinter

Chapter 69: In the Black Midwinter

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“No, we haven’t seen Hermione,” said Harry, lifting his head in surprise. “Why?”

“She’s not with you?” said Ron sharply. Ginny lowered her hand of Exploding Snap. “Didn’t you get on the train together? We thought you followed us.”

“We did,” said Draco, who would have lacked patience for Ron’s tone even in much better moods. “She’s on the train. I merely lost sight of her.”

“How’d you manage that? It’s one bloody aisle with carriages on, and they’ve windows in ’em—”

“Not ones you seem to have made use of, seeing as she’d have passed this compartment, and you didn’t notice — nor did you exhaust yourself looking for us, I’d add—”

“Oi! We did two rounds of the train! Worried sick, weren’t we, but we couldn’t find you, and we couldn’t get in the prefects’, so excuse us for having a sit—”

“Pardon me if I won’t, seeing as I just polished off a deadsprint from the castle onto a moving train—”

“You wot?”

“Pipe down,” said Ginny, to evil-eyed compliance from both interlocutors. “She’s a witch. Reckon if she wants a moment to herself, she can manage one.”

The truth of this was accepted in silence by three ill-comforted wizards; then, by way of an olive branch, Ron cleared his throat. “Onto a *moving* train, you said?”

“Long story.”

“We’ve got until London,” suggested Ginny, drawing her legs off the bench to clear space.

Draco casted a glance down the hall. The train rattled, raising a small thunder in the luggage racks. The ghostly print of small hands lingered on his skin.

“She’ll probably turn up in a minute,” said Harry, somewhat pointedly.

The weight of growing awkwardness tipped the scales. Draco closed the door behind him.

But she did not turn up in a minute, nor an hour, nor by the end of the ride, whereon the four of them disembarked to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters to a close-knit crowd that made finding anyone particular, not least a small witch of considerable talent, next to impossible. Mad-Eye and Arthur had come to collect those going to Number Twelve, and Eventually the Weasleys and Harry turned on him with mutual grimaces of sympathy and concern.

“Suppose we stop by the Grangers’ on the way home,” Ron said, “just to see if she made it — or pop over to a telly-phone and call.”

“Call whom? The answering machine?” said Draco coolly. The fact that Ron supposed himself to be on ‘stopping-by’ terms with the Grangers rankled him. “They’ll have driven here to get her.”

“Bully. Let’s find them, why don’t we, then?”

“Because we’ll miss our portkeys,” growled Mad-Eye, who wore a lavish black wig for a disguise. “An’ I’m not walking you lot through

the streets of London so long as I fancy my freedom. I'd do better to make Runcorn my Secret-Keeper."

"Fine," interrupted Harry, who despite being under the Invisibility Cloak communicated a scowl quite well. "You can take Ginny and the twins, and Ron and I will use the Cloak—"

"Nice try, Potter."

"How about Draco?" said Arthur helpfully. "You could stay, couldn't you, lad? You'll be here anyway, to make your connection to Wiltshire. Why don't you go find the Grangers?"

"He doesn't know what they look like," Ron said, apparently without thinking, and then stopped. Ginny turned sharply to stare at Ron, flickering a glance at Draco.

Belatedly, Ron froze and glanced at Draco, too. There was a pause with teeth.

Draco slipped his hands in his pockets and held Ron's gaze as neutrally as he felt capable, which was not very.

"No," he said, "but I know what she does."

Ron's cheek twitched. He averted his eyes.

"I've only met them twice," said Harry, apparently in response to nothing in particular. "For the record."

"We can all recount our fond acquaintance with the Grangers later," snapped Mad-Eye. "She's a clever lass. She'll turn up. Malfoy, good day. Weasleys, with your father. Potter, with me."

His hand shot out and grabbed a handful of thin air — the air gave a high yelp — and he cut off through the crowd at top speed. The Weasleys followed him with varying reluctance, Ron lingering until Ginny stuck her head back through the platform wall and hauled him out by the sleeve.

Draco, whose train would not come for another hour, waited on the platform until the train was all but empty; but since no muggles remained on the platform by that time, the Grangers, if they had ever been there, seemed to have left; and so he boarded his connection, however unwillingly, with a dull weight in the pit of his stomach.

The entrance to Malfoy Manor was empty. Calls to his mother received no answer. The windows gazed back at him like a long line of gray eyes, fogged with frost.

He dropped his luggage in the foyer, went straight through to the gallery, and snapped the lock on his father’s broomstick collection.

The most expensive was a vintage Firebolt Imperator, which Lucius had anecdotally procured by calling in a favor with the Grand Duke of Luxembourg. It was worth three hundred thousand galleons by itself, and five with the factory seal on.

Draco stripped off the seal and hauled open a window.

Why would you kiss someone and then run away?

Possibility the first: she had undergone a spontaneous realization of having made a colossal mistake. She had, in remorse for this act, fled the scene of the act, hurled herself from the train, and died.

Possibility the second, adopting the same premise: having fled, she had discreetly exited the train in the usual way, and was now tucked away somewhere in muggle London, drafting an eloquent resignation from their friendship, Gryffindor House, and Hogwarts itself, never to be seen again.

Possibility the third: She was mad, and there was no point trying to understand her at all, because she was a cruel and lovely sprite sent from the aether as a personal envoy of misery and torment. This last seemed to be the strongest theoretical explanation.

When the Imperator accelerated, the jetstream felt like razing off a layer of skin.

Narcissa didn’t return for the first few days of the vacation. This was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it relieved him of the need to come up with an excuse for his foul mood. On the other hand, the reasons she could have for being absent did nothing to improve said mood, either.

He ordered Briselda to keep the Floo grates open and set the table for two at meals. He practiced with the dueling wands in the gallery, dismembering mannequins with an efficiency that bordered cruelty. He flew for hours through snowstorms that doused the grounds in white ice. He tried not to think about Hermione. That would have been easier if he couldn’t remember the feeling of her mouth like it was the only thing that had ever happened to him.

Why would you kiss someone and then run away? If you thought you’d made a mistake. If you didn’t want to have kissed them in the first place. If you’d detonated five years of friendship because you were careless, because you’d acted without thinking, and wanted to take it back as soon as you did. Because you knew the boy you’d kissed would want too much, because he bled things dry; because your heart was worthy of people like Viktor Krum, who could give themselves freely and selflessly, and who stepped willingly onto the sacrificial pyre, because the metal of their souls was cut from the same spiritual ore, and it was a finer alloy than his own.

Because the boy had known this, and kissed you anyway. For he had always drunk in all the attention as you could give him and still demanded more, because he was selfish, and not the kind of person you would want to be attached to, if you were a brilliant girl with a heart like an open door. Because he never met someone Because he loved like a sinkhole, which was to say, badly.

You ran away if everything was over, but you couldn’t say that, so you left them standing on the back of a train with the wind and the cold and the ghost of a kiss still warm on their lips.

After the first three starts of a letter to Hermione failed to yield anything tolerable, he began a different letter entirely.

Dear Dr. & Dr. Granger,

I apologize for the necessary impropriety of addressing you in print without a personal introduction to precede it. Please trust that under no circumstance but urgency would I consider it appropriate to take this liberty with persons of such esteem and of such close relation to someone I consider a dear friend.

I therefore take the liberty of introducing myself as Draco Lucius Malfoy, Lord Apparent of House Malfoy, Master Apparent of Malfoy Manor, and an inveterate companion of your daughter, Ms. Hermione Granger.

While one regrets deeply to demand favors on the heels of introductions, one would nevertheless appreciate confirmation that said daughter has safe passage to her dwelling, and resides with you in a reasonable state of health. While one does not consider oneself fretful, her departure from the castle occurred under such circumstances as to make such inquiries appropriate for those with an interest in her wellbeing.

One also would like to inquire as to the state of her arm, and attaches with this missive a small poultice of dittany, in the event that the answer is not favorable.

I wish you good tidings, and hope that you will be unhesitating in your solicitations of assistance from me, should it ever lie within my power to render it.

Yours sincerely,

Draco L. Malfoy

He attached both letter and package to Ulysses's leg, and released him into a silver sky, feeling a foreboding commingled with irritation.

Ulysses came back by the end of the next day, carrying a letter that was written on fresh white paper instead of parchment.

Draco,

I don't know what unearthly idiocy compelled you to write to my parents (!) instead of me, but thank you ever so much (!!) for doing so because now in addition to explaining why an owl flew into their window at half six I got a nice full day of trying to convince them my friend isn't a real member of the British peerage, even though you go around calling yourself 'lord'(!!!) and generally otherwise write like someone picked you up out of Middlemarch. And thanks also for leading them both to freak out and COMPLETELY overreact to an injury that I previously had made the executive personal (!!!!) decision not to tell them about, because (1) it is my business and (2) explaining the relative frequency and normalcy of injury in the Wizarding World to a pair of dentists was not a source of anticipation for my winter holiday!(!!!!!) Really, I can't possibly thank you enough!

I have been instructed to inform you that I am safe, and to apologize for any distress. They also thank you profusely for the poultice, which they have insisted that I make use of, and so you may add the waste of a perfectly good bottle of dittany as another offspring of your letter.

If you felt like checking up, you might have at least tried writing me first, instead of doing what you did, which made my parents think I'd been ignoring your letters (which didn't exist). If you don't want me to to write to me that's fine, and I certainly won't demand that you should, but if you're not going to write to me then you shouldn't expect to hear anything about how I am. For your information I would have been perfectly happy to answer a letter from you under

different circumstances and in fact would have welcomed one. At any rate we've been corresponding for years so I don't have any idea why you've decided to stop now.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

Granger,

Three points.

Matters relating to your health are indeed primarily 'your business,' but it does not follow that they are not mine. That wound did need dittany, and while I rarely risk saying so, our Potions marks testify that I am, in fact, a better judge of that than you. Because neither I nor Potter nor Weasley(s) had any idea what became of you on the train, you will pardon me for writing directly to persons I could reasonably expect to answer, out of urgency. Any show of life from you would have been more than sufficient to forestall my inquiry. I would also have welcomed any letter from you, as I am sure you could have inferred. I did not 'stop corresponding' with you, nor will I, until fortune sees fit to remove my hands at the wrists.

In sum, you have behaved erratically, uncharacteristically, and illogically, and we were all much concerned about it. That I may have had special reasons for concern, concerning the circumstances of our departure, should be perfectly clear.

I have attached another volume of dittany. I request that you return the empty vial with your reply as proof of use.

Yours sincerely,

Draco

P.S. I am a member of the British peerage, just not the one they're familiar with. And knowing your opinion of 'Middlemarch,' I should think the comparison a compliment.

Draco,

Eight points.

Whether or not my health is your business, my decision to share information about it with my parents is mine exclusively. My parents, as you may or may not be aware, are muggles, and are not very keen on their daughter continuing to attend a school where muggle-borns are looked on unfavorably, so keeping the details of my life at Hogwarts to a minimum will be essential if either of us want me to come back next term. You are beating me in Potions by exactly two points, both of which were scored as extra credit on an exam in which it was not clear extra credit would be available, which makes them suspect in my view since I could have written the same thing you did and earned the same points if I wasn't trying to follow the rules. And even if we took your mark to be reflective of any technical superiority (which would be suspect in the first) it does not follow whatsoever that you are better at medical diagnostics, which is a distinct skill that has nothing to do with potioneering, and if anything has much more to do with anatomy than it does any sort of magic. Don't be ridiculous. Also, you saw the injury for a minute at most, in a dark wood during heavy snow. Also, it is my arm. For your information, I spent the train ride with Cedric and Angelina, who were asking to be put in touch with Mad-Eye over the vacation. They wanted information about joining the Order. I was not behaving 'erratically,' 'uncharacteristically,' or 'illogically,' I was simply preoccupied. I am sorry that I worried you. I did not mean to do that. Nothing about you or your feelings is 'perfectly clear.' What do you

mean by the ‘circumstances of our departure’? If you’re talking about the kiss, you might as well say so.

Anyway. Here’s the bottle you asked for. I did use it, though for the record, I think I would’ve done alright with aloe vera. You really are the fussiest person I know.

Write back soon, and preferably at a more appropriate time of day. My house is not large, and when Ulysses starts shrieking at my window, everyone can hear it.

Sincerely,

HJG

P.S. Re: kiss. I have a lot of thoughts about it, obviously, but the first thing to get out of the way is that I realize what a hypocrite you must think I am going on and on about being friends and then kissing you. You’re right, I am a hypocrite, and I’m sorry. I don’t have a good explanation except that I was caught up in things and wasn’t thinking properly. I suppose I just wanted to kiss you, so I did. I am happy to talk about it further at length when we see each other next.

P.P.S. Everything I said in the bathroom is still true and I do care for you very much, but my feelings about the subject haven’t changed and I am sorry if I gave the impression they had.

P.P.P.S. I don’t know what your Christmas plans are, but my parents are going skiing with my cousins in Switzerland, and I am staying with Harry and the Weasleys for the last week of the vac. Obviously you are welcome but I understand you may have plans with your mother. I would obviously like to see you if it suits you, but don’t feel under any obligation.

Granger,

I don't know how many points this is going to be, so make yourself comfortable.

You are on record as having threatened to take me to a muggle hospital with or without my mother's consent, if the necessity revealed itself, so you will permit my skepticism on your commitment to this principle. You have a charming way of framing your loss to me in Potions as if it somehow reflects a virtue of yours. It was a noble effort, but the fact remains: two points is two points. Apologies are accepted. You might also extend some to Ronald and Potter, whose concern was not less poignant for being less informed. I am not 'fussy,' and if I was, then one could still forgive the cauldron for taking offense when the pot calls it black. I had not received any such invitation to intrude on the Weasleys' Christmas plans, but if you would like me to come, I will. Re: re. You say your feelings on the subject have not changed, but it seems from my vantage that they have at least changed enough to permit very different behavior than was previously established. You will forgive me for mistaking them, then, since I do not believe you ever expressed fully what it was you felt, or wanted, from me — a fact that I resent, since giving you what you want of me has become an increasing obsession. Any clarity would be an act of mercy. Relatedly, I believe my feelings are a great deal clearer than you permit, especially to you.

Nevertheless, you may have it in writing: My feelings on the subject also have not changed. They are what you must have surmised on our prefects patrol. If you wanted them to, you ought not to have kissed me. It was a terrible thing to do to a man you expect to be friends with, and I strictly recommend you not to do it to anyone else.

I think of you to the point of distraction, likely to ruin, and clearly to the point of bad behavior. I have thought of you in this way for longer than you can imagine, and if you object to me expressing it now, I apologize, but your hesitation in the matter makes me think you perhaps do not understand who you are talking to.

There are the facts of it; do with them what you will. If you are committed to sharing a platonic friendship, I will attempt one, though I would note that we have both thus far been unsuccessful in maintaining it.

I remain—

Yours sincerely,

DM

Draco,

Sorry for the delay in replying. It took me a while to sort out how I ought to begin and I still don't really know how. So. If this is disorderly, you might imagine why.

I'm not as good with words as you are, so if this doesn't make sense, then I promise you're not the only one who's frustrated with me about it.

I wish what I wanted was simple. I feel like everything's crept up on me without giving me any time to think, and I wake up feeling like I'm drowning under all the problems I have to solve to make it through the day. I hardly know what to say to you half the time because I can't look at you without my brain getting tied up in all the things I want, most of which don't fit together. I've been doing my best, which hasn't been very good so far, as you pointed out, but I really have been trying. I shouldn't have kissed you. It was a bad idea, and I think about it a lot. I think about you, too. I think about things like your hair, and how your face bunches up when you're cross, and your handwriting. You have very nice handwriting.

In my heart of hearts I think we both know I don't want to be your friend. That's the truth. It has been for a while, and I've never really

known what to do about it.

But I still don't. It's all so messy. And I'm so scared of everything now. How do you manage it? The fear? Sometimes I worry I've forgotten what it felt like not to be afraid.

I'll have more to say about everything when we see each other next. I don't know if I'll have a good answer for you by then, but I'm going to try to put my thoughts together.

I hate writing letters like this, really. I wish I could talk to you in person. It's easier to think when I'm talking to you.

Hopefully I'll see you at Christmas. Miss you terribly.

Yours,

HJG

P.S. You were right about the dittany. However, all other points re: potions remain unchanged.

Draco leaned back in his chair. He missed her, suddenly, like realizing a great hunger all at once; he wanted to be in the same room with her, listening to her fidget with the pages of a book she was reading, watching her bite her cheek in thought. He missed the way she smelled and the way she wrinkled her nose at him when she was exasperated with him, which was often, and the way that rooms felt when she was in them— safe and whole.

His finger drifted over the line in the letter where she'd written: *I don't want to be your friend,* and then down to the line that was simply: *Yours.*

It tightened the same part of his chest that envy lived in, but in a warm, rich way — a strange sort of sting that soothed.

Later that day, a letter came from the Weasleys' owl, a grossly overworked creature whose genealogy somewhere concerned a pigeon. It contained a scrawl of numbers and letters indistinct from someone beating their fist indiscriminately on a typewriter. At the bottom was the missive's only legible line:

P.S. Key is 1991 bathroom dweller visually identical to d. malfoy.

He threw down the envelope and stormed off to fetch a quill.

It was a simple transposition cipher. The product was a short letter from Ron, peppered with what were either misspellings or errors in encryption.

Draco,

Good job with the code. Moody's making us encrypt everything in/out of No. 12, so use code to write back. Don't go nuts . Hermione's last took 2 hrs & had to ask Bill for help. Bloody mad she is.

Anyway. Know you've probably got big holiday plans to eat caviar and throw rocks at peasants and all, but Mum wants me to invite you for Xmas. Told her you'd want to spend it w/ your mum but Sirius butted in and said to invite you anyway, which was freaky because Mum and Sirius agree on piss all. So there, you're invited.

Come whenever. Plenty of room. I'm bored of kicking Harry's arse at chess and yours is due a good walloping.

Hope you're enjoying your castle.

Cheers,

Ron

He considered it.

He thought with uncomfortable reluctance, about Molly Weasley, who was already cooking to feed a house of twenty at least, and insisted nevertheless on an invitation for a boy she knew perfectly well wouldn't go hungry. Molly who had six sons, seven counting Harry, which she obviously did. Molly who had made him a sweater, and baked him a cake when he made Prefect, and put him up in Ron's bedroom for weeks while his own mother was off God knows where, doing God knows what.

Which wasn't Narcissa's fault. She was a soldier, no less than Alastor Moody. And she had a different part than Molly did to play.

The thought made him itch with a vague and childish guilt, but it didn't stop him from writing back to accept.

He woke at half three in panic for no reason at all.

It was like hearing the whine of an alarm fastened to the underside of his skull. The hairs on his nape stood rigid, and the house resettled riotously on its foundations, and the queer, impalpable certainty that he was not alone. Someone else was in the house. He was certain of it. He had no idea where the certainty came from, but it was unimpeachable.

He lay in bed for a minute, trying to rationalize the feeling; meanwhile, the feeling itched on like insects climbing up his arms.

Finally, he rose, and took his wand with him when he left his bedroom.

Stepping outside, the sconces whiffed to life, licking the dark wood paneling with warm light. A door creaked at the end of the hall,

inviting him towards the main stairwell. He followed it.

The main entrance remained locked and bolted, as were the doors to the veranda, and the viewing balconies. None of the secret passages appeared to have been used recently. Not a mote was out of place in the dining-room, the gallery, or anywhere else that a burglar might find interesting; snow coursed silently and dimly in the dark frames of the windows.

When he reached the library wing, he noticed the door to the study was cracked, and light fanned from the crevice in a yellow triangle on the hardwood. Footsteps echoed from within.

He lifted his wand, but then thought better of it. He reached for the door, and it moved without being touched, gliding silently and dreamily out of his way.

“What the devil is wrong with you?”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” Narcissa said tiredly. “What happened to ‘good evening, Mother?’ Do the young people not greet each other nowadays?”

She wore traveling leathers, black from toe to fingertip, and the dark under-half of her hair spilled from its knot over her mantle. Snow christened her shoulders and the alpine roots of her hair.

“It’s not evening, it’s morning. And you tripped the wards at four o’clock to sneak around in the study. I woke up thinking we’d been robbed.”

“I’m delighted that you’re learning to read the wards, it’s a prodigious advancement. Have you been practicing your household magic?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Am I not allowed to indulge in my son’s success?”

“Don’t stall, either.”

“You’re no fun anymore, darling.”

“You could’ve come to wake me.”

She arrested him with a cryptic stare, and did not answer. Then she took off her mantle and draped it over the back of a chair.

“Would you like some tea?”

“No.”

“Well, I’m having some.”

In the kitchen, lamplight lapped in uneven tides over the Edwardian cabinetry. The wide wooden slab of the table was polished and bare. Narcissa lit the stove with a flick of her wand and Summoned a kettle from the copper rack in the ceiling. She took down a pair of teacups from the cabinet and settled them down, along with a box of loose-leaf darjeeling, first flush.

By the time the kettle came to boil, the room had warmed from the steam. He sat at the table and she settled the teapot in front of him, so that he could pour. She took hers with one lemon wedge, no cream, no sugar. He couldn’t remember a time he hadn’t known that.

He finished and dried the spoon with two taps. “Did you have to travel long?”

“Not as far as you did. That train ride from Scotland is beastly. Did you sleep?”

“This is insulting to both of us.”

“How’s that?” Her face revealed nothing.

“‘Do you know how many caves there are in Cornwall, Severus’?” he repeated.

“Must we?” she said. “It’s so late, my darling.”

“If you won’t tell me the truth, then we’ve nothing to say to each other.”

Her mouth twisted archly at some secret joke. “Adolescence is such a strange time,” she said. “All the zealous fire of a child’s yearning thrust clumsily at an adult’s desires.”

“Tell me what you are doing,” he said, “for Albus Dumbledore.”

Her fingers were long and thin, terminating in shiny white points. One tapped the shell of her teacup.

“There was a locket that once belonged to your Cousin Regulus,” she said, in a lower, clearer register. “After his disappearance, it went missing.”

The Dark Lord has split his soul among several vessels. A necklace, for Regulus.

He lowered his saucer to the table.

“Either he took it with him, or something… someone… took it from him. But Albus believes it was hidden. He says that before his death, Regulus was trying to find a certain cave in Cornwall.”

“...A cave?”

“Yes.”

“Is he serious?”

“That was my reaction. His theory, if you must know, is that Regulus never *did* wear the horcrux he was given, only a fake copy; he hid the real thing somewhere near Witherfell. And before he vanished, for some reason, he was trying to recover the original. Albus thinks — hopes, rather — that he might have succeeded.” She sipped her tea. “But of course he hasn’t any idea *where* Regulus might have stuck the dashed thing, so I’ve been appointed as a spelunker. It isn’t very exciting, but it also isn’t too dangerous, and I’ve learned my

lesson about whinging to Severus, for my God, if you think you've ever seen a withering look—"

"What happened to him? Regulus?"

"He disappeared," she said evenly. "If that answer disappoints you, be assured that you are in good company."

"But—"

"There is no 'story.'" Her nails drilled a quadrille on the side of her teacup. "It was not the kind of action to which explanations can be applied. It was not a tale with a beginning, middle, and end. It was a vanishing act."

"Might he have run away?"

"No."

Draco straightened with renewed interest. "I understand it would be out of character," he said, "but if no one ever found a body—"

"No," she said flatly. "I would believe it of anyone before Regulus. He was an odd little thing, and I confess I never understood him, but if he had one trait, it was duty. It wasn't in his nature to seek pleasure. Nor to experience it, really; he was his mother's son, and a droll boy to begin with, but all the joy went out of him, after… childhood."

"How do you know he didn't change?"

"Because he didn't change," said Narcissa, with a tired note of amusement. "None of us did. Blacks don't, generally. We have strong natures; it is not our way to be reformed. *Toujours pur, pour ainsi dire."*

"What about your sister?"

The rain slapped the windowpane. Reflected candlelight danced in Narcissa's sunless eyes.

“Bellatrix,” she said, after a moment, “remains, I assure you, the same she ever was. Nothing has ever tamed her, and in my own judgment, she will go to her grave as the same girl she was at eleven.”

He cut short a reply that would have corrected her.

“Perhaps it wasn’t true of Regulus. You admitted he was unhappy.”

“He would be the last one to act on his unhappiness, if he felt it,” she interrupted. “Fealty was his virtue. To the family, to the name, and to the Dark Lord, in that order. Why not? He was heir to the greatest house that ever was, Master of Witherfell, the richest wizard in Britain, worshiped by his peers… and one bright morning in September, he walked out the door of Grimmauld Place, and he never came back.”

Her gaze slipped from his face into the middle distance.

“Your great aunt was undone by it,” she remarked. “He was her only son, by then, her only child… And after all that had been visited on her family, a decade of disgrace… not even a body to bury… It swallowed her. She died, too, soon thereafter.”

A faint, absentminded ‘by then’ was the only acknowledgement of Sirius’s existence.

“Was Bellatrix the heir thereafter?”

She nodded. He twirled his teaspoon restlessly.

“What was she like?” he said. “Bellatrix. Before.”

He didn’t know if he meant *before she killed Father* or *before she was the heir* or something else altogether — a nebulous *before,* invoked by Narcissa’s remark about the girl Bellatrix had been, a reference to a child he could not imagine coexisting with the woman he recognized now.

“Ask me a different question,” she said roughly, “please.”

Her tone sent him scrambling for a change of subject.

“There was a spell you used in Professor Dumbledore’s office, last year.”

Her haunting expression faded, and she cocked her head curiously.

“Do you remember? You performed it on Sibelius Nott. It made a bunch of lightning. An Electrocution Curse, or something like that.”

“You mean Electrosempra.”

“Yes. Did you invent it? Because Flitwick doesn’t know it.”

“I’m not surprised. It’s a quite cruel spell, and it’s not the kind of thing they’d teach you at Hogwarts.”

“It’s dark?”

“Not everything cruel is dark magic,” she said, cryptically enough. “And not all dark magic is cruel.”

He cocked his head in interest. Narcissa sighed, rubbing her temple.

“I will say this once,” she said. “I don’t much like the idea of you using it, and I doubt you will find it often useful. Heaven knows I try not to.”

“Fine, good, whatever. How do you do it?”

“Electrosempra is the incantation. It’s a conjuring spell. It draws the energy out of the air, it uses friction — don’t ask me details, I don’t remember. When it strikes a target, it moves like lightning. It travels downward.”

“Through conduits until it reaches ground.”

“Whatever they teach these days,” she said, waving lazily, and he recalled with discomfort that those were muggle words. “Naturally, you have to direct it where you want, which is the difficult part. Raw power doesn’t want to go where you tell it. The key is to be deliberate. You have to maintain perfect clarity of purpose. You must know what the spell is for.”

“Cruelty,” he supplied.

“Cruelty isn’t an end, it’s a means. Only a brute takes cruelty as an end unto itself. And you are not a brute, Draco.”

He scowled at her instructive tone. “I know that.”

“You think you do.” She drank the remainder of her tea with an elegant movement. In her dark robes, sitting straight with her legs crossed at the ankle, she could have been a portrait by Sargent.

He suddenly recognized her as she had been when he was young, as others must see her still: cold, beautiful, wealthy, above everyone’s notice. It was an impression so strong it felt like a glimpse of another life.

“We ought to go to bed,” she said. “Would you like some Dreamless Sleep?”

“I’d rather stay awake.”

“Suit yourself. You know where it is, if you change your mind.”

Her heels made a stately carillon on the floor. He remembered something and called after her.

“I’ve been invited to Christmas dinner with the Weasleys.”

The carillon stopped.

“That was… optimistic of them.”

“I said I would.”

A beat.

“I see.”

“I didn’t know when you were coming back.”

“It’s perfectly alright.”

“I would have stayed if I’d known you’d be here.”

“You mistake me for someone who is trying to stop you,” she said. “Enjoy yourself. Do you know how to get there? I’d Apparate you, but I’ve no idea where their flat is.”

“I’ll take the Floo.”

“Oh, they *do* have a Floo grate. Good for them.”

“Mother.”

“That was a joke. Will your friend be there?”

“Several of them.”

“I believe you know what I mean.”

He stood up, annoyed.

“You know her name.”

“So she will,” said Narcissa. She sounded both satisfied and yet unhappy, somehow.

“Perhaps. Is that a problem?”

“Certainly not, so long as she stays there.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“Another little joke, darling. Laugh. It’s funny.”

She moved toward the door. It slammed in front of her. Its echo shuddered into a taut silence.

“I’m going to assume that was the draft,” she said.

“I don’t understand why you’re being like this.”

She didn’t answer.

“I’ve made my position clear on several occasions, despite which you’ve somehow failed to grasp it. Your beliefs are your business—”

“They’re not beliefs. They’re rules. It’s unlike you to forget the difference.”

“Whose rules? We’re the only ones here.”

The manor creaked on its foundations.

Narcissa straightened. Her silence was worse than a scream.

It occurred to him that he had never, not once, heard his mother make a sound of pain. At his father’s funeral, she had stood with head high and delivered a eulogy like a medical record.

Here lies my husband, Lucius Abraxas. He is survived by myself, Narcissa Alocasia, and our son, Draco Lucius. He was thirty-four years old.

“You have to accept her,” he found himself saying. “You must understand that this is not an argument that you can win.”

“I must? Oh, well, if I must,” she said mockingly. For a moment he hated her, with a searing stripe of hatred that left his hands tingling;

then it was gone, replaced by a dull, burning resentment, and shame.

“She is — something upon which I will not compromise. What I feel for her is immutable.”

“Draco, there are fathomlessly few things in this world that are immutable. Your feelings at fifteen years old are not one of them.”

He realized abruptly: it didn’t matter. He had nothing left to hide.

You’re butchering your own happiness over the opinions of a corpse.

She deserved to have someone tell her.

“I am your only son.”

“Draco.”

He spoke over her. He had to. He knew how it went.

“I am your only heir,” he repeated, louder. “I am the last family you have.”

She whirled around, wild. “Have I wronged you?” she said wondrously. “Have I been cruel? Have I possibly earned this?”

“It’s the truth. The House of Black doesn’t exist anymore. The House of Malfoy barely does. You don’t have anyone left to obey or impress. What you have is me, and that’s all. So how can it possibly matter—”

“‘What can it matter?’ You say that to me, now, in this house?”

“—what your ancestors would think of me? They’re not here. I’m here. I’m alive.”

“As am I,” she cried, and he quailed at her tone, high and cold, shattering on the ceiling like broken crystal. “As am I! Black was my

name first, it is my name still, and it is not yours! It will never be yours! Not to honor nor to desecrate — it is mine, and you have *no right to invoke it against me."*

"Mother—"

"And I *am* alive," she snarled. "I survived. I lived. I lived for them, I lived despite them, and now I live without them. But I did not die. And my name is Narcissa Black."

Her chest rolled with the force of a great, ragged breath. Her echoes filled the hall with whispering applause.

"So do not," she rasped, "tell me my house is dead."

Watching her tremble, he reached for his courage, and found his scorn instead.

"I'm still your son," he said.

"Always."

"You said you would stand by me."

"I did. I do."

"But you won't. Not on this. Because I'm not a Black, am I? You don't respect me," he said, raising his voice over her cry of complaint, "enough to bother with what I think — because that's not as important to you as what they *would have* thought—"

"How many times must I tell you? *None of this* is about what *I believe!* The fact that you think it is, somehow, is — it is a luxury that has been bought for you in blood!"

"You're wrong."

"No one has ever cared what I believe," she said incredulously. "It has never mattered. If I bent to you now, what do you think would

happen? If I broke faith with my house, do you think anything would change? Do you think the filth and grit of the world would cast off at the slightest gesture of my hand? That muggles and their progeny would rise to the ranks of our equals once I lifted my heel? I am not the author of your suffering, Draco, nor anyone else's."

"I'm not demanding you to fix the world. You know perfectly well what I want from you, and it isn't that."

"I do not! I do not know, in fact. I live for you. I endure for you. I risk my life for you. What more do you ask of me?"

He was disgusted by her helplessness, and his.

"To be brave," he said. "To be braver than this."

She spun around, turning her back on him in a jerky movement.

"No," she said feebly. "I cannot. I cannot bear it. I tried my best, but it will kill me, that promise — and you promised me—"

"Stop! Don't mumble at the corner, don't pretend you can't hear me, I'm right *here!* Turn around and look at me!"

She did not turn around. What she did was say, calmly:

"Do you love her?"

The candles guttered. Wax melted in thick folds on the sconces. He recoiled in fury.

"What do you— what does that have to do with *any* of this?"

She lifted her chin, though it was trembling.

"Because I could bear the rest. I could bear all — I could bear anything, for you. But you made me a promise."

"What? What promise?"

“You promised you would protect your father’s name. Our name. You swore to me—”

“That promise? A promise you took from an *eight-year-old* at his father’s funeral?”

“Yes! And I would have let you have her,” she cried, turning to him. He recoiled at the wildness of her stare: it was not the familiar wildness of an oncoming episode, but an intense, searing, terrifying lucidity. “Take her, keep her, have her as you liked, I never stopped you! You think you’re the first boy who ever tried to bend the rules? Do you think I was never young, do you think *we* were never — do you know how I have watched trespass upon trespass, and found it in myself to tolerate it? Do you know what riches of forgiveness I have offered you from the shadows, thanklessly, endlessly, while you — you, with your sneering, and your recklessness, and your ideology — you find the gall to call me heartless?”

“I never said—”

“Do you even *know* what my mother would have — I have held my tongue while you humiliated yourself!”

“Don’t you dare speak of her.” He was numb with fury. “You lack the right. You — you lack the fucking honor.”

“I have allowed you anything!” It was shrill, with a note of the child’s complaint. “I would forgive anything, and I would have forgiven it all, but — but you brought her *here—”*

“As was my choice to make.”

“It was an embarrassment, Draco!”

“To you,” he said coldly. “Not to me. And this is my house, not yours.”

She sagged to one side, and caught herself on the desk, as if he had ripped away one of the struts holding her up.

“To your father’s house, then,” she croaked. “To a place you inherited on the sole condition that you would maintain it as your forebears willed it. You brought her into it. And still, I could forgive that, if you tell me now — promise me — that you understand the limits of your position. That you will never — go somewhere I cannot follow.”

She wore it badly, begging. It was the only thing even she couldn’t make graceful.

“I really am sorry, you know,” he repeated, as confusion stirred her face. “You likely don’t believe it, but I am.”

She drew herself up to a height. He was still taller. That fact caused unexpected sadness.

“Let me be clear: I am asking you this for my sake. I am asking you, outright, as your mother and the woman who raised you, alone, in this very large house, for fifteen years: go no farther. Do not leave me here.”

“You don’t have to stay.”

“You would take yourself away from me, and it would — you will unmake me. If you do that. So promise me you will not go,” she breathed. “Or lie. Lie! If you have to. Lie to me. It won’t kill me. But the other will.”

He was silent. The room, like him, was silent. They became two silent people, in a silent house, in a silent, snow-covered world.

“Lie to me,” she said. “Please.”

He turned his head away. Her shoulders wilted.

“Get out,” she said.”

“Mother—”

“Go.”

The doors parted. He hadn’t touched them, and neither had she.

Finally, he did what she asked of him.

Everything was sepia and silent in the dawn: dusty curtains, snow-packed windows, parquet floors filmed in the bleak light of a midwinter morning. When he reached his rooms, the doors slammed behind him with a snap like a great pair of jaws.

His breath rasped loud in the preternatural stillness of his chambers. Ulysses bleated unhappily by the king-sized bed, with its foam of tangled sheets.

Draco stood in the window, his reflection gray against the dark snowfall. He thought of his dorm at Hogwarts, miles away, and of the leagues of silent, frozen ground between one barren home and another.

Hello, everyone. I don't know how to begin. I suppose I'll start by saying that I'm sorry this isn't a Friday, but I wanted to put it out as soon as I had finished editing rather than making you wait, since I'd done so much of that already.

And thank you so, so much for that waiting. I've said it before, and I'm sorry to say I'll likely say it again, but your comments are the reason this fic continues to exist. The amount of grace and kindness you show me makes me strive to deserve it. Even when I wasn't active, I would come read and re-read comments that you left on this fic as a source of comfort on rough days, and it would bring me back to life a little bit. You've brought me through, and I don't take a single bit of it for granted. You're the heart of this story. It owes everything to you.

Anyway. Enough of the soppy stuff. The next chapter will be called "The Ghosts of Grimmauld Place," and it will go up... possibly soon? I will try to set up an update schedule as soon as I'm reasonably settled and no longer on the move. As soon as I'm able to make

promises to you, I will. I care for you terribly much. I hope that a stranger on the street today smiles at you. I wish I could.

—GT

The Ghosts of Grimmauld Place

Chapter 70: The Ghosts of Grimmauld Place

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Christmas morning found a stack of presents at the foot of his bed. From Dobby, who had wrapped it in sandwich paper and glitter, came a tin of olive-and-pepperwort ice cream with a small wooden spoon that appeared to have been carved by Dobby himself, as it gave him four splinters. The rest were from his mother. He left them where they lay.

He dressed for the Weasleys. Black tie was custom for a Christmas luncheon, but from a desire to not be pilloried on sight, he chose a gray dress shirt with French cuffs. His signet slid comfortably onto his little finger, and he stole a dark blue formal cloak from his father's wardrobe, made of silk so fine and thin that it shimmered like liquid where it sloped gracefully down his shoulders. The mirror offered up a smaller, slenderer impression of a man seen often gazing out of a portrait in the gallery.

He exchanged the lounge jacket for a green jumper with a white lion on it, which was pilly and mothball-scented and only slightly less oversized now than in 1993. The result was not mistakeable for any image of Lucius Malfoy that existed.

Standing on the parlor hearth, he took a lingering look at the drawing-room: the twelve-foot Christmas tree, the grand piano, the silver garlands laid thick as icing over bay windows. The chandelier chimed in the draft. He got the queer feeling he was waiting for something.

Something in him was waiting for Narcissa to come striding out of the hallway, yawning in her dressing-gown, and tell him Dobby had made cocoa.

Which was absurd, because Dobby hadn’t lived there in three years, and his mother hadn't spoken to him since their fight. When they encountered each other, she glided past with a deep nod and eyes that seemed to float over him, lifted high and distant, fixed on some point that neither of them could see. He lacked the reason or tolerance to apologize and the endurance to risk another fight, so he moved past in identical silence, with an identical stare.

He threw some Floo powder on the coals, snapped: “Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place,” and the drawing-room vanished in a green wash of heat.

Stepping out of the fireplace, the first thing that registered the noise.

Grimmauld Place sounded like someone had trapped an angry cat in a bag with several other angry cats, sewed it shut, and lobbed the bag into the House of Commons. A whole percussive section of slamming pots and pans, thundering footsteps, and tinkling glasses swelled behind the strains of a vocal clamor so great it seemed fit to wake the whole of London, and over it all, the conductor’s voice cut clear and shrill as a banshee’s wail:

“OUT! OUT! IF YOU’RE A MAN NAMED WEASLEY, OUT OF THE KITCHEN! GINNY, GET YOUR BOOTS OFF THE TABLE! WHERE’S SIRIUS? TONKS, GET HIM — AND I KNOW THAT’S YOU, YOU’VE GOT BILL’S NOSE WRONG — AND RON, PUT A SHIRT ON, YOU’RE NOT A BARBARIAN— ”

BANG!

“FRED!”

“I’m George!”

“YOU’RE FRED IF I SAY YOU ARE! PICK UP THIS MESS—”

“Kid’s innocent, Molly, that was one of mine.”

“—CARE IF YOU’RE OF AGE, YOU’RE UNDER MY ROOF — oh, Chrissakes — I SAID *NO TRAPS IN THE KITCHEN,* ALASTOR!”

“Then stop opening the damn window!”

“I CAN’T! BECAUSE THERE’S NO! VENTILATION! IN! THIS! HOUSE!”

“Mum, I can’t find my Holyhead jersey! You didn’t wash it, did you?”

“It’s an undefended point of ingress—”

“SIIIII-RIUUUS,” bellowed Tonks. A fist pounded a door. “REEEEEEE-MUUUS!”

“It’s a bright green jersey and I left it *right* on my bed and I *told* you not to touch it because it’s hand-wash *only* —”

“Oi! Mum! Can Harry and I go on a chippy run?”

“IT’S CHRIIIIIIIIIIIIST-MAAAAAAAS—”

“—the point of even *having* wards if you keep the bleeding window open, it’s a glaring invitation—”

“I DON’T *CARE* IF IT’S OPEN! YOU THINK YOU-KNOW-WHO’S GOING TO CRAWL IN AND HIDE IN THE MASH?”

Draco chuckled softly, brushing ash from his jumper.

The parlor of Grimmauld Place was decorated for Christmas, though in such a way it would’ve likely given his grandmother conniptions: the tree was scrappy and plump, stuffed with ornaments like someone upended a box of sweets on it, while popcorn garlands and ropes of holly the size of an arm dangled from the tarnished chandeliers. Live fairies drifted around the lures hanging from the eaves, jingling faintly and winking their little lights. The radio in the kitchen was playing muggle rock music, and warmth and smoke

piped from the kitchen, while outside, the snow rose ever higher on a dark London street.

A footstep stirred the doorway, and he turned to find a small, elfin woman with silvery blonde-hair and a slightly crooked nose. She was carrying a tall stack of presents.

“Delacour?” he said, surprised.

“Oh,” Fleur exclaimed, dropping her cargo unceremoniously. “You! *Ça fait longtemps, dis donc!* Ça roule, mon chou?”

“Ça rampe. What are you doing here? I thought your family was in France.”

“Ah, yes, but I — well. I am working in London, these days,” she said. Her accent had faded; her were consonants crisper. “And the Ministry is not making it easy for us with the work visa, you know, to come and go, and — anyway, Bill worries it would be hard for me to come back if I leave. And I am not knowing many people in England, so the Weasleys are being very kind, and inviting me here for Christmas.”

“...I was under the impression that you and Bill didn’t get along.”

She shifted her weight and glanced over her shoulder. It was needless; the din from the kitchen made it impossible that they were overheard.

“Bill is being very gracious,” she said delicately. “Especially when it is possible I am not always giving him — oh, what is it? — *bonne foi.”*

He tilted his head, smirking. “Rien de tel qu’une petite fraternisation sur le lieu de travail pour s’ouvrir l’esprit.”

Fleur gasped. *“Chut!”* she said. “You are a ’orrible brat.”

“Mais oui.”

Doors slammed. “WE’RE UP,” Sirius howled, “WE’RE UP, BLAST YOU! STOP KICKING MY DOOR!”

“—IIIIIIISTMAAA— oi, Sirius! Happy Christmas! Oh! Hi, Remus!”

“Good morning, Tonks. Happy Christmas.”

“CAN’T A MAN GET A MOMENT’S REST IN HIS OWN HOME WITHOUT SOME DEGENERATE COUSIN DRAGGING HIM UP AT THE CRACK-O-DAWN—”

“It’s eleven-thirty!”

“It *is* eleven-thirty, Padfoot.”

“THAT’S IRRELEVANT,” said Sirius. “TONKS, STOP GAWKING. HARRY, DON’T RUN ON THE STAIRS—”

THUMP.

“Shit!”

“TRAITORS! HALF-BREEDS! MUDBLOODS! SCUM!”

“Portrait’s off again,” shouted Ron.

“Where’s my jersey?” wailed Ginny.

“SPLENDID!” roared Sirius. “GREAT TEAM EFFORT. MERRY CHRISTMAS, MUMMY!”

“FILTHY, FILTHY CREATURES, STINKING UP MY HOUSE! OUT! OUT! BURN THEM OUT!”

“WILL SOMEONE SHUT THAT BINT UP?” Molly bellowed, storming out of the kitchen. Her hair formed a fiery lion’s mane around her flushed face. “PAINT A GAG ON HER, IF YOU HAVE TO — Merlin’s *bones,* Draco! How long have you been here? Don’t tell me, I don’t want to know. Come here.”

He by now could tell the difference between volitional and mandatory Weasley embraces, and this was of the mandatory sort. He complied forthwith and bent down to be throttled.

Her fiery hair smelled of bacon, and she was hot as a coal stove. It was not awful.

“I’m so glad you’re alright,” she murmured, while her arms did their level best to cave in his ribs. “Months under that awful woman… We’re all so very glad you’ve come. Happy Christmas, dear.”

It was hard to look her in the eye. Perhaps it was too much, after the Manor’s long silences, to have so much attention all at once — like dropping frostbitten fingers into scalding water.

“Happy Christmas, Mrs. Weasley. I apologize for arriving early.”

“Do shut up, dear. And it’s Molly, you know that. Fleur! You’re awake! Would you fetch Bill for me? You know where his room is, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she said nervously, “but per’aps better for one of his brothers —”

“Thank you, sweetie. Draco, you sit there and don’t touch a thing, we’ll be having breakfast in a minute — really it’s more of a lunch — and presents. It’s just the family, of course, and Sirius and Remus; and Fleur, who Bill invited — which I’m *not* allowed to comment on, apparently — and Alastor and Tonks, who practically live here anyway, couldn’t have it without them.”

“Indeed.”

The doorbell chimed.

“GOT IT,” Ron shouted. He slid down the bannister and jumped into the foyer, and Harry hopped down behind him. They were both still in

pyjamas. Harry was more relaxed than Draco had seen him in months: hair rumpled, grin wide, shoulders straight.

“Draco! Happy Christmas.”

“Happy Christmas, Potter.”

Ron hauled open the door. “Oi, it’s you!” he said delightedly. “Everyone, it’s Hermione! Come in.”

Draco twitched, and then tried to sort out whatever his pulse was doing.

Hermione whisked into the foyer carrying a train of snowflakes, brushing frost crystals from her sleeves. She thrust a pair of voluminous bags into Ron’s arms and then wrenched the scarf from her face, panting.

“Hold those,” she announced — the classic Granger greeting of a command — and began the industrious business of shucking her outer layer of clothing. “They’re presents. Don’t peek.” She wriggled out of her overcoat, revealing a red jumper, muggle jeans, and pink socks. The red clashed with the pink. Her scarf was orange. These and other sartorial choices suggested her stylist was a color-blind street urchin.

He lifted his eyes, and tried helplessly to find it anything but endearing. His heartbeat was a dry rasp in his chest.

She really was lovely, hopelessly lovely, in a terrible outfit and dreadful muggle trousers and hair seven different kinds of wild, and so there was nothing for it but to stare.

“Sorry I’m late, it was absolutely stupid out there. I saw Mum and Dad off, and then I had to get here myself from St. Pancras, but I forgot the Tube doesn’t run on Christmas, so I had to take a cab. But I couldn’t come straight here because I didn’t want the driver to know where I was going, so I had them drive me on to Charing Cross and

then walked, but I forgot it was snowing so it took twice as long and I couldn't see anything and I had to stop every five minutes to check the map—"

She breezed on like a locomotive while she peeled off her gloves.

As if they had nothing better to do than listen to her enact a stream-of-consciousness relitigation of her day. It was an irritating habit. He tried to be irritated, and found a horrifying lack of will.

Ron, fortunately, obliged him.

"By the way, Draco's here," he said, gesturing. Hermione's head snapped up. Her cheeks, already flush with cold, turned darker.

They regarded each other across the foyer. The noise of the house dimmed.

Hermione cleared her throat, like *he* was supposed to say something.

"Happy Christmas," she said.

He nodded to her, politely. "Happy Christmas, Hermione."

She winced.

He hadn't meant to sound petulant. It had been as much grace as he'd been capable of offering with half the nerves in his body on edge.

A pause of miserable longevity. Harry and Ron looked like they were watching two wild hyenas circle each other.

"I like your jumper," she said bravely.

"Thank you. It's custom Weasley, 1993."

She gave a surprised little laugh. The sound offered some hope that everything good in the world was not soiled past recognition.

Or, at the very least, that no one had to say so just yet, on Christmas morning.

Molly rescued them all by barrelling out of the kitchen in a maelstrom of needless urgency. He could have kissed her feet in thanks.

“SIRIUS! REMUS! TONKS! IN HERE, NOW! EVERYONE TO THE DRAWING ROOM, WE’RE DOING PRESENTS! Ginny, would you check on Bill and Fleur? Lord, it’s Frank and Alice all over again — and Ron, remember to — HERMIONE! *Why does no one in this house ever announce themselves!”*

Once the whole house had been herded into the drawing-room like vociferous cattle, Molly served a lunch of corned beef sandwiches. The table setting was being preserved for dinner, so they ate from plates in their laps. Arthur and Remus took prize seats on either side of the couch, and acquiesced with grace to Sirius’s insistence on wearing paper crowns. Fred and George perched on the arms of Ginny’s chair, sniggering together; Charlie sat on the sideboard, heels swaying. Bill and Fleur came down ten minutes later than everyone else and stood on opposite sides of the room.

Mad-Eye presided from a deep armchair, nursing a cup of tar-black coffee. When Draco sat down by the hearth, the old Auror sent him a sidelong eye and lifted his mug, and Draco decided that if it all weren’t too frivolous for Mad-Eye, it needn’t be too frivolous for him.

Sirius paraded a stereo into the room over his head, and he was met by mixed cheers and dismayed cries.

“Bang on! Oi, Sirius, let us pick a song—”

“No, let me! Pick me! I’m your cousin!”

“A very weak argument, historically,” said Sirius. “All of you shut up! You’re missing the music!”

“Jesus wept,” Remus murmured into his tea. Then he grinned when Sirius kicked him.

“She studied sculpture at Saint Martin’s college…”

“Can’t we have some nice Christmas music?” sighed Arthur. “Why is it always the rock and roll?”

“Dad, please,” said Ginny. “Try not to be uncool. It’s Christmas.”

“Good haul this year,” announced Ron, flopping down on the hearth beside Draco. “Nice call with the whistle for Harry, but you’ll regret it when he’s getting us up for six o’clock quidditch practices. That from Remus? Bet you anything it’s a book. Sirius and Remus got them together.”

“Which means Remus bought books, and Sirius signed his name on the card.”

“Eh. Mum and Dad do that all the time. Anyway, he can’t very well pop out to the shops.”

Draco eyed his cousin, who was dancing with Harry and Ginny as if he had ants trapped under his unmercifully tight trousers. He seemed to be in high spirits: he laughed loudest and longest of anyone in the room, and there was a slightly manic affect to his glee.

“Rent a flat above a shop! Cut your hair and get a job! Smoke some fags and play some pool… Pretend you never went to school…”

“Hermione got us homework planners,” Ron continued, and he made a valiant effort to sound happy about it. “Yells at me every time I open it. At least it reminds me of her, eh? Anyway, there you are. Merry Christmas.”

He dumped a package in Draco's lap. It was wrapped in torn clippings from *Quidditch Weekly.*

Draco stripped them off. Inside there was a long, thin knife of burnished silver, marbled with tarnish, with an opal on the crossguard and the Black crest engraved on the pommel.

He was shocked into silence. The weight was solid, heavy, fine. It was likely more expensive than anything Ron owned. Or everything he owned, put together.

"I didn't buy it," Ron said, perhaps guessing his thoughts. "If that wasn't obvious. We were mucking out one of the upstairs bedrooms and I found that stuffed in a closet. It's a dueling sidearm, isn't it? That's what Sirius said. I guess he might've been having me on, come to think—"

"It is." He ran his thumb over the dark, soft leather of the grip. "You hold it in your offhand. If you lose your wand, in theory, you'd… but nowadays, they're mostly ceremonial."

"Reckon that's perfect for you, innit? Old, poncy, dangerous," said Ron cheerfully, and clapped him on the shoulder. "Right, that's that settled. I won Christmas! Nice try, good run, see you next year. What'd you get me, some socks?"

"That one's for you."

"Sure. Hey, what did Hermione get you? Bet it wasn't a homework diary. She always gets you muggle stuff, right? What's the de— HOLY SHIT!"

"Ronald Weasley!" Molly cried. "Language!"

"HOLY SHIT! HOLY SHIT! IT'S A BROOMSTICK! A FIREBOLT! THE NEW ONE!" He sprang to his feet. "THANK YOU! BLIMEY! THANK YOU, MUM, THANK YOU— I — Mum?"

Molly and Arthur had frozen with awkward, terrible smiles plastered on both their faces. Ron turned, lowering the broomstick, as an embarrassed flush pooled in his cheeks. He hid it with a quick, stubborn grin, the well-worn expression of someone so used to the chip on his shoulder that his very spine had adjusted to the weight.

“Blimey,” he said weakly. “That’s… really generous.”

He felt, with a prickle of heat, the room’s attention glide unerringly toward himself. It was rather less pleasant than he thought it would be. Molly was picking at a thread on her skirt, and Remus was carefully stirring his tea. Hermione’s eyes were boring holes in the side of his skull. Ron was holding the Firebolt like it might at any moment transform into a venomous snake.

Draco cleared his throat.

“You’re welcome,” he said to Arthur. “I told you he’d like it.”

Arthur’s mouth parted. Draco rolled his eyes. “What is it with old people and Comets?” he said to Ron.

“Hey,” said Arthur weakly. He regarded Draco with a heart-rending alchemy of relief and grave, soft respect. Draco avoided his eyes, skin crawling. “Back in my day, the Comet was sexy.”

“See? See what age does to their brains, Ronald? He wanted to get you a Commodore model, which is wrong for a keeper, because—”

“Because Commodores are endurance brooms, and Firebolts are sprinters,” said Ron automatically. He stared at him intently, with the sharp blue eyes that had accused Draco over a hundred losing games of chess. It was clear to him, as to anyone who knew him, that Ronald Weasley was nobody’s fool. “Thanks. You’re a real mate.”

“Bet that I won’t be, if I see you letting any quaffles through on that.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Ron roughly. “Blame the keeper because you can’t hold the quaffle. Classic chaser bullshit.”

Harry laughed. The burble of the room picked up again, and everyone else found something else to look at, which in Draco’s opinion they ought to have done in the first place. They were, each to each, a pack of dull nosy busybodies who were far too used to living completely in each other’s pockets.

Draco stuck his head into his gift from Sirius and Remus, *The Subsistence Potioneer,* and pointedly ignored them all.

By and by, Hermione picked her way through the battlefield of wrapping-paper and sat next to him. She didn’t speak. He didn’t, either.

He could feel the space between them like a physical object.

When she drew breath, it was a relief for all of a second, until she started speaking.

“Hello,” she said. “Happy Christmas.”

“Hello,” he said, wondering if the word could possibly contain any more feeling than she had fit in it.

Hermione hesitated again.

“This,” she said, lifting a small vial of silver fluid, “is extremely expensive.”

He returned to his book. It was easier to look at. “Is it?” he said.

“I tried to buy some earlier this year.”

“Quite practical of you.”

“This is at least a thousand galleons.”

“I hadn’t looked at the invoice.”

“I know that’s a lie,” she said, and her familiarity made him strangely warm. “And it’s too much.”

“I’ve spent a thousand galleons on Potter’s legal fees alone. You didn’t mind that, I remember.”

“To keep him out of prison. For his safety. This is—”

“For yours. Do you imagine it’s worth one galleon less?”

“No, and when the Ministry arrests me, you’re welcome to spend a king’s ransom on my lawyers. But phoenix tears? *Real* phoenix tears? What am I supposed to do with these?”

“Well, you don’t bloody well drink them. Best results come from topical application—”

“On *what?* Have I got a *mortal wound* I don’t know about?”

“On your hand, simpleton,” he said impatiently. She twitched her right hand, which someone had wrapped in proper bandages to replace his handkerchief. “Unless you’d prefer to keep the scars. I personally would rather be rid of them; I assure you, they don’t suit you at all.”

Her indignation was cratered by surprise. “Bbut that’s a monumental waste.”

He glared at her, welcomely reminded of what it felt like to be irritated by her. Good to know he hadn’t lost the knack.

“Do they bother you?” she said quietly. “The scars?”

He inclined his head.

“Would you like me to cover them up?”

“The look of it isn’t the problem.”

She bit her cheek in thought. He watched her, tracking the process of her deliberation by the depth of the wrinkle in her brow.

When it was all but smooth, she said: “It’s not fair that I should get rid of my scars when everyone else has to keep them.”

Hang ‘fair,’ he wanted to say, but that wasn’t an argument she would hear.

“It’s not fair that some people have castles and Firebolts,” he said. “And if you think Brown keep your scars for the sake of fairness, you’ve badly underrated her.”

The abuse of her cheek continued. At length, she said, “No, I don’t think she would.” She dropped a package in his lap by way of changing the subject. “Here’s yours. I’ll just tell you, because I don’t want you to have any nice expectations — it’s a new music player. It’s called a discman. The one you have is a bit old, frankly. And there’s a few CDs in there, too. Those are from my parents — to thank you for checking in on me. ‘Violator,’ that’s from my dad, and the Pink Floyd. I picked out the rest.”

“Thank you,” he said, watching her.

She fidgeted. “Yes. Well. You’re welcome. I know how much you like to have — the nicest of everything.”

“I do.”

Music tinkled from the stereo. Ginny squawked as Fred spilled a mince pie in her lap.

Hermione nibbled at her lip. Abruptly, her hand darted out to find his, all but buried in the spilled wrapping-paper. Her fingers folded through his tightly.

“I missed you,” she said, her eyes low.

Her hand was warm and firm in his. He let her slide her fingers between his own, knitted so tightly he doubted he could pull himself free even if he wanted to. The feeling was like a homecoming.

“Granger—”

There was a commotion by the sofa. Molly had opened an unremarkable package in brown paper wrapping, and promptly broken into tears. They could have been joyous until he saw the expression worn by Bill, who stood at her shoulder.

“What a shithead,” he said coolly. He picked up the package and carried it away, though Molly continued to cry into a handkerchief. Arthur tucked his arm around her.

Ron opened his mouth. Fred clapped a hand over it.

“Percy sent back his Christmas jumper. Don’t say anything.”

“Why’d she even make one?”

“Search me. Told her he’s a fat load of rat droppings.”

“You’d be surprised how attached you can get to a fat load of rat droppings, when you changed its nappies,” said Sirius. He slapped Ron on the shoulder. “Scram, will you? Go make some trouble and let the grownups clean up your mess.”

Ron got up, rolling his eyes, and gestured for Harry and Draco. “That means they want to talk Order stuff.”

“George and I are grownups,” Fred piped up.

“Yeah? Great stuff. You’re on dish duty.”

“On second thought,” said Fred.

The seven of them — Draco, Harry, Hermione, and the four youngest Weasleys — were unsubtly shepherded upstairs and the

doors to the sitting-room swung closed on Sirius's grinning face.

"There's not a way to eavesdrop on the sitting-room, is there?" said Hermione.

"Nah. They boarded up our secret passage, the bastards," said Ginny. "Sirius fought for us, though, said he'd have done the same thing… he's on the side of the righteous. What's that you've got, Harry?"

He'd lagged behind the group on the stairs. He held a present, half-unwrapped, evidently just opened.

"Mad-Eye's Christmas present," he said tightly. "It's… a photograph."

"Come and show us, then," said Ron, and they huddled around to inspect it.

The film was grainy with age. A crowd assembled in the drawing-room of Grimmauld Place as if for an unusually large family portrait. A caption jotted in the corner read: THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX, 25.12.1979.

Harry brushed his fingers over a redheaded woman and a dark-haired man near the center of the frame. They waved at him.

"There's rather a lot of them," Draco remarked, for want of anything better to break the awkward with.

"Yeah, there were," said Ginny. "Gosh, the gang's all here. That's Mad-Eye, there; see his nose isn't broken yet? And that's Dumbledore, he's always the same, innee… the Longbottoms, know them anywhere, Neville's the spit of them… Emmeline Vance, she's my godmother… Dorcas Meadowes, she was Bill's, but she's gone now. Lot of them are, since… yeah."

Hermione inhaled. "Because they all…?"

“Not *all* of them,” said Ginny hesitantly. “Sturgis Podmore… well, he didn’t die in the war, anyway… think I met John Dawlish once at a party… oh, and there’s Hagrid! Mad to see him without a beard. Plus Amy Bones — bet you’ll meet her, she’s been around a few times — and that’s Uncle Gideon and Uncle Fabian, right next to her. Both, um… but Mum’s right, they really did look like the twins.” She stepped back and spoke gruffly. “You know the rest, I think.”

He didn’t, actually — there were two faces she’d rather pointedly left out — but he could wager a guess. James and Lily shared the middle of the sofa; at James’s right sat Peter Pettigrew, pulling a silly face at the camera. Sirius stood behind them, younger, short-haired, radiantly handsome, and every ounce a Black. He’d slung his arm around Remus, who save for a few wrinkles was largely the same: brown curls, scars, a crooked smile. The four of them made a tight little square at the heart of the photograph.

The group smiled and waved, a checkerboard of the ghosts of the living and the ghosts of the dead.

He drove his nails into his palms. Turned to inspect an oil portrait of his Uncle Cygnus, which nodded somberly back at him. He breathed through his mouth and out through his nose.

“I’m in this photo,” said Harry suddenly.

Ron squinted. “Well,” he said, trying to be tactful, “I do reckon you take after your dad, I guess.”

“No, this is Christmas, 1979,” he said. “Mum’s pregnant with me. I’m right there.”

He pointed at the redhead’s stomach. She wasn’t showing; she was so early on even she mightn’t have known.

“Family portrait,” said Harry.

Ron put his hand on his shoulder. Harry cringed, though, as if that made it worse, which Draco could imagine it might. It certainly would, for him.

Ginny said, “Last time you ever looked good in a photograph.”

He grinned at her, and she grinned back, her tongue between her teeth. Then she slapped his arm and mounted the stairs.

The group fractured. Ginny spirited Hermione off to her bedroom, where Hermione hurried gladly, without a backward glance; Draco was admittedly relieved when she left, although the party was smaller and less interesting without her. Harry disappeared into his room with the photograph; and Ron, Fred, and George went to test the new Firebolt in the gallery. They invited Draco, but he declined. He was itchy and restless, and he had a curiosity to satisfy.

The day was late, and the light was already thin in the windows when he found the small, gabled bedroom near the top of the house. The door parted at his touch, and he stepped into Regulus’s bedroom.

It was no different than it had been in August, down to the wrinkle on the coverlet where Ginny had sprawled. He realized only now that the last person to touch it before her had been Regulus.

The desk contained a datebook and an address book, both of a nice-but-unused character that suggested an ill-chosen Christmas gift. The bedside drawer offered nothing but owl treats and a pair of thick browline glasses, one lens cracked. Underneath the sofa cushions there were several sickles and a galleon, and a receipt for school textbooks from Flourish & Blott’s in 1973, so frail it crumbled at his touch. Nothing hid in the bottom of the dead boy’s wardrobe, his old coat pockets, or under the rug; nor in a hidden compartment under one of the floorboards, whose only secrets were a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

He sat at the desk, warm from exertion, and wondered how many people had ransacked the room before him. He wondered how long Walburga had searched the place for some secret symbol or clue her son had left behind. How long Narcissa had searched, if she had searched at all. Had they used magic? Had they rifled through with their hands, like he did, not because they had to, but because it was the only way to be sure? Or simply because it was something to do with their hands, because it was a chance to touch the things that he had touched?

The bookshelf was the same combination of uninspiring titles, but he pulled each one out anyway, and flipped through the pages. Not so much as a scribble in any of them.

He scanned the room again, settling on the bookshelf. Textbook, textbook, Evelyn Waugh, another textbook, Shakespeare, *Paradise Lost.* Collected poetry. Quite a lot of poetry, in fact. He hadn't thought Regulus would be the type.

Draco pulled out one of the slimmer volumes. It was bookmarked in the middle.

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—

Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night

And watching, with eternal lids apart,

Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite

Draco had never much been one for poetry, to tell the truth. It was all a bit circumspect.

The bookmark was interesting, however. It was an envelope addressed to:

Mr. Regulus Arcturus Black IV

The Bedroom At The Top Of The Stairs

No. 12 Grimmauld Place

London, England

The handwriting was almost too elaborate to read. The crest, before it was broken, had been a stylized A in red wax.

He slipped out the letter. The edges were thin and translucent from wear, but the ink was still dark enough to read.

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22 December 1970

Hogwarts Castle

Scotland

My dear and beloved Egg,

I'm already better today, my temperature hovers between 36.7-37, as I write this I'm lying in bed and eating chocolates. That sweet Cassie Greengrass brought them (please marry her so I may be near her always). Feeling mediocre; I think tomorrow I'll be dead. But last night was sublime. I read "Cut" and "Elm" for the poetry society (small group, only 30 or 40) and it was glorious triumph. Then Evan spoke for half an hour quite thrillingly but said nothing at all I fear. Poor dear has got it in his head to impress me or bore everyone trying.

On Sirius — forget it. He never hangs out in Slytherin anyway so it really isn't anything to do with you. If he hasn't written back by Christmas, tell me. I'll bend him over and spank him in front of all the other naughty 3rd years (as prefect I am entitled to do this any time I

please). On the subject, I strongly recommend becoming prefect, you get all the gossip before it happens. Yesterday I caught Robbie Carrow with his hand up Persephone's skirt. I wanted to wait & see how far she let him go (all the way?) but I was patrolling with Edward (Ravenclaw mudblood cf. previous whinging) who is a stone cold grump. I must kill him and stash his body in the laundry I think. Will ask his girlfriend for help as I assume he has her in some sort of hostage arrangement (not a looker).

By the way: I've chucked that last poem so please burn your copy. Have spent the whole day rewriting it and just now finished at half four, that death-black December teatime which always tastes lonely no matter where or how you are — but suddenly someone downstairs put on the Nutcracker and like magic I am home for Christmas and Bella is dancing for us like always and you and I are eating popcorn under the table (which is where it tastes best of course of course.) Why hasn't Bella answered my letter? Go nag her about it. Cissy hasn't either but that's because she's a slut. I miss you. I can't wait for you and Cissy to come back. In the spring we will have a tea party on the lake and drink sparkling wine until our insides turn to butterflies and float up through the blue forever.

Temperature: 36.8. Remember me when I have perished of this ague — be my Horatio, my Orpheus, my Antigone — and most importantly, burn that poem. I will not be immortalized by amateur work.

Love love love love you Eggy, you charming weevil, you sad hedgehog, you silly little absolute cheese, you. Merry Christmas.

Your (almost) sister,

&E

The letter was dated two years before Andromeda had been disinherited.

How long had it hidden there? Since it was opened? Had Regulus stuffed it there after finishing it, closed his book, and simply never touched it again? Or had he returned to it, when she left, and made the conscious decision to keep it? That was even more interesting, and more strange.

He wondered if Andromeda knew Regulus had kept her letter. If she ever thought about him.

He supposed he could always ask Tonks if he could speak to her.

But the idea of talking to Andromeda spent a spider of dread crawling down his neck. It still carried a specter of taboo: it was anathema to imagine calling on his aunt casually, as any ordinary loving nephew might, to speak freely and casually about a past he had been forbidden to know.

Draco pocketed the letter and left the room. He shut the door behind him.

He descended no farther than the second floor before there was a splinter and a shriek and Tonks staggered onto the landing, holding one end of a brass portrait-frame. Draco flattened himself to the wall, being taught by five years of cohabitation with the twins to Get Out The Bloody Way first and ask questions later. Tonks dropped the frame with a THUNK that rattled the floorboards and wiped her forehead, grinning maniacally. The portrait was wailing bloody murder (and a good bit worse).

“Wotcher, Malfoy!”

“...Tonks. Is that who I think it is?”

Sirius’s head appeared at the bottom of the stairs. “The Queen Mother?” he suggested happily. “Lilith the She-Demon? The Wicked Bitch of the West?”

“My great aunt, you mean?” said Draco, dry.

“Bingo.”

“How on earth did you get her down?”

“Oh, she held out, but she came in the end,” he said. “Took a piece of the house with her, though.”

The edges of the portrait-frame were charred. Tonks had singe marks in her hair.

“You blew a *hole* in the wall?”

“A small hole,” said Tonks. “Improves the whole room, really. Great feng shui down there.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t bring the roof down!”

“Wouldn’t have done,” said Sirius briskly. “I’ve brought down a building before, and it’s harder than you’d think.”

The letter in Draco’s pocket seemed to heat against his skin. He tried to imagine what he would think of his mother if she disowned him, but it was impossible to do, it was inconceivable; she simply wouldn’t, and that was that. Even in the distant, foggy fields of the hypothetical, he couldn’t imagine speaking with a fraction of Sirius’s vitriol about her. Disinherited, distanced, or dead, she would be his mother. He had clenched her hand on his first trip to Diagon Alley and fallen asleep in her lap at a hundred boring parties. Anyone who kicked her portrait would be volunteering themselves for acquaintance with the vicious end of his wand.

“What did she do?” he asked, abstractly, before he thought better of it. Tonks sucked through her teeth.

Sirius shrugged.

“Didn’t win any parenting awards, did she,” he said. “Yelled a lot. Made me eat lentils. One time she kicked me down the stairs—”

“On purpose?” Draco said sharply, with a glance at the portrait. Beady dark eyes squinted back at him with uncomprehending scorn. “Why?”

“Can’t remember. Think I brought home a muggle. Might’ve been a boy. Probably did it to piss her off, in fairness.”

“You can’t *remember?”*

“Mum told me everyone was afraid of her,” volunteered Tonks. “Like living in a dragon’s cave, she said. You had to whisper all the time, or it’d wake up and burn everything.”

“Kind of,” admitted Sirius. “Only sometimes the dragon woke up anyway. Nothing you could do about it. S’the way dragons are. So you and the other guy in the cave, you teamed up, and worked out how to get it back to sleep, and you got pretty good at it, after a while. And so now the dragon’s sleeping a lot, but it’s still a fucking dragon, you know? And then you finally get out of the cave, and your brother’s all, ‘how could you do this to me, I thought we were cave buddies,’ and you’re like, ‘kid, we can still talk, just come out of the cave,’ but he doesn’t want to, because he wants to spend the rest of his life putting it to sleep — thinking like, maybe if he just holds out, one day he’s gonna wake up and it’s not gonna be a dragon anymore — like that, only there’s a war on. Oh shit, sorry, Mum.”

It was muttered without thinking: he’d stubbed his toe on the side of the frame, and Walburga had given a frightened little yelp. He patted the frame in absentminded reassurance.

Draco stared at him.

“You’re a real piece of work, Black.”

“Best piece of work this place ever did,” Sirius agreed, massaging his foot.

“Second best,” said Tonks, not unapologetically, “on account of Mum.”

“Your mum was a snoot.”

“Andromeda,” said Draco suddenly, turning to Tonks. “Was she close to Regulus?”

Tonks shrugged and looked to Sirius. “Never mentioned him,” she said. “But she didn’t mention most of you. No offense.”

“Offense unheedfully taken,” said Sirius, “and the more your loss. Tyke, Andy was close with everybody.”

“Not Bellatrix, surely.”

“Especially Bellatrix,” said Sirius absently, eyeing the staircase in a calculating manner. “That was the mad part. Against all odds, growing up in our house, Andy was actually halfway decent — not all there up top, maybe, but decent—”

“Oi! That’s my mum!”

“—and still managed to like that demented hag of a woman more than just about anyone living. Until she didn’t, I s’pose.”

Draco frowned. “What changed her mind?”

It was Sirius’s turn to shrug and look at Tonks.

“Never said exactly,” said Tonks. “Just that she didn’t fancy being told what to do.”

“That’s it?”

“Made enough sense to me,” said Sirius. “Where is Andy, anyway? Thought she might be around.”

“Spending the hols with Dad’s family in Leeds,” said Tonks, a bit guiltily. “They’re both cross I’m not there. Molly invited them both here, but Mum turned it down.”

“S’ the house, I expect,” said Sirius, with a quick glance at Draco. “I don’t blame her one mite there. I’d rather spend a decade in Leeds than a weekend in this place, and that’s for certain.”

But whether Sirius meant it or not, the implication still seemed clear to Draco: *It isn’t about you.* Which, of course, meant that it was.

“I’d like to speak to her,” said Draco suddenly. Hearing himself, he pushed back a wave of apprehension, which, he told himself, was unreasonable. She was only a witch, and having a conversation with her wouldn’t break any rules. None that applied to him, anyway.

Tonks blinked. “Sure, yeah,” she said. “If I can get her down. I mean — she’s not avoiding you, mate, you just—”

“We haven’t customarily been in correspondence,” said Dracl, with a thin cordiality. “I understand. I’m attempting a change in custom.”

“She don’t go into wizarding society often,” corrected Tonks. “She keeps to muggle life, mostly, Mum does. Hardly even uses magic around the house. Only went to the Ministry with me because she didn’t trust me to handle Davis on my own. And fair enough, I’m no diplomat, but she’s not much of one, either.”

“Andy’s idea of diplomacy was pitching a fit until someone did what she wanted,” said Sirius, with great fondness. “Won every argument she ever had. Bless.”

“Save one,” said Tonks.

“Yeah. Well. Save one.”

The shadow of the past loomed and then receded like the coming of tide. The moment passed. Tonks inhaled and clapped the dust from

her hands.

“Speaking of which, we’ve still got to lug this thing up to the attic. Hey, Malfoy! You’re not busy, are you? How’d you feel about getting elbow grease on your blouse?”

Like she honestly thought after five years in the company of Weasleys he’d never had to use his hands before. As if he was going to keel over and faint at the idea of disturbing an heirloom.

“I didn’t realize you were starting the party early,” he drawled, and tugged off his jumper. “Allow me to show the noble delegates from the House of Black how a Malfoy handles his business.”

Later that night, on the far end of a three-way intergenerational wrestling match with a slab of wood, when Walburga had been slotted in the attic between a fanged victrola and an old set of bagpipes — when the scent of Molly’s cooking wafted in thick, smoky strains through the house, and the table had been mounted with every piece of crockery in Sirius’s name, when Arthur, Bill, and the twins were singing “Blue Christmas” — their pitch altered by a generous serving of cognac — and when the dining room gleamed from the light of a hundred candles mounted here and there and floating around the chandelier like a choir of stars around a full golden moon, Grimmauld Place hosted its first Christmas party in at least thirteen years.

They ate steaming roast pork until each guest was porcine by weight, and passed bowls of supple roasted chestnuts spiced with cinnamon and brown sugar. There was a Christmas cake the size of a beehive, drenched in enough brandy to float a barge of pirates, and mulled wine and butterbeer and bourbon and crackers, paper hats on every head, and then a recess to regroup, and then ice cream and gingerbread and more cake and wine, and everyone drifted around nibbling for hours after the meal formally ended. Everyone was overfed, over-drunk, and overdressed: Draco had come down in a hot flush of triumph from his bout with the portrait, tie lost to the fray, and so fit more naturally between Charlie’s leather

duster, Bill’s frayed suede jacket, and Ginny’s outsized Holyhead Harpies jersey. Every so often he looked up from his plate and found Hermione looking at him, her gaze drifting over from where she sat between Ginny and Molly, like a warm cloak settled on his shoulders; when he caught her, she would flit her eyes away, a silent admission which, if anything, only sharpened the warmth.

Ron spilled the soup. Fred put the empty tureen on his head like a silver knight’s helmet. George and Bill arm-wrestled for the uneaten half of Harry’s pudding, and Tonks did an imitation of Moody that made Arthur roar with laughter. They were all useless rascals stacked shoulder to shoulder at a table too small despite three Engorgement Charms, jeering and pounding their goblets like the many Knaves of the Round Table. It was a good party.

After dinner, a caravan of dishes trundled into the kitchen. In what her children called an outstanding show of favoritism, Molly unexpectedly exculpated Draco from dish duty when he gave a put-upon sigh. He was surprised as anyone, being unused to put-upon sighs getting him anywhere in the domain of Weasley.

“So as you don’t dirty your nice shirt, dear,” she said assuringly, patting his shoulder. “We don’t need all those people in there, anyway. Why don’t you put out the candles and put away the silver?”

Ron, laden with plates, rolled his eyes. “Misses Percy,” he muttered to Harry, but not subtly enough to prevent Draco hearing; nor, perhaps, Molly — though she said nothing, and swept into the kitchen.

Disarmed, Draco moved about the newly empty dining-room, pinching out the candles, reducing the room into a smoky dusk, while the kitchen bustled from next-door with light.

Hermione came in as he was finishing, and stood hesitantly in the doorway. He was aware of her almost without looking, by the shift of her step on the hardwood, and the way she drew breath when she

had something to say. So he waited until he had finished the last candle to turn and look at her.

She had rolled up her own sleeves for the dishes, and her hair was pinned up with her wand. She watched him put out the candles on the bureau. A veil of smoke hung thin over her face.

“Did you have a good time?” she said. The quiet seemed strange after the loudness of the dinner-table, and the kitchen’s noise all but swallowed it.

He nodded.

“Sirius said that you helped them move Walburga’s portrait,” she said. “That was nice of you.”

“It was a bother to everyone in that stairwell.”

“I can’t imagine what it must have been like, growing up with her,” she said. She walked around the table, drawing her fingers idly over the tablecloth. “My parents hardly ever shouted.”

“Portraits take liberties,” he said. “They exaggerate the qualities of interest to the painter.”

“And that painter was interested in her prejudice?”

“Or her house pride. It was commissioned after her death. By her husband, likely, or a relative.”

“How do you know that?”

“She’s in mourning clothes. It’s her funerary portrait. I’d wager her husband’s is at Witherfell. It’s odd; usually they’d be hung together.”

“Witherfell?”

“The Black seat. Large estate in Cornwall. Abandoned since Regulus’s death, for obvious reasons.”

“They aren’t obvious to me,” she said thoughtfully. She peeled off a bit of wax from the bottom of a candelabra. “Why wouldn’t your mother take it?”

“It’s enough trouble maintaining the Manor. Anyway, supposedly it’s cursed.”

“Cursed?”

“That’s the story,” he said, flicking his hand carelessly, to indicate his lack of credence in the idea. “The curse of the Blacks. Five heirs — one imprisoned, two disinherited, one dead. And four parents dead in a decade: accident, heartbreak, sickness, grief.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t know any of them. I met my grandmother, once or twice. Druella Rosier. But she died when I was young.”

“Of what?”

“‘Grief.’ Which I have always understood to be a euphemism for an overgenerous dose of Dreamless Sleep.” He paused. “My mother blamed the Rosiers’ house-elf.”

“...For murdering her?”

“Manslaughter by inattentiveness, I suspect, if you pressed her. Druella more or less stopped eating after her husband died of dragonpox. She lost almost two stone in a year, and dosing Dreamless Sleep is difficult even for a trained wizard. Placing such a task in the hands of a house-elf was not the act of a witch with a powerful desire to live.”

“There are worse cases to be made for a family being cursed,” she said after a moment.

She had come to stand at his side. They watched the wax move in slow braids down the silver sconce. He felt her nearness so keenly it

was almost its own kind of touch.

“If the Blacks are cursed, it isn’t because of magic,” he said.

She turned to him curiously. “Do you think you’re cursed?” she murmured.

He chose not to answer the question. Instead, he shifted to lean on the wall, regarding her upturned face through the smoke-silver dim.

“I’m a Malfoy,” he said. “Malfoys aren’t cursed, merely dead.”

She stepped forward, bringing them so close he could have touched her by shifting his weight. “Except for you.”

“Except for me,” he agreed.

She pressed her lips together. When she spoke, her words took him by surprise.

“Is it lonely?”

He took his time finding an answer to that.

“It used to be,” he said.

Her smile was a halting flash of hope. Her eyes found his, and then lowered.

“I just meant that it’s a big house to be alone in,” she said. “I’m — glad you’re here.”

“Yes.”

She was very close.

“Oi, Hermione?”

Ron’s silhouette blacked the kitchen doorway, bracing the door ajar with his arm. Hermione moved away quickly.

“Mum says we need another hand to move the table,” he said. “Not interrupting anything, am I?”

“No,” she said brusquely. “Of course. We’re happy to help. Draco, will you—”

“Oh, he’s alright,” said Ron. “We only need the one pair of hands.”

With a fleeting backward glance at Draco, she followed Ron into the kitchen. Ron met Draco’s eyes over her shoulder, and with an unreadable expression, he shut the door.

The candles were all extinguished. Draco slipped his hands into his pockets and retreated to the drawing-room, quelling a strong twinge of bitterness.

There were voices in the drawing-room, low and heated. He slowed on his way past the door, and a murmur escaped with the sliver of lamplight through the crevice.

“—best fighter you’ve got, don’t deny—”

“—wards on the house! All of us—”

“—in and out, three hours, they’ll never notice—”

A shadow dimmed his view. He shifted out of the light.

“It’s my decision.” That was Sirius.

“Not as long as we’re under this roof.” And that was Molly.

“Half of you won’t be! That’s the point!”

“Fine. Not as long as my children are under this roof.”

“Alastor’s here, they’ll be fine — and anyway, between you and me, this ‘master of the wards’ business from Dumbledore always sounded funny.”

“He’s got a point.” Tonks. “You can’t make him stay here.”

“No, but I can.” Remus was not apologetic at all. “Padfoot, listen to me. You’re not leaving this house. The risk is greater than we can accept. The conversation is over.”

“It’s a holiday! The Ministry will be closed! It’s never been safer!”

“Emergency staff still comes in on New Year’s, and you said yourself we’ve no idea if the Unspeakables take holidays—”

“Which hasn’t stopped the rest of you!”

“The rest of us can afford to be arrested.”

“Really? Not worried about Azkaban, are you? Well, why would you be, you’ve never been!”

“I didn’t say that. I said we could afford it.”

“Yeah? What happens when they book you and don’t find your name on a certain registry?”

There was a beat. “I’ve never been formally charged for that,” said Remus, his tone flinty, “and in any case, being an unregistered lycanthrope isn’t a capital offense. I’d go to Azkaban, but at least I’d be alive.”

“I’d rather the other.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“I would,” said Sirius, raising his voice. “I’d rather the other than go back there, or see you in it. Or live in this fetid, godforsaken temple

to barbarism for the rest of my days. I didn't break out of one prison for another—"

"A prison! A prison, really? That's what this is, for you?"

"Yes!"

"Food on the table and a roof over your head? Friends at every meal?"

"Yes, it is!"

"Waking up somewhere you're loved, that's prison? Why, I should've liked some years in prison, too! To think," snarled Remus, "how much suffering I could have avoided—"

"You wake up here because you choose to! I don't!"

"Because I'm flush for options?"

"Yes! You could leave, if you wanted to!"

"To do what? Go where? I'm not free either — you put me in the same position when you came to Hogwarts—"

"I did? *I* did? Jolly good, Moony, this is just like old times! Something's wrong, let's blame Sirius!"

"I was complicit from the moment I set eyes on you, and you needed me, and you know perfectly well I was never going to walk away!"

"Yes! Yes! All my fault, isn't it! Poor little Padfoot needed minding, so Mummy had to step in! And now you're stuck with me. That's you and me, isn't it, you puttering around after my fuckups with a mop, and getting pissy when I didn't kiss your feet after—"

"And it just killed you, didn't it, to need it? You never complained of a mop when it was necessary, you just assumed that it'd show up, like

it always does, and whinged when it wasn't sufficiently *expeditious* or *grateful* for the chance to be of *service* to the great Lord Black—"

"And thank God for you, Saint Remus," said Sirius savagely. "How would we poor lepers do without? Read my lips: I never asked you to stay. I never told you to lock yourself in here with me. And if you ever wanted out, I would be the last person to try and stop you."

A chair screamed, its feet ripping across hardwood.

"Fine."

Several people tried to speak at once. Another shriek of wood.

"Don't touch me, Sirius."

Quick footsteps. Draco threw himself out of the way, backpedaling back up the hallway. His back collided with something hard and short, and someone yelped.

"OI! Where d'you think you're going?"

It was Harry. He caught Draco before they both toppled to the floor in a rictus of stupid.

"You alright?" he said, bewildered. "What's wrong? Look like you saw a dementor—"

"Quiet! They'll hear you. This way, come on."

The door to the drawing-room banged open, and Remus stalked out. For a jumpy heartbeat Draco thought he would turn and see them huddled at the end of the hall, but instead he wheeled in the opposite direction and stomped up the staircase.

"Merlin," said Harry angrily. "What's up everybody's arse? It's Christmas."

Draco raked a hand through his hair, nerves still jangling with the proximity to being caught. “Get the other two,” he said shortly. “Meet me somewhere private. The Order—”

“Can wait. Hey, you have a second? Great.”

Harry seized his sleeve and hauled him into the nearest door — notwithstanding an exclamation of complaint — which happened to be a pantry. The light snapped on at the yank of a cord, and they were blinking at each other in a cramped wooden closet full of jars, smelling of sawdust.

Harry shut the door and pivoted, guarding it with a stern expression. Draco brushed himself off indignantly.

“Listen. I’ll make this quick. I don’t know what’s been going on with you and Hermione—”

“And I’m astounded you feel any entitlement to,” said Draco, outraged and unsettled in equal measure. He had no positive inclinations about where this sort of conversation with Harry might be going.

“—but you’re not subtle, alright? Neither of you. For months now you’ve been at each other’s throats or in each other’s pockets, and I know you’re going to say that’s the way it normally is, but it’s different. And I know you, tosser, I notice these things.”

Draco offered a withering stare for an answer.

“And based on how you are, and everything,” he said awkwardly, “I reckon there might be — stuff going on. Maybe. Between you two. I notice her being all — touchy with you—”

“Granger touches her friends.”

“Not the same way she touches you,” said Harry. Then he muttered: “Thank God.”

The satisfaction was sharp enough to burn.

“Perhaps. What of it?”

“Because if it is — you know, like that— and mate, it’s none of my business—”

“Wholeheartedly agree.”

“—you have to let us in on what’s going on, alright? You have to sort it out. Because if it’s not, and the two of you are just — I dunno, having a weird phase or something — you’re going to hurt Ron. You already are. Hurting him. Not that he’d ever tell you that, because he’s a mate, but I will, because I’m sick of everybody being stupid and walking on eggshells around each other. The three of you need to sort out who fancies who and who doesn’t, or I’m going to lock you all in a broom cupboard together.”

Draco stiffened.

“Hurt *Ronald,”* he repeated.

“Yeah,” said Harry, pointedly. “Ronald. Who’s fancied her for ages. And if you’re *not* like that, and you’re really just mates, and don’t fancy each other— you should, y’know, back off a bit.”

Something in his face must have registered surprise, because Harry rolled his eyes and said, “C’mon, you’ve absolutely noticed.”

“Obviously I’ve noticed,” he said coldly. “But it isn’t requited.”

“Give him a chance to see about that, would you?” said Harry. “Reckon she might like him more than you think.”

“I rather doubt it.”

“Well, if you don’t fancy her, it doesn't matter, does it?” he shot back. “All the same to you, right?”

“Of course it matters. They’re not suited.”

“Says you!”

“Says Granger.”

“Not to Ron,” said Harry firmly. “And she should say it to Ron, then, because he really cares about her, and it’s prattish for you to put him off if you’re not actually interested.”

Satisfied that he had said his piece, Harry turned to open the door. Draco, who was loathe to prolong the conversation, ground out anyway:

“Suppose that I was. Interested.”

He had been girded for the worst — dismay, disappointment, cringing repulsion. It did not come. Harry instead carded both hands through his hair, with an expression of aggravation, but not surprise.

“Fine. Just… don’t make it weird, okay? Whatever happens, you still have to play quidditch together.”

“Excuse me?”

“You can’t quit. I won’t let you. And I won’t let him quit, either.” He paused. “So I don’t care what you do with her — well I do care, don’t mess her around or anything, obviously. She’s my best friend — not that you’re not, or that I don’t, but I’ve got to kick *someone’s* arse, so — but the real thing is, you — someone has to think about Ron.”

This last was, it seemed, the only thing in the speech that he was certain of, and he believed it fervently.

“So don’t make it weird,” he ordered. “Be nice to him. Be nice to her, too. Be nice to all of us! We all bloody need it. And… I dunno. Good luck with all that, or whatever.” His shoulders drooped. “I hope… you get what you want. Whatever that is.”

He lifted his hands as if dropping an invisible object of some weight, stepped back from it, and began walking away. Ginny followed him.

“Shouldn’t you hope Ronald does?”

Harry paused.

“Get what he wants,” he clarified. His stomach twisted at the thought.

“I have this really irrational thing,” said Harry dully, “where I hope everyone will be happy at once. I get that the universe isn’t really on board with this idea; it seems to get pissed whenever someone asks. But I don’t hope for things because they’re rational. So yeah, I hope you get what you want.” He took a deep breath. “Alright. What was it you wanted to tell me about the Order?”

Harry’s bedroom was a dark paneled room on the second floor. A chicken-scratch sign on the door read PROPERTY OF S.B.!! NO TRESPASSING!!!, along with several others, all lavishly festooned with exclamation points.

Draco threw himself into an armchair and brooded while Harry vanished downstairs. A few minutes later, he reappeared with Ron and Hermione, who crowded in and shut the door behind them. Harry locked it.

“Tell them what you told me,” he ordered. Ron sank onto the bed warily. Hermione folded her arms and stood stock-straight in the middle of the room like a pillar.

“They’re going to break into the Ministry.”

“We knew that already,” said Hermione at once.

“They’re going to break into the Ministry imminently. And it’s almost certainly the Department of Mysteries.”

He related what he'd overheard. Harry and Ron were unsettled, and Hermione started pacing in thought.

"We knew all that, too," she said. "We've known they wanted the Department of Mysteries ever since your Occlumency lesson. They're trying to get the 'special artifact' you told us about. What I don't understand is why Sirius is kicking up such a fuss about going — it's going to be heinously dangerous, and if he's caught, he'll get the Kiss, if not worse — and why?" She lifted her hands, acidly. "Because he wants a bit of fun? Then he's a selfish arsehole, and Remus has every right to be angry with him."

"No, because he's been cooped up here for six bloody months," said Ron. "Because all the other grownups are swanning off to do a heist on the government, and he's supposed to sit on his arse at the kiddie table. Six months of that and I'd flip my nut, too."

"Personally, I'd love to have it that easy," Hermione said thinly, "since the rest of us don't get to say we're helping the war effort by breathing. And all of us have it worse than he does, living under Umbridge, but no one asks us if we're sick of being cooped up in Hogwarts."

Harry's shoulders crept up by his ears.

"S'different," said Ron. "C'mon."

"How!"

"It's not like we *couldn't* leave Hogwarts."

"Not this again." She massaged her nose.

"What?" said Draco.

"Ron, you just want to get out of taking your O.W.L.s."

"I told you, that's a bonus!"

Draco sat up straighter. “No one’s leaving Hogwarts.”

“No, but hang on, give it a think.”

“Fine. My thought is: no one is leaving Hogwarts.”

Ignoring him, Ron counted points off on his fingers. “Grimmauld is safer than Hogwarts these days. We’d be protected by the whole Order. We could spend all our time training — I mean, seriously, Hermione, do *you* want me spending my time on Divination homework?”

“You don’t do your Divination homework anyway!”

“There you go! No great loss! And anyway, I’ve been working on bringing Mum around, all she needs is a hard press — she’s already thinking about letting the twins skip their N.E.W.T.s if things get any worse. And Harry’s legal guardian is Vernon Dursley, who couldn’t give a fuck if it hit him in the nose.”

“You’re serious,” said Draco, aghast. “You’ve thought it through.”

“You call this ‘thinking it through’?” Hermione muttered.

“What about you?” he shot at her. “Have *you* considered it?”

“Of course not! I’m sure there’s nothing Umbridge would like more than my vanishing off the face of the earth, but she won’t get the satisfaction,” she said indignantly. “I’m getting my O.W.L.s, and I don’t care if I have to break down the door of the exam room.”

He relaxed slightly, his hackles lowering. “Good.”

“Easy for you to say,” muttered Ron. “You still get to walk around like you own the place.”

Draco stood up. Ron stepped back, startled.

“And do you imagine that I enjoy that privilege?” he said coldly.

“Draco,” said Hermione.

“Is that what you think? My life is a draught of Felix Felicis? When my knee still hurts from where Goyle *shattered* it last year? When my godfather lives under the thumb of the Dark Lord? When my mother is out there doing God knows what at Dumbledore’s beck and call, and barely talks to me even when she isn’t? When I spent most of this holiday alone in an empty house? Would anyone,” he said, “like to switch with me?”

“Done,” said Harry.

There was a long, oily smear of silence.

“Yeah,” he added. “Thought that’d shut you all up. Are you three done yelling at each other, or should I pop down and put the kettle on?”

The smear widened.

“There’s no point in arguing over who’s got it worse,” said Hermione carefully. “No one gets a prize for having suffered most.”

Harry moved his head equivocally, but a hard look from her cured him.

Ron nodded shortly. “Sorry,” he told Draco. “Didn’t mean that. I know it’s rough for you, with your mum, and everything. I do… get it, you know.”

“It’s fine.”

“And don’t think I’m going after you for being cosseted, either. I mean, you are, but I saw you ask Umbridge for the quill, I haven’t forgotten—”

“It’s not necessary to pursue this further.”

“I’m attempting a manful show of respect over here.”

“Try a manful show of shutting up, next.”

Ron barked a laugh. Draco’s mouth twitched and he eased himself back into his chair, aching unreasonably in muscles he hadn’t even used.

“Did you ever tell them about the mole?” Hermione asked Harry, who blinked at her. She sighed. “The one who’s leaking information about Sirius and Remus?”

“What? Oh, yeah. Moody said he wagered it was Mundungus,” said Ron eagerly. “Apparently, Dung disappeared on a scouting mission around November, hasn’t been seen since. Sirius revoked all his ward permissions, so he won’t be able to get back into the house.”

“Why was he allowed into Twelve in the first place?” said Hermione crossly. “He’s a petty criminal with a record. hardly a freedom fighter.”

“You don’t win wars with saints,” Draco remarked, crossing his legs.

“You don’t win them with pickpockets, either,” she retorted.

“He had good information,” said Ron. “Connections everywhere, lots of intel. Plus, you need someone who can report on the criminal underground, since Lupin won’t go undercover—”

“What?” Harry said sharply. “How did you hear that?”

“Overheard Mum and Bill talking about it. Apparently, Moody wanted him to go back in with the werewolves, but Lupin wouldn’t—”

“Of course he wouldn’t,” snarled Harry, “what a foul fucking thing to ask—”

“—and Sirius threatened to revoke Moody’s ward permissions if he pushed the point, so he didn’t mention it again. But you still need an ear to the ground on what’s happening down Knockturn Alley, so to speak — so they got Dung. Suppose Lupin feels a bit guilty about it

now, too — if he'd been willing to work as a double agent again, we'd never have needed to bring in someone else, and there wouldn't have been a mole in the first place."

"And risk his life," said Harry loudly, "yeah, that's a totally reasonable thing to ask—"

"Everyone's risking their lives, Harry," said Hermione impatiently. "For goodness's sake. It's not like Moody asked Lupin for anything he wouldn't do himself, if he could; and moreover, it's not like he forced him to do it."

Harry's outrage was hardly quelled by this acrid infusion of reason. "Are you joking? Remus's *life* blew up and he spent thirteen years living alone, and just when he's got Sirius back, Moody wants him to turn around and go back to the werewolves — to be out there on his own, no one looking out for him, to be like Snape—"

"Yes, and you don't seem to have a problem with it when it's someone else's godfather, do you?" said Draco coolly. Harry bit his cheek, his expression brittle.

"It's still wrong," he said, "and Snape did that of his own free will."

"Well, so would Lupin!" Hermione said, exasperated. "If he *chose* to, which he didn't! Honestly, Harry, you can't be sore with Mad-Eye for voicing the option! It *would* help to have a trustworthy spy in the Death Eater camp, and I don't think he's wrong for pointing out the obvious candidate."

"Snape *is* trustworthy."

"Well — yes, I don't deny it, but I mean a spy who's loyal to the Order itself, not just to Dumbledore."

"I can be sore with whoever I like," snapped Harry. "For whatever reasons I like. It was a rotten thing to ask of him."

“Worse than asking him to die?” retorted Draco. “Because that’s the whole point of the Order, you realize. They’re recruiting soldiers. What is it you think soldiers do, exactly?”

“There are things worse than dying,” said Harry shortly, and said no more.

The house sighed on its foundations like it was trying to soothe itself. Voices murmured dully from downstairs, comforting in their proximity and their indistinctness — a reminder that the adults, while out of earshot, were no more than a flight of stairs away.

“I want a break,” announced Harry.

Hermione cleared her throat. “Sorry,” she muttered. “We’ll give you some space.”

“Not from you. From the rest of it. D’you lot remember the last time we talked about something that wasn’t the Order? Or Defense Club? Or Umbridge?”

Hermione massaged her own shoulder, restlessly avoiding his eyes. “That’s a lot of things.”

“Yeah? But I miss you,” he said.

Her face crumpled, and the fight went out of her like a departing spirit.

“Just because we’ve talked doesn’t mean it feels like it. I miss talking to you. I miss you going off about how rubbish my Transfiguration essay is, and you and Ron fighting about Crookshanks. I miss talking about rubbish because it’s rubbish, and it doesn’t matter. I want to hang out with my friends, because it’s Christmas, and do — literally anything but think about this stuff, for a bit. I get that it’s stupid and childish, I do, but I’m still asking, because — I need it. I really need you. I’m sorry. I just do.” He swallowed. “Also I think I’ll go mad pretty soon, if you don’t.”

It was light, with a trifle of fear.

Hermione made a wounded sound, and hugged him.

Of course she did. For her, from him, the words *I need you* were a Summoning Charm.

Harry buried his head in her shoulder. Their closeness fused their silhouette into a single creature, one head, one shuddering chest. Two dark-haired children with parents nowhere near, grappling each other like it was possible to wring the wide universe of all they didn't have from the little they did.

Ron cleared his throat. Draco averted his eyes from Harry and Hermione, who were still wrapped tightly in each other.

"Exploding Snap?" said Ron.

"Five galleon buy-in," said Draco

"Of course you want to play for money."

"I thought you'd leap at a chance to lighten my pockets."

"Oh, I will, don't you worry," said Ron, flopping down on the carpet. He began to shuffle. "Might even let you keep your shirt as a Christmas present."

"Whereas you couldn't pay me to take yours."

"Laugh it up, git, it'll be twice as funny when you're naked."

The night sank into a slow, warm ending. Draco was the best hand at Snap by some margin, but Ron was better at cheating, and Harry and Hermione were both redundantly awful, so the game devolved. They ended up sprawled over the carpet, laughing at the charred bit of Ron's fringe and picking ashes out of their clothes.

The cards drifted away, and the candles died in their brass berths, but the fire crackled on, and the grandfather clock was tolling, but nobody could say how many times. The boys pitched the pocket snitch around in a three-way game of catch until it knocked over a vase, which spilled a filmy and suspicious ash; Ron said, “Damn, there goes Draco’s great-auntie,” which everyone found unreasonably funny. Hermione tried — through vigorous, bemused heckling — to explain what a ski trip was, though when she began describing a ‘ski lift,’ she was shouted down for having them on.

She was leaning against the foot of the armchair with Harry’s head in her lap. Her fingers glided every now and then through his hair like she was petting Crookshanks. The conversation dwindled, turned a few times around the same subject, and finally laid down into a close, companionable silence. Harry’s snores joined the crackling of the grate as the only noise in the room. Ron held up longer, but surrendered at last, his cheek sandwiching the last of the Snap cards to the rug.

Hermione’s yawns grew in frequency until Draco turned to ask her something and found her eyes closed.

She lapsed toward him in her sleep, her head tilted back against the chair behind them. Her shoulder pressed against his arm, a weight that made him intently aware of every inch of the skin beneath it. Her hair brushed soft and fragrant on his cheek.

It was warm in the firelight. The room smelled of woodsmoke, varnish, incense, citrus. In his limbs was a thick warmth that moved slowly and viscously down his veins. The other boys were both asleep. He could count her freckles, locate them in their usual stations, and draw the usual constellations he liked to imagine between them, studying her face with a naked and unrepentant greed, free of the fear that someone — not least of all herself — would catch him looking.

Her mouth was parted slightly. Her breath feathered from a crease between bowed lips. It was so close that a slight movement of his

head would brush it with his own; and when the thought occurred to him, her eyes fluttered open, as if she'd heard it too.

They were the only part of her that moved. From beneath her thick eyelashes, she studied him. Then her eyes dropped down his face, and rested on his mouth.

He felt pinned to the spot by an enormous weight, bearing down on every nerve at once. It pressed hard on the center of his chest, forcing his heart to beat.

With a slight movement of her chin, she lifted her face. He bent down the slightest distance, and their mouths touched. And then, as if by accident, they were kissing.

It wasn't urgent as the train had been urgent. It was slow, and shallow, and he almost felt outside himself, watching his own body do something it had never been taught. He mirrored the cant of her head, bending to kiss her better, and each movement glided smoothly into the next. She tasted like cinnamon and the trifle they'd had for dessert; that was the second time she'd tasted sweet when he kissed her, and there was a giddiness in the thought that he could tell the difference.

And of course she tasted sweet. It wasn't surprising at all. Nothing about kissing her was surprising. She did it the same way she did everything, which was to say, thoroughly, passionately, and extremely well.

The fire snapped, and Harry made a noise in his sleep.

Hermione drew back with a twitch. Draco tensed.

She didn't run, this time, however. She gave him a small smile that was half-shy and half-pleased, searching his face for a sign of something.

She must have found it, because her smile widened. Then she folded her head against his shoulder, took a deep breath, and settled, her shoulders slackening into a posture of utter rest.

He tipped his head back on the chair, stared at the ceiling, and tried to breathe evenly. From the rate of her breathing, Hermione had fallen asleep, and a dawning weight on his eyelids suggested that the same would soon be true of him.

It had been so long since anything had been as easy as this. It had been ages since he hadn’t fallen asleep to a list of the several hundred things he had to worry about. He couldn’t remember worrying about anything, really, with her head on his shoulder, and her breathing slow.

-September! Happy Hogwarts season!

-We're trying to do a semi-regular update schedule, but I'm not quite back at weekly-post levels of productivity yet — sorry about that! I'm doing better now, so that is progress in one direction.

-God, I love Black family drama. There's nothing I love more than an old bitchy aristocratic house that's tearing itself apart.

-Slow burn continues to slow-burn post-kiss, but in a positive direction. I've always maintained we weren't fucking around with it.

-The previous chapter's title was a riff on "In the Bleak Midwinter," which is one of my favorite Christmas songs and belongs to the robust canon of “festive holiday tunes that happen to sound like a funeral march.” My bonus piece of paratext is that I imagine it being Draco’s favorite carol. That or "A Coventry Carol."

-This is the halfway point of Book 5! Thanks for sticking with me.

-The chapter, "Auld Lang Syne," will be up hopefully before too long (though not too soon).

Auld Lang Syne

Chapter 71: Auld Lang Syne

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

When he woke, his heart was racing, and the room was dark. Vestiges of a dream frittered away in his periphery: a train car, a dead sprint, a wall of white masks, and a thatch of brown curls receding into the mist before him.

It was cold now that the fire had gone out. Hermione had curled up in a ball to sleep, and someone had draped a blanket over her shoulders. Harry was a dark lump on his bed, and Ron slouched in the armchair, head buried in the crook of his elbow.

Draco blearily lifted his arm, and found it buried under another blanket.

He shrugged it off and stood up. The clock was tolling two.

A jolt of panic sent him stumbling to the door. His mother would have expected him back.

Then he remembered he wasn't on speaking terms with his mother, and he lurched against the doorframe, grinding the heel of his palm into his eye. He felt tired and miserable in the way one could only be at two in the morning, when one was far from one's bed.

The stairs creaked on the way down.

It was a relief not to creep past the first landing, now that Walburga's portrait had been replaced with a wide, splintering maw in the wall; all the same, the hole was somewhat unsettling. He trotted past it and into the drawing-room, picking his way through the papery detritus of Christmas morning.

A moonless night pressed flush to the windows; frills of frost around the eaves. An owl crooned.

He fumbled through the darkness for the Floo powder, lamenting his want of a Summoning Spell, or even a miserly Lumos. When his fingers located the jar, they also brushed a fold of paper.

Moony,

Don’t be angry. Back in a jiff. Keep the Floo open.

—Your Padfoot

He stared at it for a second. It was very strange, how time moved then: he could feel each beat of his heart as if minutes elapsed between them, horrible pauses crawling past between each detonation in his chest. His mouth parted; he fumbled for a name, and in a white blear of panic, it seemed to take him years.

“REMUS!”

The door slammed against the wall. He tore through it and up the stairs.

“REMUS! ARTHUR! MOLLY!”

Lights blazed.

“What?”

“Who’s that?”

“What is it?”

He took the last three steps in a single jump and whipped around the banister. He almost slammed into Arthur, who stepped into his way and seized him by the arms, wrenching him still with surprising

strength. Arthur wore a dressing-gown, and behind him, Molly was hurrying out of their bedroom, fumbling the tie on her robe.

“Who’s that?” she cried. “Is that Ron?”

“No, it’s Draco — what the devil’s the matter, son?”

He didn’t have the time. He shoved the paper into Arthur’s hands, tore himself away, and raced up the stairs.

“REMUS!”

Fleur swept down the stairs and nearly speared him in the eye with her wand. *“Est-ce que quelqu'un essaie de nous tuer?”*

“Oui, il s'appelle Sirius Black, alors dégage de mon fucking *chemin, s’il te plaît,* where the fuck is REMUS?”

“I’m going after him,” cried Arthur, voice winnowing down the stairs, “I’ll take Tonks, Bill, and Fleur, Molly, go get them—”

“Yes, and Alastor, take Alastor!”

“No! Best people stay with the children! You and Alastor stay with the children!”

“God *damn* it!” She didn’t argue, but hurtled up the stairs, brushing past Fleur. “Fleur! Code seven! TONKS!”

Remus staggered out to the landing, gaunt and horrified, his nightshirt flapping open around his ribs. “What’s happening? Is there an attack?”

“Sirius is gone.”

“Where?”

“No idea,” shouted Tonks, “he might've gone to the Ministry—”

“Godric's Hollow,” rasped Remus, interrupting the answer to his own question. Then he raised his voice: “I know where he is. He’s gone to Godric's Hollow.”

“Godric's Hollow,” Bill shouted, sprinting past on the stairs. “Great! We'll use Bagshot's Floo — *Fleur, n’y pense même pas,* you’re staying here!”

“Je t’emmerde, Rouquin, my left thumb is twice the duelist you are!”

“Telling, not asking, kid, and this isn’t a dueling tournament!”

“Ne m'appelle pas ‘kid,’ petit con, I am *le grand prix* in spellcasting at Beauxbatons, five years, and you are barely getting — what is the name, fucking stupid English tests—”

“Maybe you can write a paper at them!”

“She’s right, and shut up about it,” roared Tonks, erupting from her room. Her hair was black again, choppy around the shoulders, and her nose was a large, lopsided, very un-Black ridge of knobs. She flipped over the railing and soared down to collide with a house-shuddering rattle on the ground floor. “Delacour eats your charmwork for breakfast, she’s coming. Arthur!”

“Gone!”

“Damn! Alright, I’m after him!”

The sound of slamming doors and footsteps thundered through the house. The twins Apparated onto the landing with a one-two *crack-crack.* Charlie gave a shout and came pounding down the stairs with his wand in one hand and a nail-studded beater’s bat in the other.

The Floo howled. Remus sagged against the wall, ashen and limp like a used sheet. Draco took a wary, nervous step back.

“Why?” Remus mumbled.

“If it ever mattered, it doesn’t now. Come, you’ve got to help Moody ward—”

“Isn’t he going to,” he said, blinking glassily, and he gripped the wall as if seeking a hold on the surface of reality. “He’s— they’ll kill him, won’t they. Sirius.”

“Lupin.” He gripped his wand, ten useless inches of hawthorn wood, dead to rights, while the man who could use his appeared to be visibly dissolving. “Professor Lupin. Take hold of yourself.”

Remus’s gasp trembled on the thin verge of a laugh and a cry. “The Dementors. If they find him. He hasn’t been able to do a Patronus in six months. The others don’t know. It’s the Kiss on sight, if they find him, and he *can’t do a Patronus.”*

“Listen to me. You need to help Moody ward the house.”

“Oi.”

It was Ginny. She stood in the mouth of the hallway, wand drawn, hair a riot of disturbed sleep. She elbowed him away from Remus and took her old professor by the sleeve. “He’s having a panic attack.”

“You say that like I failed to notice!”

“Bugger off and do something useful,” she ordered, eerily calm. “Go find Harry, make sure he doesn’t run off.”

“He’s not a dog,” said Draco uneasily, but he swept away from the shivering man, and the last he saw of them was Ginny kneeling to help Remus sit down.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione leaned over the second landing, a triptych of terrified bewilderment. When Hermione saw him, she let out a small sound, and then clapped her hand over her mouth, sagging against the railing. She clung to it, wild-eyed.

Draco looked up at them, at a loss for words, and drew a deep breath. As his mouth parted, the scream cut open the air.

It came trembling out of the bottom of the house. Ron reacted first, probably because he was the first to recognize it as Molly.

He and Harry shot down to the ground floor. Draco followed them into the drawing-room.

The pulsing strains of the scream made the room unreal, uncanny, like a dream or a vision; he almost floated in, with a calm, vivid clarity that he was about to witness something awful and inevitable.

In the drawing-room, Molly sank in front of the hearth, her hands clutching her chest, as if the scream were something coming out of it involuntarily, an angry creature pouring out of her body and swelling to suffocate the room. Bill and Fleur knelt with their arms wrapped around her shoulders, bracing Molly upright; through thick tears, Fleur was babbling in an inaudible slur of French.

In the hearth, Sirius and Tonks braced up the body of Arthur Weasley, whose chest shone red from the gash in his throat.

A pale blue sunrise was swelling over the London skyline before any of the Weasleys returned from St. Mungo’s.

There were hours of waiting, in the awful, eerie darkness of morning. Moody had closed the Floo, for safety’s sake, and warded the doors. Tonks made coffee, cleaned up the wrapping paper, checked the wards, went for a walk — twice — and then paced around the room juggling her wand until Moody snapped at her. Fleur sat in silence, her hands folded over her pendant.

Draco sat with his back to the cold glass of the window, letting the icy line against his neck keep him awake.

Hermione came down over and sat next to him, staring dully into the middle distance. He looked at her, and then at her hand, which had fallen on the seat between them.

She moved it closer to his, and then — still without looking at him — shifted along the bench until she leaned against him. Her head tipped against his shoulder.

He considered her hand, which had burrowed its way into his. Her fingers were so small, and her skin was so cold. Her nails were bitten short and uneven.

It was an awful endless morning, and the modicum of comfort was her weight against his shoulder, a stark contrast to the cold glass.

He flipped her hand over, raised it to his mouth, and pressed his lips to it. She gave a hard shudder.

There was a knock at the door. Sirius scrambled to get it.

When Bill stumbled through the door, the room rose to its feet.

“Dad’s alive,” he rasped.

The knot in Draco’s chest slackened. Hermione gave a quiet, powerful: “Oh,” and sank back down into the couch, clutching her head in her hands.

The twins slouched in behind Bill and wordlessly climbed the stairs. Charlie came in behind them and shut the door.

“How bad is it?” Moody asked gruffly.

“No idea. Bad,” said Bill. He rubbed his eyes. “Mum’s got a cot, and they’re letting the kids stick around… we’ve told them Harry’s a cousin, so he’s ‘Lancel Prewett,’ if anyone asks. Ron’s idea, and thank Merlin he was quick… Mum was so out of it she almost put him down in the guestbook as Harry Potter.”

“Disguises?”

“Glamoured birthmark on the scar, Hair-Lengthening Charm, and he took off his glasses.”

“What’d you tell the healers?”

“He tried to break up a street duel on Knockturn.”

“Any aurors come looking? Unspeakables?”

“Fleur Obliviated the ones who saw us.”

“Good thinking,” Mad-Eye muttered. He shook Bill’s hand. “Well done, boy.”

“Thanks,” said Bill, without joy.

“Thank God for you, and your luck,” whispered Sirius. He made to take Bill’s hand, too, but Bill didn’t acknowledge him.

“I’m exhausted. I’m going to sleep,” he muttered. “Wake me up if the house is burning.”

And he left Sirius empty-handed in the foyer.

Time stretched and ribboned out in strange ways over the course of the next few days. It seemed like he had been at Grimmauld Place for weeks, picked at a dozen breakfasts of burned toast and watery porridge, while Charlie and Tonks clucked over the coffee pot; as if he had stumbled a dozen times into a spare bedroom, collapsed on the coverlet, and slept without removing his shoes; and a dozen times arisen, bleary, when the sun had nearly set again, for a small, somber tea with Moody, Fleur, and Sirius in the drawing-room.

Harry and Ron returned from St. Mungo’s the next day, followed by Ginny and Molly the next, and all of them prowled around the house in a state of tense, fretful shell shock. The twins said little and laughed less, and their faces became almost unrecognizable without

their usual smirks. Fleur prayed, often, with her hands clasped around the pendant of her necklace.

None of Arthur's children would speak to Sirius. Molly would, if needed, address him in clipped tones about some odd job around the house that wanted doing, but usually communicated using Harry as an envoy. Fred and George refused to sit at the same table as him; Bill and Charlie would leave any room he entered; Ron never crossed paths without sending him a nasty look. Of all of them, Ginny was the most forgiving; though she had dutifully adopted her siblings' vow of silence, she seemed conflicted about it.

Draco preferred even this dour, eerie Number Twelve to the Manor as he'd left it. For Twelve was never silent, not even under the shroud of Arthur's injury, and there was always something to do to take one's mind off the obvious: namely, cleaning. The mansion contained an inexhaustible hoard of cupboards to be emptied, windows to be wiped, cobwebs to be cleared, silver to be polished (though he pointed out, somewhat waspishly, that there was piquant irony in being ordered by Molly to polish his *own* family silver).

He wrote to his mother, telling her he would stay a few days more with the Weasleys, but did not write why. No answer came, so he adopted her silence as consent, and if it put him in a foul mood to hear nothing from her, then he was in plenty of company.

The work was good for all of them; it gave them something to do, especially Ron, who took to it with a focus he usually reserved for chess games and quidditch, and not labor of any sort. The boy who loped around Gryffindor Tower with a crook in his grin and a joke for everyone was sealed now behind a hard line of a mouth and a dull, muttered answer to every question. Harry stuck close to him, as did Hermione and his brothers, but the more people tried to comfort him, the more he pulled away — offended by their comfort because it reminded him of what he had to be comforted for, and in so doing dragged him headfirst back into consideration of what he had to be afraid of. Resentment at this curdled any gratitude for their comfort — one tending to resent, rather than savor, the need to thank

someone who had rendered an unhelpful service — and so he became snappish and withdrawn. It seemed to Draco that the best thing to do was to afford him the privacy he needed to pretend that nothing was happening, for as long as he needed to, until he could face it head-on — self-deceit in the face of tragedy being, in his experience, not cowardice, but a chance to marshal one's strength.

He found Ron once curled on the window-seat in his bedroom, head bent against the glass in obvious contemplation, and though Draco had been sent to bring him down for dinner, Ron's posture made it obvious he had no interest in food nor disturbances. Draco made at once to retreat, but Ron noticed the movement of the door, and called out to him.

"That you, Draco?"

Draco reluctantly revealed himself. Ron sat with his shoulders hunched over his drawn-up knees, and he seemed withered and shrunken, his great height reduced to a boyish size.

"Can I ask you something?" he said apprehensively.

"You can ask. I may even answer."

"Right. Okay."

His jaw worked with the effort of formulating the question. Draco shut the door behind him.

"When your dad died," Ron said, "would you have wanted to know as soon as it happened? Or would you have wanted them to hold off on telling you as long as you could, so it'd be like — he was alive a bit longer, you reckon?"

Draco did not reply at once. The snow on the window left a pale glow on the carpet, reflected light from a thin London sun.

“My father was murdered by my aunt,” he said. “Our situations differ somewhat.”

“Yeah, but hypothetically — and I’m sorry for bringing the shit up, but I don’t know anyone else whose dad’s died.”

Draco raised his eyebrow.

“I can’t ask Harry,” Ron said quietly. “He doesn’t remember his dad. S’different.”

Draco acknowledged it, and set his brow in consideration.

“When I was eight,” he said, “freshly eight — perhaps a month or two after my birthday — my mother took me into the study and told me what happened to my father. I don’t remember what she said precisely, or when. It wouldn’t have mattered. In the long run, it’s only the beginning.”

“But—”

“It takes months for the idea of it to settle in,” he said. “And years before you stop forgetting.”

“When’d you manage it?” said Ron. “When’d you stop forgetting that he was — you know?”

He shrugged. “Fathers are long in the dying,” he said.

Ron swallowed. “I see,” he said, and turned back to the window.

Draco felt that he had failed to render a vague but important service.

For a few weeks after his father’s funeral, Draco had been given to bouts of crying, and so he’d locked himself in one of the little house-elf cubby-holes under the kitchen, which were too small for grown wizards to enter. It had felt a great shame to cry, after his mother had asked him to be strong about it, so he’d tried to stop by pinching himself, and made Dobby promise not to tell.

He recoiled from the prospect of telling this to Ron; it would help nothing to suggest that Ron was the object of his pity or compassion, both of which he already received from others, and by all appearances resented. He also recoiled from the words that would have expressed what they both knew, which was that Ron faced the prospect of a shared tragedy, and Draco was the only person in the house who could lend credence to the lie Ron wanted to hear: that things would be alright, somehow, eventually, if Arthur died.

“Look, Ronald.”

Ron raised his eyes in a start: his posture, his shabby shirt, his raw-bitten nails, and the red lines trawling around his eyes, all begged for a better answer than the one Draco had given.

“For one thing, he may not die,” he said. “It doesn’t do to mourn before you have to. And when he does, it’ll be a question of courage. Between the two of us, you’ve more courage at fifteen than I did at eight.”

“I don’t have courage for that,” said Ron hoarsely. “I’m not you. I couldn’t — do whatever you do. To live with it. To just — lock it up, and push on, like nothing happened. That’s not the way I am.”

Unexpectedly, it stung. Draco crooked his little finger, pressing the band of his signet deeper into the skin. He thought of empty rooms, and empty doors, and a cold, rainy day where a man had gone into the earth forever. He thought of his anger walking into those rooms, and vanishing behind the wide black doors, or being swallowed by the dead wet earth, and suddenly it was easy to speak without emotion.

“Why do you think it’s the way I am?” he said quietly.

Ron paused. When he spoke again, it was thin and wavering.

“I don’t want to be like that,” he said. *Like you,* he didn’t say.

Draco dipped his head. His acknowledgement of Ron's point was silent, and Ron's plea to be disagreed with was silent, too.

"I would bet a monumental sum of money," he said at length, "that so long as we live or endure in living memory, no one will ever remark that Ronald Weasley reminded them of me."

There was a beat. Then Ron threw back his head and laughed.

"You're bloody right," he said. "Oh, you're bloody well right about that, at least. You tosser."

"Ingrate," said Draco, which made Ron snort and laugh harder.

But it was a laugh of relief, not humor, and it did not last long.

Meanwhile, Remus had sequestered himself in one of the guest rooms, and would speak to no one. That included Sirius, who had after several excruciating days ceased trying to get Remus to talk to him, and now communicated through forlorn stares and deliberate, hopeful remarks addressed to no one, but pointed in Remus's general direction. Otherwise, he floated around the house, haggard and cringing, when he wasn't sleeping on the sofa in the drawing-room.

Harry took it, predictably, not well.

"Give it time," said Hermione.

"But they don't even talk to each other."

"So?" said Ron brusquely, dealing out another hand of cribbage. Hermione was forcing them to learn muggle card games because she was sick of losing at Snap. "Serves him right. Fucker."

Harry cringed. Hermione rubbed his shoulder comfortingly.

"He just wanted a bit of fresh air," he muttered. "A bit of freedom. On Christmas."

“Bet my father wants some fresh air,” said Ron, in light, clipped tones. “In St. Mungo's.”

The conversation keeled over from the force of this blow, and did not recover.

“My parents fight, too,” Hermione said quietly to Harry. “Once fought for three months, actually.”

He folded his hand over hers, smiling weakly.

Draco couldn’t remember if his parents had ever fought. Surely they had tiffs; his mother aggressed obliquely over the soup course, and his father made a discerning implication over dessert; but fights, when they happened, had taken place behind closed doors.

He wondered what his father’s anger had looked like. If it looked like his own. If it had felt like his own.

He wondered how it would feel to know for certain that you had your father’s rage. Then he wondered if it weren’t better not to know.

“Bet it wasn’t over something like this, though,” said Harry.

“No. It was over sending me to Hogwarts.”

Silence descended.

“My mother said no. My father said yes. She was unhappy, but she came around to his way of thinking.” She shrugged. “In her defense, my life would've been less eventful if I’d gone to Cheltenham.”

“And mine would be a lot shorter,” said Ron. “Tell your dad thanks for me.”

She laughed. Ron practically glowed, and tried to hide his pleasure by dealing out the next hand with such vigor that a card ended up on the other side of the room.

“So,” said Ron, “you like your Christmas present? The perfume?”

“It’s nice,” she said hesitantly. “I’ve never had any before.”

“Well, good. You like the smell, though? I made Ginny pick it out, but she isn’t much of a girl.”

“She wouldn’t like you saying that,” said Harry.

“Yeah, which is why you won’t be telling her, Harry.”

“It’s a very nice smell,” said Hermione primly. “The perfume. It’s clean. Like soap. Thank you.”

She tapped her cards even on the floor and began organizing them. She avoided eye contact, including Draco’s, whose stomach twisted in a bitter, irrational way.

He despised this part of fancying her: the meagerness, the pettiness. Knowing that the feelings were reciprocated should have banished this sort of feeling — an aggression that verged on nervousness, as if Ron even looking at her in that worshipful way was a threat that needed to be dealt with. He hated the idea of her going around smelling like something Ron had given her, and hated doubly the fact that the idea of it so colonized the forefront of his brain, ineradicable, a permanent installation of discomfort. He hated most of all the way Ron sat there satisfied with himself, as if he’d won some sort of prize.

They played another hand, and Draco excused himself. Hermione looked up as he went, and he felt the weight of her uneasy stare follow him out the door.

If they had any time alone together, it might have been easier. But in Grimmauld Place, one was never more than fifteen minutes from their next encounter with a Weasley, and the four of them were spending so much time together that pulling her away for a private conversation felt like a public declaration of intent.

The closest they'd come to communication was a fleeting encounter when she was coming out of the room she shared with Ginny, near the bottom of Regulus's staircase, and he met her on the landing; she had touched his forearm as he passed, her fingers grazing the curve of his elbow, and he stopped short, as if some invisible cord in his navel had wrenched him back.

"Are you alright?" she said in a low voice.

He found his heart in his throat for some reason. "Fine," he said. "Better than most, I should think."

"It's a good thing you were awake to raise the alarm. I don't know what would have happened to Sirius, otherwise."

"I don't know that we would have ever found out."

She shivered. "It's awful," she said in a hard voice. "I can't imagine what it would've done to Lupin. Or worse, to Harry."

"Inconsiderate, to be sure, but paltry in comparison to what he'd have done to the rest of us."

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose he'd led someone back to Grimmauld Place. He's master of the house. If he brings someone through the wards, they could have brought the whole Ministry in after them. Not to mention he made us sitting ducks when he left the house — there are certain wards that only activate when the master's at home. Black could have murdered us."

"See, but I don't understand why he has to be the master. He hates this place. Why can't he just give it to someone else? To Mad-Eye, or Remus, even—"

"The laws don't work that way."

“You can't *sell property* in wizarding Britain? How classically medieval. ”

“You can,” he said, mouth twitching, “but not a family seat. They're magically entailed. It's his until he dies, and then it passes to his lawful heir, or whomever he names in his will.”

“Who's the lawful heir?”

He raised his eyebrows and smirked at her.

“You're joking,” she exclaimed.

“Through my mother, but yes.”

“Is there *anything* your family doesn't own?”

“We're working on it.”

“There should be laws against that,” she said, aggrieved.

“What? Against me?”

“Yes, exactly. Against Draco Malfoy. An exile decree for gross accumulation of wealth.”

“Tsk. You'd be miserable.”

“I would get so much work done,” she said, with a distant gleam of longing.

He laughed. Her mouth twitched up, and she watched him with an exasperated sort of pleasure. She lifted her eyes, and drawn close in the dim torchlight of the landing, her proximity flickered through his awareness like a warm wave.

Footsteps battered the stairs below them. “Hey, Hermione?” called Ron. “Come help with something, would you? There’s some old runes on the silver we found in the basement…”

She closed her eyes in a fleeting, minute gesture of exasperation. Draco jerked his head in invitation, and she drew away, calling out: “You know, if you’d *taken* Runes, like I *told* you to *two years ago,* you could translate them yourself!”

“But I’m no good at them!”

“How would you know?” Her voice faded down the stairwell. “You never tried!”

That had been several days ago. Now, the same landing was quite empty, and Draco swept through it with the memory of their last private moment, fleeting as it was, itching in his head.

Rounding the corner, he nearly tripped over Sirius, who was taking a chisel and hammer to one of the mounted elf heads on the wall.

He was whaling at it ferociously. Sawdust clouds sprang up wherever the hammer landed, which was not always proximate to the chisel.

Draco stood back and watched him, slipping his hands into his pockets.

“Putting holes in my house, Black?”

“Not your anything. This is *my* dusty — old — stinking — shithole. Get your own.”

“Only until you’re dead. Based on recent events, I won’t have to wait long.”

Sirius missed the chisel, struck his finger, and swore loudly.

“Mad-Eye’s right. I really should see someone about a will.”

“You don’t want to do your dear cousin a good turn?” said Draco, mockingly. Sirius flashed him a look of warning.

“You’re set to inherit two haunted houses already, kiddie. It’s a kindness to spare you another.”

Draco leaned against the wall. “How did they find you?” he said coldly. “When you left. Where did you go?”

“Godric's Hollow.” Sirius gave the hammer another swing. “Had some friends I wanted to visit.”

“Friends more important than our lives?”

The hammer paused. Sirius rolled his shoulder, face hidden under the long shag of his hair.

“You never knew them,” he said. “If you'd met them, you'd understand.”

“I doubt that very much.” He paused, and frowned. “Knew?”

Sirius smiled a terrible, bitter smile. “They're dead, you see. My friends,” he said. “And there's only one place to visit them.”

He swung the chisel. Wood snapped.

“But the Ministry's got it under surveillance,” he added briskly. “Heat detectors. Caterwauling Charms. Two patrolmen on watch. Makes sense, I guess. First place I'd look for me, too.”

“A very foolish man once told me that dead men can't be proud of you.”

Sirius barked a laugh.

“The difference between you and him is you've got a life ahead of you, lad,” he said. “And respectfully, your dead man wasn't worth half what mine was.”

“Perhaps, but they're equally dead,” said Draco coolly, and felt very little remorse when Sirius flinched. “And you're thirty-six. You have a

life ahead, too."

"I had a life before," said Sirius. "And it was very nearly perfect, for a while there."

He hefted the hammer. A ribbon of tattoos stretched and pulled on the weathered skin of his arm. Then he swung the chisel again.

The elf-head broke off the wall in a firework of sawdust.

"There we are. One down, only nineteen… twenty… only twenty-two."

"You're surely not doing all of them."

"All of them. Plus the severed hands in the master bedroom."

"The what?"

"The master bedroom, I said. Then I'm taking down all the crests. And that tapestry of the muggle-born hunt upstairs."

"Do you intend to refurbish your way into Lupin's good graces?"

"I intend to make this house half livable. If I happen to blow parts of it up in the process, that's a bonus." He lined up the chisel on the next elf-head. "And don't you worry about Moony. He and I have come back from worse than this."

The stairs creaked. Harry, Ron, and Hermione appeared on the landing.

"Draco. There you are," Ron clipped out. He gave no sign of acknowledgement to Sirius. "Dad woke up. Tonks is taking us to see him. You're coming. C'mon."

"I thought they only permitted family visitation," said Draco.

“Yeah, and the Order’s got this really clever workaround for that,” agreed Ron. “It’s called lying.”

“You can be Pisscock Prewett the Third,” said Harry. “Hey, Sirius.”

“'Lo, kid,” said Sirius, smiling unsteadily. “How are you, now?”

“I'm fine. Why are you covered in sawdust?”

“Renovating, boy-o. Gonna build you a bedroom that doesn't smell like old dog.”

“Aw, but it just won't feel like home.”

“Never mind. You can sleep in the house-elf cubbies.”

Ron cleared his throat. Sirius straightened up.

“How is he?” said Sirius. “Arthur.”

Any levity evaporated like fog in sunlight. Wordlessly, Ron turned around and went down the stairs. Hermione called out his name, sighed, and then followed with a lingering glance at Sirius.

“He’s okay,” said Harry, once he was gone. But it wasn’t clear whom he meant.

The Floo at St. Mungo’s was emergencies-only, so they made their way on foot through London — a fact that Draco wished someone had done him the generosity of mentioning before he agreed to the visit.

The rest of them were wearing muggle costume, concessions to Mad-Eye’s preference for subterfuge; somehow, only Hermione managed to make this seem remotely presentable. Draco had vocally rejected an offer to borrow Bill’s muggle jeans, and so his costume consisted of a coat borrowed from Sirius, a sweeping double-breasted leather thing that somehow felt both more and less

pretentious than a cloak. It smelled of patchouli oil and cheap cologne.

He complained of the situation, in his opinion, a normal amount.

“It’s just the Tube,” muttered Hermione. “You’re not being made to crawl through the snow.”

“Nothing I have ever known about muggle transportation leads me to imagine I will enjoy one more than the other.”

“Stop being fussy. It’s an English institution.”

“As is the practice of hanging,” he said, and she laughed a little.

That laugh was some consolation, anyway. It was the first good one she’d given in a while, loud and un-self-consciously grating. It was snowing, and when she tipped back her head the snowflakes beaded in tiny crystals on her eyelashes.

The group ventured down a narrow, dirty stairwell that appeared to serve a double purpose as a public toilet, and into a wide underground cave with silver turnstiles. A train came screaming out of oblivion with a sound that Draco would have assumed meant the station was collapsing were it not for the other passengers’ indifference, and Tonks herded them all into one carriage. Draco ended up wedged against one of the poles, a stranger flush to his back, Hermione pressed into the space under his arm.

The whole thing was a real gallimaufry of sensations.

“Hold on to something,” said Hermione, elbowing him.

“I don’t need coddling, thank you.”

“Fine. Suit yourself.”

This light tone, from Hermione, was a sure sign that you were about to screw yourself over with power and efficiency; but he didn’t have

time to follow up.

With a howl, the train lurched forward, and he nearly flew.

He would have, anyway, if there had been any room in the carriage to fly. As it was, he was vaulted almost horizontal to the floor, caught himself on the pole, and headbutted someone in the shoulder. They gave him a look he would personally have reserved for someone engaging in vigorous public sodomy.

Hermione was visibly wrestling with herself.

“Don’t say it.”

“I’m not.”

“Good.”

“I’m not!”

“And that’s good.”

“But if I *were* to say it—”

“Here we go.”

“I mean if someone, hypothetically, were to have told you so—”

“You get one more warning.”

“—then that someone would be me. Telling you so. Because, as it happens, just a few seconds ago—”

“Before you speak, remember that at some point in the future, you may find yourself a passenger on a broomstick I’m operating,” he said, “and I advise you to choose your words with the level of grace you expect to receive.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she said gaily, and brushed past him on the way out of the carriage with a smirk.

He followed her, strongly resentful of the fact that the universe let her win so many arguments, which was terrible for her ego, and even worse for his own.

They emerged from a station by Tottenham, and made their way up through the glut of shoppers and tourist crowds, winding a long, mostly ginger caravan through the bustling pavements of London. Billboards twinkled and automobiles whisked past in a blur of glittering lights and hammering, industrial sounds, the same old unnerving roar of life. Mist and falling snow bled the streets into astigmatic streaks of scarlet and yellow.

Hermione cut briskly through the crowd. There was a seeming logic to pedestrian city-travel that she and Harry understood, and so they drifted naturally to the front of the group, while the others trailed behind, buffered by the strange and seemingly unpatterned flow of harried shoppers charging up and down the streets.

Outside a shabby brick department store called Purge and Dowse, Tonks stepped up to the glass and began muttering something. Brown paper walled up most of the windows, and the sign on the doors read CLOSED FOR REFURBISHMENT.

As they waited for Tonks to finish whatever she was doing, a well-dressed muggle on the pavement ran headfirst into Mad-Eye, nearly toppled over, and then stalked off without apologizing, wearing a dazed expression.

“Real nice, tosser,” shouted Ginny, and was *shush*- ed by four people.

“Not his fault. Notice-Me-Nots,” growled Mad-Eye. “Not to mention muggle repellent charms. Can’t hardly see in front of his nose around this place.”

The glass panel of the windowfront gave a shudder and slid back, emptying a bath of warm air and yellow light onto the street. Whistling cheerfully, Tonks led them into the waiting room of St. Mungo's.

Inside, past a dismal foyer populated by wailing miserables, fluorescent lights paved rows of checkered tile floors. Arthur's bed was in the short-term ward, a marble chamber with frosted windows and a dozen beds separated by red curtains. Some of the other beds had curtains drawn, and from inside came the occasional rasp, wheeze, or moan that indicated the condition of its occupant. Arthur's, in contrast, was silent. He laid back on a bed of shock-white sheets, his skin a ghastly, unrealistic shade of pale, with a thick collar of bandages around his throat.

Molly sat in a chair by her husband's shoulder, holding his hand in a grip that could have resisted hurricanes. Her children filed in with uncharacteristic gravitas and stood in an awkward semicircle around the sickbed, exhibiting the range of expressions from stoicism to full-throated distress.

Ron made an involuntary noise. Harry put a hand on his shoulder.

Arthur stirred when they all came parading in, and his eyes slitted open.

"Hi, Dad," croaked Ginny. She clambered onto the foot of his bed and sat on her knees, ignoring her mother's hiss of discouragement. "How — how are you?"

Arthur smiled. With effort, he made a fist, thumb jutting upright.

"Yeah? Nice gig, eh? Having a good lie-in?"

He nodded.

"Nurses got you sorted? Are they all terrified of Mum yet? Blink once if she's cussed them out."

Arthur blinked twice, waggling his eyebrows, and then fumbled for some object on the side table. Fred hurried forward and passed it into his hands: a yellow legal pad.

Arthur carefully extricated his right hand from Molly's grip. His fingers were shaking.

"What's wrong with him?" Ron demanded. "Can't he talk?"

"Ron!" said Molly.

"What? I don't know! No one's told me fuck—"

"Language!"

"The curse severed his vocal cords," said Mad-Eye brusquely.

Ron choked.

At length, he said: "Well — are they — are they gonna grow back?"

No one answered him.

"We'll see," Bill said finally. "They've done some reparative spells, but we won't know until it's fully healed. He's meant to wait two weeks before trying to talk again, to give it time to rest."

"Oh." Ron cleared his throat. "And — how do they like those chances? The healers?"

This time, not even Bill spoke up.

"Doctors tend to err on the side of caution," said Hermione hesitantly. She qualmed when the attention of the Weasleys fell intensely on her. "In the muggle world. It's far worse to be disappointed than pleasantly surprised."

"Children," said Molly, "why don't you go—"

There was a loud collision of words and limbs by the door. Someone was trying to force their way into the ward, and the assistant healers were being rewarded for their diligence by getting verbally trampled by a bureaucrat.

“—know who I *am?* Senior assistant to the chief secretary of Lord Rookwood, that’s *chief* secretary, remember—”

“Oh, God,” said Molly faintly. “Percy.”

“Percy,” Bill said grimly. “Stay here. I’ll get him to leave.”

“Don’t! Let him in!”

“Let him in?” Ginny said. “Are you joking?”

But Bill stepped aside. Percy swept inside with great purpose, and yet stumbled to a halt before the crowd at his father’s bed.

George, of all people, was the one to break the silence.

“Afternoon, Comrade Weasley,” he chirped. “Shoot any good dissidents lately?”

Percy’s lip curled. “Do you have any idea who you’re talking to?” he said.

“No,” said George. “Not anymore, I don’t think.”

Everyone had been expecting a joke; the lack of one dropped like a stone and punctured the conversation, opening a black well of silence.

“George,” said Percy, affronted. “Merlin’s sakes. I— you — you would do well to mind your tongue.”

“Is that a threat?” Ginny snapped, scrambling to her feet, and Harry barely grabbed her in time to stop her from vaulting Arthur’s bed.

Percy sneered. “Molly, please inform your daughter that when she addresses a Ministry official, she should do so in tones of respect.”

“Don’t call her ‘Molly,’ you twat,” said Bill.

For a second, Percy’s sneer flickered, broken up by the cringing shame of a younger brother being castigated by the older.

And still, there was something unserious in the way Bill spoke: as if he couldn’t quite muster the same disgust or frustration that the others could. The way he spoke suggested he found nothing threatening or surprising about Percy at all — the third son, second even among middle children; the first to be no one’s favorite, too late to impress, and too early to be a darling.

Fred’s mouth twisted into a crooked, lightless smile. “Bless him, he thinks he’s important,” he said coolly. “You know, that always was your problem, Perce. You never could figure out how to make people care.”

Critical hit. Percy opened his mouth and nothing came out but a faint choking noise.

“Enough!” Molly cried. “Out! In fact, *all* of you, out! Percy wants to talk to his father!”

“Must have said that awfully quick, because I didn’t catch it,” said George. He hip-checked Percy on his way to the door. “Speak up next time.”

“Or don’t,” said Fred, jostling his other side.

Ron said nothing, but stalked past Percy with his hands in his pockets.

“Mum,” Ginny began.

“Harry, take Ginny and go, please,” Molly said brusquely.

Ginny rounded on Harry with an expression that told him very clearly what a bad idea this would be, and his expression assured her that he believed her.

“Now, young lady! Out!”

“No!” Ginny shouted. “He’s a pig!”

Percy flinched.

“Ginevra! Percy, don’t listen to her—”

“Don’t apologize to him! He’s a traitor! He works for the people who killed Viktor Krum! He might as well have cast the curse himself — and you would’ve, wouldn’t you, Percy? If your beloved Minister asked you to? Viktor Krum or any other little boy—”

“Ginny,” Bill said. “Don’t.”

She faltered for only an instant. “Fine! Here’s what he *did* do: he sent back his jumper! One week ago, he did that! No note, nothing! No? Not enough? How about this: he called Harry a murderer!”

“Don’t,” said Harry. “This isn’t about me, don’t — not for me.”

She whirled on him. “Yes, for you,” she said furiously, “always, deal with it, I don’t care what you want or what you think — *nobody* gets to — no one — and anyway, he *hates us!* Does no one else care? Why is he still here? Somebody *listen to me!”*

Molly was the color of her husband’s hospital bed. “Ginny Weasley,” she said, “if you don’t lower your voice, so help me Merlin, you will be headed straight home, and you will stay there until you go back to Hogwarts.”

“You’re kicking *me* out? Me? Me! Not him!”

“Your brother isn’t the one causing a scene!”

Hermione caught his arm, and they began to slip out of the room.

“He hasn’t even apologized, and you’re letting him slither back in like he’s brought the sodding cavalry! You want him to like you so much you don’t even care that he hates us, all of us, because we’re not the rich, prissy family *he* wanted! Because *you’re* not the rich, prissy mum he wanted! You get that, don’t you? *He doesn’t like you!* Letting him treat the rest of us like rubbish he can pick up whenever he wants won’t make him love you, it’s just — it’s fucking pathetic!”

Arthur slammed his fist into the bedframe. It rattled.

Percy made a noise like he’d been slapped. This was nothing compared to Molly’s silence, however.

Ginny broke off, her whole body heaving. Very slowly, Arthur set his jaw, and shook his head at his daughter.

“Never mind,” Ginny said bleakly. “I’m leaving.”

She ran out. Bill reached for her as she went, but she brushed him off.

It was something of a scramble to catch up with Ginny, who was moving like someone on a footrace out of hell. Harry was the fastest, and caught her arm as she slammed open the door to the stairs. They vanished, and the door had nearly closed before Draco caught up with them.

In the high, echoey chamber of the stairwell, he caught Harry’s and Ginny’s voices trailing up from the staircase below.

“—won’t do any good, seriously—”

“—do a lot of good, actually, to pop him one—”

“Ginny, c’mon. It’s Percy.”

Draco paused with his foot on the first stair. Hermione came skidding into the stairwell, and he held out his arm, freezing her.

That was the last he heard, and he was glad of it. The door to the stairwell clicked behind him, louder than he would have liked, and he had only just teed up a suitably apropos change-of-subject when the door to Arthur's ward opened — *opened* was an inaccurately pacific word, but 'exploded' implied some kind of dynamic force — and unleashed a hurricane of bureaucrat into the hallway. There were voices, far too many to pick out, but in the same shrill frustrated overlay of people running verbal trains right past each other, and listening not at all.

"—can tell your *Lord Selwyn* to kiss a dementor, while he's at it—"

"I shouldn't have wasted my time!" Percy slammed the door behind him — but, thinking better of it, he spun back around, ripped the door open, and emptied his lungs into it. "Do you think I came because I didn't have anything better to do? Do you think I rescheduled four meetings, two lunches, and tea with the Undersecretary of Law Enforcement so that I could have the pleasure of enduring your lectures?"

"Sir, you're disturbing the other patients."

"Hang the other patients! You shouldn't have put my father in a ward with them anyway! Do you know who I am?"

A triage of shouting rendered itself indistinct.

The lift whispered open, and Hermione tugged Draco inside. She jabbed two buttons at random, and the doors closed on the sight of Percy shouting at a pair of nurses, his face nearly purple.

Hermione took a hesitant breath, and glanced at him. Her expression revealed a great depth of thought, but no great eagerness to speak. He nodded in agreement. The affairs of the Weasley family, though inescapable in such close quarters, remained a matter in his view

best handled by Weasleys, and he lacked both tools and appetite to dissect them. They turned forward again in stony silence.

He had thought to visit the ground floor — upon leaving, he had vaguely identified a destination of ‘anywhere the fuck else’ — but the lift deposited them in a large, airy space filled with the pale light that poured from a clouded skylight. It bathed an interior of thick greenery, feathered with ferns and trawling vines, clambering up and over the buttressing walls of planters each grand enough to fit Hagrid’s garden entire, with runnels of palm and dogwood latticing over the centerpiece of a wide, sculpted marble fountain. An alabaster wizard poured water from each of his outstretched palms, and a pair of stone house-elves crouched at his feet, weeping four more streams that traced the contours of their sculpted rags. A brass plaque by the doorway identified it as the Parkinson Family Reflection Garden.

In the shadow of the fountain, a girl sat in a chair. She was small and slight, with yellow ringlets that hung in a thick dandelion fluff around her ears. She was wearing a blue hospital gown, and her tiny white ankles protruded from the gown’s hem like a pair of bony bird feet.

Hermione’s footsteps dappled the stone behind him.

“Draco, this isn’t — oh.”

Astoria sat up at the sound of voices. She executed the classic face-scrub of someone banishing tears.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded. “Are you ill, Draco?”

Hermione, whom Astoria could see perfectly well, made an exasperated noise in her throat.

“He’s fine,” she said. “We’re both visiting.”

“Oh,” she said. “Who?”

“An acquaintance. What are you doing here?”

Astoria held out her arm and revealed a long, clear tube spiraling up a vein in her wrist. “I got a new bloodbag today,” she announced. “They’re testing to see if it’s a match.”

“...Bloodbag?”

“My house-elf,” she said. “They breed them so they can give me transfusions.”

Hermione went very still.

“It’s not easy to breed a house-elf,” she said.

“No kidding!” Astoria said passionately. “They’ve taken so much of my blood I bet that thing’s part Greengrass! Mum didn’t even want to do it, she keeps saying how they’re full of diseases, but the healers said they keep the elves really clean.”

Hermione’s nails bit her palms and kept digging until the skin turned white.

“I meant that it requires a great deal of labor and capital,” he said. “Which is unusual, since you already have a genetic match.”

“Oh! But they won’t let me take Daffy’s anymore,” she exclaimed. “She didn’t send you to spy on me, did she?”

Hermione made a high, thin sound that might have been a laugh, but her jaw was clenched.

“And why can’t you get a transfusion from Daphne?”

Astoria frowned. “Because she’s not doing good.”

“Is that how your parents put it?”

“No, but—”

“And what did they say?”

“That Daffy’s sick,” recited Astoria dutifully. “Very sick, and if she touches me I’ll get sicker.” Rubbing her cheek, she muttered: “And she only hit me because she got moonsick from the halfbreed.”

“That’s not true,” Hermione snapped. Astoria jumped. “She’s perfectly safe to touch! And I should know, since I’ve shared a bathroom with her all year — which, just so you know, I would’ve done even if she *did* have lycanthropy, because I happen to have actually *read* about this disease your parents are so terrified of, and it’s transmitted through the bloodstream, not skin contact. Which, by the way, your parents almost certainly know, Astoria, because if I was them and *my* daughter came back with a werewolf bite, I’d have a lycanthropy specialist on my doorstep in an hour. And that’s another thing—”

“Stop yelling at me!”

“She hasn’t presented a single one of the five textbook lycanthropy symptoms besides heightened reflexes, which could very well be from the maladict going into remission, and chronic pain, which she had already—”

“I don’t know what that means!” wailed Astoria. “I don’t know what any of that means! Stop yelling!”

“—and in any case you have *no idea* how lycanthropy would interact with the blood condition because it’s a horrifically underfunded research area and there are! No! Studies! About cases like Daphne’s! And I should know! Because if your parents had *any* scientific basis for doing this to her, I would have read about it! Also —” She inhaled sharply. “Also: besides all that, Daphne is a *very* brave girl who’s been through a hell of a year, and she’s got it hard enough without her own family going around spreading lies behind her back.”

“It’s not *my* fault! She’s the one who doesn’t like us anymore!”

“Is that what Pansy Parkinson told you?”

“No! She didn’t need to! I know she hates us, everyone does!”

“She obviously loves you,” said Hermione impatiently. “She cried her eyes out after your fight in the Three Broomsticks.”

“Shut up! You’re lying! You just want me to forgive her.”

“For *what?”*

“For leaving!”

“For goodness’s sake,” Hermione snapped. “Leaving where? She’s still in Slytherin, she can’t very well leave it; she still takes all her classes with them, and I suppose she doesn’t sleep there, but you wouldn’t see her much anyway—”

“For leaving *me!”* Astoria shouted. “For getting sick of me! I always knew she hated me, I knew she hated coming back to our horrid empty house with her stupid baby sister, I knew she wanted to leave, she always did — I was the reason she couldn’t go to *stupid* France with *stupid* Draco, because *I* got hurt and she had to come back and give blood and she *hated* me for it, I know she did, I could tell from how she looked at me—”

“Astoria?”

“She wanted to run away and live with her pretty friends and forget all about me! I bet she wanted me to *die* just so she could finally go do what she wanted! She wanted me to shut up and lay down and *die,* she wanted me *dead,* she wanted to *kill* me—”

Astoria had shouted so hard she began to choke on her own spittle, and her tiny body trembled so hard it rocked the chair. But she slapped away Hermione’s efforts to help her with furious, violent strokes.

“Don’t touch me! Mudblood! Mudblood! Mudblood!”

Draco stepped between them and touched his wand.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Hermione quickly. “She doesn’t mean it. We should go.”

“Granger.”

“We’re upsetting her, and she won’t listen to me anyway. We should just go.”

She nearly dragged him back into the lift and jabbed a button. Astoria did not try to follow, but skulked back into the shade of the ferns, sneering at them as they left.

“She called you ‘mudblood,’” Draco said, by and by.

Hermione said reluctantly: “Yes, I heard her.”

“She shouldn’t have done that.”

His hand was still near his wand; she noticed it, and sighed.

“Well, jinxing her certainly wouldn’t have helped,” she said. “Though the thought is appreciated.”

“Jinxing her would have given her something to remember.”

“And it would confirm for her what she already suspects, which is that we hate her. Punishment only works if someone understands what they’ve done wrong.”

“Eleven is old enough to know what it means.”

“Eleven is also young enough to be forgiven for it.” Her look conveyed a stinging reminder. He narrowed his eyes.

“I was twelve, and you slapped me, if I recall.”

“Well, I shouldn’t have.”

“You should have done worse. Even I got off generously, but compared to Astoria Greengrass, the difference is stark—”

“I was thirteen, and I adored you,” she said tiredly. “Of course it was different. I cared what you thought of me more than anyone alive, and I couldn’t care less about what Astoria thinks of anything. I—”

The doors slivered open; he hit the button to stop them. The lift shuddered to a halt. Hermione frowned at him.

“What are you d—”

“Adored?” he demanded.

“Yes,” she said, faintly reddening. “Well, I told you that before— in the prefects’ bathroom, last year, you were my first friend, and I—”

“You said we were friends,” he said, blindsided. The world seemed to lilt on its axis. “You didn’t say *that.”*

“Oh. Well,” she said brusquely, “of course I had a bit of a crush. When your best friend is a boy, and he’s clever and top of the class, and a quidditch player, and he writes you lots of pretty letters, you can’t very well help — but it was a kid thing, you know, I was barely even a teenager yet, and I thought—”

“It would pass.”

“Yes.”

His heart slowed. “Did it?”

Hermione folded her arms as if bracing herself against a harsh wind.

“For a while,” she said.

“...And then?”

Her arms pressed tighter. She set her feet apart like a dueling stance.

“And then you came back in fourth year,” she said, “six inches taller and a bit less priggish. Shall we talk about something else?”

“Fine,” he said, and then they didn’t.

Hermione seemed about to compress herself into a single particle and blink out of existence. Her face was scrunched in the intensity of concentration that usually accompanied spellcasting.

“Would you consider,” she said, “perhaps, pressing the button—”

“You came back shorter and louder,” he said, “in fourth year.”

“I was *not—”*

“I kept thinking about your hair,” he said, apparently for dire lack of anything that wasn’t completely fucking insane.

Her shoulders slackened a fraction.

“My … hair?”

“Yes.”

“That doesn’t sound like a terribly… appealing… thing to think about.”

“Shows what you know,” he said, with feeling.

“Right. Okay. I — okay.” Her chest rose and fell deeply. “But that was a while ago.”

“Several decades, by my count.”

“Alright, that’s not — you’re being dramatic, but that’s still—”

“It’s a desperately long time to want to kiss someone, by any margin,” he said. “We should get some sort of award.”

She gave a twitch so powerful it was more of a jerk.

“For what?” she muttered, though she was still fidgeting with an anxious, awkward sort of pleasure. “Mucking it up so thoroughly?”

“Personally, I think I ought to have one for every day I didn’t kiss you,” he said, “and two for every day I haven’t, after the first time.”

That shut her up good and well. She stared at him, her mouth ajar, her eyes shining with a beautiful dark softness.

“Draco,” she said, with a gentleness in his name that made it neither wholly a reprimand nor a question. She had such a nice way with his name: a stress on the first syllable that edged slightly into a drawl, as if she were lowering a great weight slowly and surely into place, and then a consonant cut crisply at the back of the throat, her mouth closed around the *O* in the shape of a kiss.

“There isn’t time,” she said, almost whinging. “We’re in a lift in a — in a *hospital,* and everyone’s here, and we can’t—”

“I know all that. You think I don’t know that? There’s never time for anything.”

“There’ll be time when we get back to Hogwarts. Once everything’s calmed down a little, and everyone’s not so much on top of each other all the time. Then we can talk about — the relationship.”

He stiffened. “Objection,” he said tautly. “Remark is leadingly amorous.”

“Seriously? After you just said you wanted to kiss me—”

“On the grounds that your standing order was to be friends,” he said, with a look that made her flush.

“Friendship is a kind of relationship,” she said stubbornly, “and regardless, we are going to just — have a very complicated one. For now.”

“For now?”

She cleared her throat. “For now,” she said briskly, and punched the button to open the doors.

He almost forfeited his awards for the day then and there, but the lift’s doors shuddered open, and they were back in the hospital, and reality reasserted itself.

Arthur’s cot was laden heavily with gingers. Ginny had curled under her father’s arm, her head pressed against his collarbone, folded up like a girl much younger than she was; Molly grasped his hand tightly, and with her other she clasped Bill to her side. Ron and Harry stood at the foot of the bed, shoulder to shoulder with a dark-haired boy that Draco did not immediately recognize as Neville. The boy wore neither muggle clothes nor a Hogwarts uniform, but a set of starched-collar robes typical of a pureblood, which must have been his usual daywear. It aged him considerably.

“Hey, look who it is,” said Ron. His raised eyebrows asked a silent question that Draco, with a short shake of the head, declined to answer. “Get lost, you two?”

“Afraid so,” said Hermione lightly. She moved over to the far side of the bed and planted herself between Neville and Bill. “Had a bit of trouble with the lift.”

“Get stuck?” said Neville sympathetically. “Happened to m-m-me, too. The st-t-taff said it was on the fritz.”

“To say the least. We ended up running into Astoria Greengrass in the Reflection Garden. The more I learn about that family, the better I think of Daphne’s luck. Also: hello, Neville. You’re not ill, are you?”

If tact were counted in galleons, Hermione would be in a debtor's prison.

"Visiting my p-p-parents in the long-term ward," said Neville.

"Oh," she said awkwardly.

Ron glowered and elbowed her.

"Oh! I mean — are they — well, how are they?"

"Pretty g-g-good, thanks," said Neville gamely. "Mum recognized me, so. Good d-d-day."

"That's… that's great, Neville. I'm sorry for… I mean, I'm sorry that…"

"It's okay," he blurted. "It's fine. Hermione. Thanks? But um, uh… it's f-f-fine. Like, it's not fine, but it's fine? You know?"

"Yes. I — understand. Thanks. Sorry."

"Nothing to b-b-be sorry for," Neville said wistfully. "I just wish you'd got to meet them. It's naptime now, but if you'd come by earlier, you could've said hello. They love v-v-visitors, I think they get bored with j-just Gran around… she comes every day, but she's the only one — not that I'm glad you're here, obviously." He glanced at Arthur.

The fact of having one's parents on a nap schedule, in the hospital where they lived, was difficult to reconcile with the blitheness Neville displayed in talking about it. It was also difficult to reconcile with the rest of his personality, which Draco had heretofore taken for granted as dispositionally peaceable and affectionate, and which by a single stroke of comprehension — by recognizing at last and in full what Neville's childhood must have been like; how he had gone about every minute of every day of every year in Gryffindor Tower carrying the knowledge, for certainty, that his parents would never know or share in his victories, no matter how good he was, no matter how

great; to weather mockery by his peers for a stutter and a slouch he couldn't help, to accept blistering criticism for want of magical skill that his parents had never been able to teach him, and that his sole guardian had resented him for lacking; as if it was not Herculean endurance for him to plant his feet on the floor every morning and rise, let alone present the world with his earnest level best — when he gave everything he had to anything that was asked of him, and it was almost never enough — in short, recognizing the vast, complicated, existential fetters of grief that Neville had worn since birth — transformed the boy's friendliness into a tremendous, stubborn, deafening assertion of inner strength.

Unless he had known it for a fact, he would have doubted it was even possible to endure growing up as Neville Longbottom had. Much less to grow up as Neville Longbottom and still be gentle. To still be kind.

Draco decided that Neville was going to pass his Potions O.W.L.

"We met them," Ron piped up. "Prettiest bastards in the ward. Plus Granny Longbottom, who's a riot, by the way. You should've heard her talk about Neville. You'd think she had a kid with Merlin. And then *he* had a kid with Merlin."

Snow was falling outside the window, a silent, constant downfall of white flecks like the silver grains that trailed a Patronus. Draco followed it with his eye and shook the memory away. The room was turned pale and cool by the window's light. Someone had set up a wireless radio by Arthur's bedside, and the tinselly strains of Christmas carols commingled with the murmuring of visitors at other beds, and jingle of medical instruments, a busy hospital feeding a muffled drumbeat through the walls.

Without preamble, Arthur closed his eyes, and began to hum to the radio.

"Arthur! Arthur, stop that," Molly hissed. "Don't strain your voice. Arthur! The Healers told you not to!"

Next year, all our troubles will be miles away…

“Let him, Mum,” said Bill. “One song won’t make a difference.”

Until then…

When it finished, Arthur smiled at her, and pressed a kiss to her wrist. She sighed, wetly.

“...that was ‘Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,’ by Frank Sinatra, and boy, it sure was. Looking like it’ll be a white New Year, too, speaking of which: the Minister of Magic will be coming on to deliver his New Year’s Address at five, that’s five o’clock, set your watches, you won’t want to miss it. In the meantime, here’s one more holiday hit, getting it in just under the radar, seven hours early — check on your champagne bottles, fire up the fireworks, and get ready to ring in 1996 with me, your friend, your host, Juvenal Jordan — right here! Right now! On BBC Radio 'M.' Hit it, Guy.”

A syrupy coalition of horns wept through the speaker.

Hermione lifted her head. “It’s New Year’s Eve,” she murmured. “I don’t know why that surprised me. I suppose I’d forgotten.”

“Reckon I did too, but that’s me,” said Ron. He nudged her. “You know me, I’d forget anything. I’d forget my own last name. When *you* start forgetting things, that’s when we’re in trouble.”

She tried for a smile and failed. He faltered.

“Joking! Only joking. Easy mistake.” Then: “And I didn’t actually forget, anyway.” Another pause. “Well, I did, but I remembered. That is, I remembered I’d forgotten. And then I remembered what I forgot.”

“That’s nice, Ron.”

There was a small susurrus of obliging, grateful laughter. Ron gave a crooked smile, and Bill ruffled his hair. Harry put an arm around his shoulder, and they leaned together, like three of a set.

Arthur was humming again, and his echoes trilled harmonies against the ceiling of the ward.

Through the window, against the blue-black square of the last December sunset, the year 1995 was ending in a thousand tiny white shards.

For auld lang syne, my dear, for auld lang syne; we'll take a cup of kindness yet, for auld lang syne.

- Happy (belated) birthday to Hermione Granger! My beloved 44-year-old teenager.

- One of my favorite bits of all time is when two characters are like:

- character A: "you know, the [INSANE THING] in the [COMPLETELY MUNDANE THING]?"

- character B: "The What Now"

- character A: "you know, the [MUNDANE THING.] anyway,"

- I don't know what it is, but I will crack up every single time.

- Slight edit, for those of you with a keen eye: as of recent changes, Book 5 will now be 84 chapters instead of 81. The Table of Contents has been updated to reflect this fact. In other news, I blow through wordcounts like a municipally funded construction project blows through its budget, son.

- Settling cautiously into this biweekly update-schedule sort of thing; I'm still not confident enough in the editing process to commit to anything, but this feels good for now, at least until I've finished enough to go back to weekly updates. Thank you for being flexible and waiting with such good grace while I sort out what the hell it is I'm doing.

- If you've commented in the last few weeks, I hope that you get exactly as much sleep as you need tonight. If you're coming back to school this autumn, I hope you find all of your textbooks on a discount.

- See you in the next chapter! "The Deputy Special Inquisitor."

The Deputy Special Inquisitor

Chapter 72: The Deputy Special Inquisitor

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Two days before they left for Hogwarts, Remus left Grimmauld Place. He claimed he had a meeting with Dumbledore, but he told them not to wait up for him, and on the way out the door he said goodbye to Harry with a long, tight hug, as if he would not be seeing him again for some time. To Sirius, he gave a brisk handshake and a resounding silence. Sirius said nothing, but his restraint seemed visibly painful, and when the door shut behind him he spent some time staring at the thing as if he wished to destroy it.

Ron said, “Hope he’s alright out there,” his voice crystal cold. Sirius flinched. Harry shoved his hands deep in his pockets and said nothing.

Later that evening, Draco was coming downstairs when he heard a blur of voices coming from the drawing-room door. He stopped and retreated into the shadows of the corridor.

“ …honest with me. I’m your family, remember?” It was Tonks; her tone was weary, a bit softened by alcohol, not without understanding, and not without a grudge. “I’m just asking. Won’t judge. Why did you do it?”

“I told you already.” Sirius, noticeably thicker, slurring around the edges. “It was stupid. I fucked up. I fucked up because I’m a fuckup. That’s what I do, I fuck things up. You want to hear that? You want me to say it again?”

“I’m not asking you to confess your sins, mate. Just tell me the truth. Where’d you go?”

“I told you. The graves.”

“Yeah, but why?” Her voice had a tangible bite of frustration. “You loved them. I get it. But you also love Harry, right?”

“More than anything. More than myself.”

“You do. Okay. What do you think happens to him if you die, Sirius?”

“I trust Molly.” It was gruff. “She can be a right bint, but she's a better mother than I ever was a godfather. Arthur, too. They’ll care for him when I go.”

“Sure. What’s left of him, maybe.”

A chair screeched. Glasses clinked. “Besides the point,” said Tonks. “You knew the site was being surveilled. The graves, Godric’s Hollow, Privet Drive — they’re all red zones. Hotspots. 'Likely points of assembly.' Moody was clear.”

“You said you weren’t here to chastise me.”

“I’m not. I told you. I want to know why you did it.”

“Why do you care? Feeling sorry for your sad old cousin?”

“No.”

“Sore at me, then, now Moony’s gone? Or jealous? Were you *mooning* over him, too? He doesn’t go for birds, I’m sorry to say.”

“Stop embarrassing yourself,” said Tonks calmly. Suddenly the softness of the alcohol disappeared, and she spoke with a clear, low voice. “If you really want to know, Moody put me up to this. He wants to know if you’re a security risk. I’m looking for reasons to tell him you’re not.”

There was a pause.

“Somehow I’d forgotten,” said Sirius icily, “that my dear cousin works in espionage.”

“That was a mistake.”

Another pause.

“Well, fine. Let’s play that out. What happens if I am a security risk? You all find another hidey-hole? Pack up and clear out? Maybe Obliviate me for good measure?”

Tonks said nothing.

“Very funny,” said Sirius.

The nothingness stretched on, interminable.

“Nymphadora.”

“I answer to Alastair Moody,” she said. “I love you. You’re family. But I am loyal—”

“To Moody? I get it.”

“To the cause, Sirius.”

“They are the cause.” His voice was thick and hard.

Tonks set down her glass. Her voice shifted into a lower pitch. “Okay,” she said. “That tells me what I need to know, I think.”

“Wait. Nymphadora.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry. Moody hasn’t made a decision yet.”

“You want to know? I went because I thought I could do it. Listen to me. You weren’t alive for the first war. You didn’t know me then. I used to be — Tonks, I used to be bloody *incredible.* I was the best melée fighter in the Order. Second best duelist, after Moody. I taught James and Remus *both* how to duel. I trained with Merrythought and Tartover, advanced lessons. I trained with fucking *Bellatrix,* back when we were kids, if you can imagine that. I was the real thing.” He

grew hoarse. “Do they ever talk about me? What I did? I know the world thinks I’m a traitor, but — they have to remember, right? I killed Johannes Rosier in wand-to-wand combat. I brought down an aerial unit of hags with only Pettigrew for backup. I dueled Lucius Malfoy *and* Rodolphus Lestrange at the Battle of Stirling. Ripped his face open. Would have killed him, too, if we hadn’t retreated at the wrong damn time.”

His hairs stood at the mention of his father’s name.

“That was thirteen years ago.” Tonks’s tone was gentle with pity.

“I know. I know I’m not what I was. The point is: thirteen years ago, I could have taken a graveyard full of aurors. I could have taken a graveyard full of anything.”

A footstep creaked a board close to the door. Draco moved back, slipping further into the darkness.

“That’s why I went. Because I’m that good. And even if I’m not that good, I’m still better than you can afford to lose. You can put *that* in your little fucking spy assessment for Moody.”

“My little fucking spy assessment,” she repeated tonelessly, “currently finds that the ward master of the Order headquarters is a suicide risk.”

Footsteps thumped upstairs: two people, at least three. The two inside the drawing room went hushed as they passed. Draco pressed his back to the wall, pulse tripping.

The footsteps faded, and the silence of the old, dusty house resumed — a house so old that even its silences seemed to whisper, as if the shadows themselves teemed with the watching eyes of a forgotten past. The ominous echoes of anonymous movements overhead leant to the impression of a place where there were things happening out of sight, and perhaps even outside the realm of the real, the echolalia of the past teeming through the walls and beneath

the floorboards. Grimmauld Place had more ghosts than any building he’d ever known.

“Yeah?” said Sirius roughly. “Then you can tell him it’s a short-term problem.”

In the lavender gloom of a four o’clock sunset, the halls of the Hogwarts Express were quiet. Students moved about in slow, careful motions, fidgeting with their collars, wandering restlessly through the aisles. There seemed to be fewer people than there had been on the train away from Hogwarts, earlier that year.

Near the front of the train, most compartments were empty, save one. Hermione sat by herself in the prefects' compartment, perched on a seat by the window. Her journal was open in her lap, and she was fidgeting with her quill. The low winter light paved her face in a sheer, ghostly shade of purple, as if she was half-translucent.

He leaned against the window beside her. She glanced up, and her face slackened infinitesimally in relief. She kept watching the highlands slip past in a white blur.

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” she said. He knew what she meant, but he didn't answer. He could hear another thought swelling on her tongue.

“Arthur, I mean. In the hospital.”

“It was fairly gruesome.”

“Yes. No, though. Not that part. The blood, the injury, I don't mind all that.” Her nail bit deep into her cuticle, drawing blood. “I wish I'd used the phoenix tears. I wish I'd thought of it, before—”

“Wouldn't have worked.”

“No?”

“The tears aren't a panacea. They can heal lacerations and they're a potent antivenom. But Arthur's wound was cursed to regenerate. You'd have used them and it would have opened up again five minutes later.”

She swallowed. She seemed to be struggling against the temptation to feel relief. “I didn't know that then. For all I knew, it would have saved him. But I just froze up. I didn't think. Like always. I can never *think* of things like that when it's important, only afterwards. And what if he died? What if Arthur died, Draco?”

Hermione stared at him with a wide, wild stare that was deeply unused to not having all the answers.

“Then we would be having the same conversation. Because it still would not be your fault.”

It took a moment; but she nodded hesitantly, and turned back to the window.

“I feel sorry for Sirius, too.”

Draco set his jaw and tilted his head towards the window. His feelings about Sirius were complicated by many factors, one of which was the imposition of grave risk to his own life, Hermione's life, and almost every other life he generally worried about.

Another factor was the increasing suspicion that Sirius was not so very different from the person Narcissa thought he was, and the similarities between his and Draco's situations seemed much less comforting in light of that fact.

“I think he feels sorry enough for himself. He doesn't need our help.”

“You're right. And I'm not saying he's the victim here. Obviously, Arthur... and the Weasleys, Ron... *Molly...* but Sirius almost got someone killed. I can’t imagine how that would feel. If I had done it

—" Her breath hitched. "If I'd said something, even by accident, that put Harry in danger—"

He frowned. "You wouldn't make that kind of mistake."

"You sound so sure," she said tightly. "But you don't know that. I could make mistakes. I do make mistakes."

"Not that mistake."

"Not yet, but someday."

"You're not going to betray him." He pushed off the window and sat across from her, leaning forward on his knees. Her eyes flickered at him and fixed stubbornly on the hills. "What are you actually afraid of?"

"I'm afraid," she said, quietly, "of what Ron said. Last year. On — this train. Do you remember?"

"About protecting Potter?"

"Yes, but more than that, it was — Ron said this one thing," she said, knuckling her temples, "and I haven't been able to get it out of my head since. He said, 'if it's him or me, it's him.'" She screwed her eyes shut, her mouth a moue of unhappiness. "And over the summer, I thought: what if it *was* him or Ron? What if it really, actually was? Because Ron's absolutely right, he's totally, perfectly dead on, it's completely possible and even probable that at some point, in the next year or years or whatever it will be, there will be a situation where it's him or Ron. And I don't know what to do."

"I believe Ronald told you," he said, carefully, when no answer seemed forthcoming.

"But that's the thing! Isn't it? How can I *look* at Ron and think: 'I love you, and I'll protect you, and I'd take a curse for you, but you're second on my list.' Isn't — isn't that a betrayal? That's what our fight

last year was all about, wasn't it, the fact that we *shouldn't* think of each other that way? Because we're equals?"

"I doubt he'd have asked if he saw it that way."

"And — and besides that," she said frantically, "isn't it psychopathic? To be able to do that? I'm worried that if I can — if it comes to that, and I *can* do it, it means I wasn't… that I never really loved Ron, after all. To love someone, and still sacrifice them, it's — that's not love. At all. It's a contradiction in terms."

"No, it's not."

"How?" she demanded.

"Because they offered," he said.

The line between her brows deepened.

"I don't accept that," she said. "I don't care if it's given freely. I shouldn't ever get to — to *do* that, it's not fair, I shouldn't have that power — even if it's Harry or Ron, I — I mean, why not me? If it's my choice, if anything, I should be the one—"

"No."

She broke off, startled. The echo clung faintly to the walls.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't accept that."

"That's hypocritical," she said. "I mean — you can't tell me I need to make hard choices and then say I can't—"

"I don't care."

He was very cold.

She shrank into herself, pressing her knees together.

“You’re upset,” she said.

“Well spotted.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.”

“We can stop talking about it,” she said, stilted. “But I’ve — and I’m sorry, we’ll stop talking about it after this, but — you get my point, don’t you? If you’re upset just *thinking* about it happening, imagine how I’d feel, having done it — or if it was me or Harry, one way or another, it’s not like it would be easy for you—”

“Yes, it would.”

She twitched, a full-body thing, as if something deep in her recoiled at the idea. She stared at him in shock. His heart seemed to graze his ribs each time it beat, a little rasp of pain.

“Don’t say that,” she said, and it wasn’t just anger in her voice, but a thin pall of fear. “I don’t — like that. I don’t want to know that. That’s an awful thing to say.”

“It’s the truth.” The train slipped through a copse of trees, and the windows turned black. “I’m sorry if you don’t like it. But I also don’t really care.”

Her stare hardened.

“it’s not just about Harry, you realize,” she said sharply, by and by. “He's my best friend, and if I lost him I’d probably lose my mind. But there’s another level here, which is that he’s the Boy Who Lived, and if that business with the twin cores and the blood protection means anything, then there’s a good chance he’s the only person who can kill Voldemort. Making him quite literally the *only* hope for the future.”

“You’re right, of course,” he said. “I’m aware of all that. But I don’t know why you think it matters.”

She sucked a breath through her teeth and glared at him, as if she could intimidate him into changing his mind with her eyebrows. Adorable.

Don’t say that. I don’t want to know that.

He knew what her disappointment felt like, and he wasn’t afraid of it. It felt like having his own ribs pried open with a crowbar. It felt like knowing that there were things about him that frightened her, and that if he wasn’t careful with them, she would get burned. And she was right to be wary of them. It wasn’t like they didn’t frighten him, too.

But her disappointment was nothing, not one microscopic atom of pain, compared to the world without her.

“You’re angry at me.”

“No,” she said shortly. She bit her lip, and he followed the movement without really intending to. “I just don’t understand you. And it’s irritating, because that’s usually not a problem.”

“I don’t know why. It’s a very simple thing that I’m telling you.”

“That you’re delusional, and I’m an accessory to it?”

“That I’m selfish, and you’re essential.”

“Don’t be dramatic. Not everyone you care for is *essential.”*

He put his hand under her chin and tipped it up, emboldened with the easy confidence of someone with little to lose. She was already cross with him, and he was already feeling somewhat reckless; one more liberty taken wouldn’t make a difference. Her skin was warm and her breath was short on his hand.

“Not everyone. No.”

Her eyes slipped closed. She inhaled deeply, as if gathering patience, and then touched his wrist, pulling his hand away from her chin.

“You shouldn’t say things like that to me,” she said, stilted.

“Why not?”

“Because it makes me want things I shouldn't want.” Her voice was almost inaudibly low. She flipped his hand over and placed it flat between hers. “Because it makes me feel like a foolish person who thinks foolish things. Because I shouldn't *like* hearing you say things like that. About being essential.”

“Who's to say,” he said quietly, “what you should like?”

Her eyes slipped closed.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she said.

“About what?”

“What we said in the hospital.”

He was more interested in kissing her, or failing that, finding a way to close the distance between them in the carriage. He said merely: “About 'relationships,' you mean.”

“Yes.”

“Do *you* want to talk about it?”

Her lips pressed together, and the corner turned. “No. Frankly. I want to stop the train,” she said, “and run back to Grimmauld Place, and hole up in the library for another century while nothing ever changes. With you. And a cup of tea, and a sleeve of chocolate biscuits, and Crookshanks. That's what I want to do.”

“You can still have most of those things.”

“Except the one that matters,” she said wryly, opening her eyes. “Which is the nothing-ever-changing part.”

“See, I thought you were referring to me.”

She laughed, and her eyes dropped to his lips. He knew with his whole body what was about to happen; it felt strange, the certainty, as if the nerves in his body had decided before he did.

He leaned forward, tilted his head against hers, and kissed her. With a soft melancholy sound, she tilted her head too, and kissed him back. Her lips caught and tugged gently at his, slow, gentle, not particularly passionate; but that was alright, because it wasn't that kind of kiss. He'd never kissed someone this way before, as if the point weren't kissing itself but the communication of something that only touch could say.

By and by, in no particular hurry, she drew back and placed a hand on his chest. She tipped her forehead against his, and he stayed there, anchored by the places where she touched him.

“Thank you,” she said.

Then Hermione climbed carefully to her feet. “We should find the other Defense Club people before we arrive,” she said. “Harry, Ron, and Daphne, at least. And soon. We're coming up to the castle. I think it's best if we go up together.”

The last time he had seen Daphne, she had been holed up in Gryffindor Tower with a stack of novels and what she claimed was a head-cold. She had looked like refuse warmed over.

In the gloom of the Express, however, she looked like refuse served cold. The face perched atop her mink-fur mantle was wan and sunken, with bruises of exhaustion bracketing the nose. Her hair was

flat and greasy, and she sported a fresh crop of spots, which drew attention to the ropey ribbing of her facial scars.

She stared out the window, her breath rattling miserably through her sinuses.

“You’d better not be contagious, because when Brown’s sick, the whole Tower is,” he said. He shut the door behind him. “In which case I’ll see you in hell.”

“Draco! Darling! How are you? How was your vacation?”

“Dreadful, to both, thanks for asking. You’re leaking.”

She fumbled for a handkerchief. “I can’t wait to see Pomfrey,” she said thickly. “I’ve been locked up in my room since December, and none of the Healers have helped. I’ve been glugging Pepper-Up Potions until I nearly threw them all back up again—”

“I saw your sister at St. Mungo’s.”

“What were *you* doing at St. Mungo’s? You’re not sick, are you?”

“Arthur Weasley had a bad Christmas. Don’t ask.”

“Oh, God! How awful,” she whispered. “Poor Ron. On top of everything else…”

“He’s enduring.”

“I daresay. Oh, we should do something nice for him, won’t we? When’s his birthday? March?”

“Do I seem like any sort of person who would know?”

“But you seem like the sort of person who’d know everything,” she said, fluttering her eyelashes.

“You look like a nearsighted drunk.”

“I look comely and winsome.”

“You’re winsome as a bog body.”

“And you’re half as friendly. No offense.”

“Offense bitterly taken, hateful wretch,” he said. “I’ve something for you.”

“Ooh! A Christmas present?”

“Of sorts.” He produced Pansy’s envelope. She slit the crest and scanned it with the expression of a child discovering a workbook in their Christmas stocking.

“It’s from Parkinson. She wants you to burn it, by the way.” He watched her scan it three times, squinting more and more with each go. “I wouldn’t mind knowing what it says.”

“Well, since you asked, it’s an illustrated record of an amorous encounter with Gregory Goyle. *Vividly* drawn, too. Gosh, how does he fit all that—”

“It was a mistake to introduce you to Lavender Brown.”

“Maybe for *you.* And don’t be nosy.” She passed it over. It read:

In the event of the worst

Gringotts Vault 1103

Password – Iphigenia

In this way each creature flies from its enemy: love is the cause of my following thee.

“Either I’m missing something, or Parkinson has gone mad at last. What does it mean?”

She shrugged and hummed a singsong: *I don't know.* "Possibly she thinks I'm smarter than I am. 'Iphigenia' is my middle name, but it could also be a reference to anything. Pans and Teddy are notorious riddlers. Used to force everyone to do them at parties. Yawn."

"You don't recognize that vault?"

"No. My family's assets live in a heritage account. Named, not numbered." Daphne lit it on fire with a flick of her wand. "Anyway, who knows?" she chirped. "I wouldn't take it too seriously. It's all very ominous, but coming from Pans, 'in event of the worst' could mean her parents want to throw a soirée. Anyway, we're about to arrive; let's find the others. I don't want to ride up alone."

"Alone? What am I, Godric's ghost?"

"You're like furniture to me. Said with love."

As they descended from the carriage, a river of black robes splashed out over the platform and winnowed down the rock path towards the herd of bone-white thestrals that waited on a small crest of rock and snow, drawn into pale prominence against a black mass of colorless, sprawling forest. The last time he had been there, he had been racing across that platform in the evening gloom.

Draco drew his wand, responding to a threat that existed only in memory, and then muttered *Lumos* to disguise the action. He pushed forward without looking at Hermione, climbing down from the train behind him, to avoid dredging up the memory of their last escape from the castle. He would have welcomed for once the insipid chatter of students returning from their holidays — lists of presents, boasts of overeating, moans about the volume of homework — but for once, the student march back to the castle was quiet, almost bone-silent. They moved into the mists of the forest with their faces cast down.

The castle peered over the treetops like a cluster of knives, its sharp turrets carving out triangles of starlight into void. They moved into its

shadow and boarded carriages drawn by creatures that should have been invisible to them.

He climbed up into a carriage and offered a hand to Hermione, who took it to pull herself aboard; she clutched it, briefly, as she moved into the carriage. Her face was an expressionless slate. Harry was wearing the same bitter expression he had when they left Grimmauld Place that morning; Ron was merely vigilant, and grim. He shot a dark glower at a pair of Slytherin prefects standing by the next carriage up, fingering his wand.

“Don’t start anything,” Hermione warned him. She tugged him in by the back of his robe, and he sat down with a *humph.*

“They were watching us.”

“Of course they are,” she said. “I’m extremely famous.”

It was a wooden joke, stifled by a quiver of anxiety; but Harry’s lip quirked up. He reached for her hand and squeezed it. She patted his shoulder briskly, as if he were merely feeling a bit under the weather, and they rode up to the castle in silence.

Daphne thrust herself through the crowd. “Draco! What’s he doing here? Do you know anything? Tell me now!”

“Specificity,” said Draco, “and fewer pronouns, please.”

“Waste of time! Just come!”

Daphne urged them into the Great Hall. Perched over a crowd of milling despairants below, Umbridge sat next to Dumbledore, engaging him in unsmiling conversation over brussels sprouts.

“Slytherin table!” she gasped. “Ten o’clock!”

“I know where the Slytherin table is, actually,” Hermione said. “I do pay atten— what's *he* doing here?”

Cassius Warrington sat in pride of place among the Slytherins, surrounded by a coterie of variably convincing sycophants, absorbed in the act of either lecturing, telling a joke, or both. His curls were coiffed and oiled to shining, and he wore a Ministry uniform of lush purple.

Theo, at right, was cradling his chin in his hands and evaluating his fork as a weapon of suicide; Pansy, at left, was holding her goblet with closed eyes as if her own evaluation had concluded, and she was now fortifying herself for an attempt.

“She seems miserable,” said Daphne, miserably. “I wish we could help her.”

Ron looked at her, not unkindly, as if she’d suggested helping a blast-ended skrewt.

“Last I checked, you had to agree to marry somebody in this country,” he said. “Unless Umbridge changed that, too, over the vac.”

Umbridge gave a high, shrill laugh that stilled the hall like a shattered glass. With her fiancé’s attention diverted, Pansy ventured a furtive, worried glance down the table at Theo, who didn’t seem to hear any of it, floating in his own dull myopia. The food on his plate hadn’t been touched. Draco took note of the fact that the hollows under his cheeks had darkened, and then carefully un-took note of it.

He wanted no share in their miseries, and he had long since revoked any claim to share in their joys. So rather than continue to watch the small, bitter vignette unspool, he left the Great Hall, his feet pointed to the one part of the castle that still felt like home.

At the foot of the staircase, a pair of Gryffindor first years were huddled together. He recognized Alfie Chrissenpoffer and Victoria Frobisher, whom he’d corralled at the Opening Feast.

“No loitering in the halls.”

They sprang apart. “It’s Malfoy,” said Alfie, relieved. “Hullo, sir. Could we have a Mending Charm?”

“I’m not a tailor.” He drew his wand anyway, wearily. “What is it you’ve broken? If it’s a tapestry, you’re getting detention with McGonagall and not one ounce of sympathy. Granger told you not to climb them.”

Victoria hid something behind her back. Alfie elbowed her. She reluctantly withdrew a white scrap of fabric. It had an insignia embroidered in red and gold: the forked tendrils of a lightning-bolt. Draco’s stomach sank.

“Frobisher, that had better be your handkerchief.”

“It’s for Potter’s Army,” said Alfie. “They’re to wear after detentions with Umbridge. Lavender said—”

“She did? Wonderful. How long have you been wearing these?”

“Since I got detention,” said Victoria, “and I needed one. It says we’re for Harry. Which we are. He’s our House, and that means we have to study up like you and Granger, so we can kill Slytherins.”

“Who told you to *kill* Slytherins?”

“Nobody, but the Slytherins want to kill us,” said Alfie, matter-of-factly. “That’s what Seamus says, and Dean, and Katie. That’s why we’re not to talk to them or tell them anything about what Gryffindors are doing.”

“Seamus,” said Draco tightly. “Dean. Katie. Right. So, on the counsel of *idiots—”*

“Malfoy.”

The hairs on his neck rose.

Cassius smiled at him politely from the doors to the Great Hall, hands folded behind his back. Pansy stood at his elbow with a guarded, blank expression.

“Back to the common room,” Draco snapped. “Both of you.”

Alfie and Victoria scrambled up the steps. Victoria paused at the banister to blow a raspberry at Pansy.

Draco slid his wand back into its sheath.

“Warrington,” he said, by way of greeting. “Retaking your N.E.W.T.s?”

“Play nice,” warned Pansy, laying a hand on Cassius’s arm. “Cassy is training as the new Undersecretary of Education.”

“Lovely. Is he aware that he’s missed his office by several hundred miles?”

“Mr. Parkinson did me the generous favor of arranging—”

“Or does he require instruction as to what education looks like?”

“If you *must* know, he’s here to shadow Professor Umbridge.”

“Such internships are quite common at the Ministry,” drawled Cassius. “I’m surprised you haven’t had one yet. Not *surprised,* that is — but you catch the idea.” Draco ignored him.

Rufus Warrington was a member of the pureblood *nouveau riche:* a wizarding line pure enough to respect, but not old enough to buy the kind of things Cassius wanted. Real power needed time to ferment, and it aged on the scale of generations. The Parkinsons had been pure since at least the Napoleonic Wars, but they’d lost much of their wealth in the First Wizarding War. Money wanted pedigrees, and pedigrees needed money. And the marriage was a political masterstroke: a Minister-in-Training and a princess of the Old Guard, one of the last intact lines of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. They’d live at

Parkinson Court, and Warrington money would fund her dinner parties with other politicians' wives; Cassius would have every door in the Cavalier Party opened to him at the flourish of her father's seal. Their children might even take her name. It was probably all laid out in the marriage contract.

But what was he doing *here?* Cassius was the Triwizard Champion, with all the glamor and notoriety that title could buy. Umbridge obviously stood to benefit from harboring a connection with him, both publicly and privately — she could find in him what she had hoped to find in Draco. But what did Cassius need from her? Not Ministry influence. His father was the primary shipping contractor for the Ministry. Neither Warrington needed anything from Umbridge, who — even given a generous estimation of her influence with Runcorn — didn't have half the sway in the Ministry that Cassius's father did.

So perhaps Cassius wasn't doing it for himself.

He turned the pieces over in his mind: Umbridge needed Cassius. Cassius needed Pansy. What did Pansy need?

"What did she give you?" he said sharply.

"Who?" drawled Pansy.

"Umbridge."

"Nothing," she said. Her voice was flat and her expression blank, a rare thing for such a spiteful creature. "She didn't do anything for me."

The doors to the Great Hall parted, and Theo slipped silently into the shaded, guttering torchlight of the Entrance Hall. He drew the door closed, and as he did, Draco stared at the bare span of his wrist — free of the silver cuff it had sported in October.

Theo brusquely tugged down his sleeve.

Daphne had told him something about Cassius's father, once.

Warrington owes Lord Nott enough money to mortgage Gringotts, twice.

Pansy kept her fingers balanced delicately on Cassius's outstretched arm. It was a facsimile of a gesture; there was no possibility of drawing support from her limp grasp.

"Not half a choice," Draco repeated quietly.

She did not blink. "I beg your pardon?"

"It was elegantly done. Heinous," he said brusquely, "and it'll make life worse for everyone, not least of all him; but elegant."

"'Heinous' is melodramatic, even for you."

"Whose idea was it?" he said, raising his voice. "Yours? Or hers? I don't suppose Nott asked you to pawn your fiancé for his freedom?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. Is Warrington here to oversee his parole? That was the deal, wasn't it? Warrington's the watchdog, and you're the leverage. Carrot and stick."

"Pure drivel," said Cassius, "and incomprehensible babbling. Are you well?"

He ignored Cassius and turned to Pansy. "There are certain people who will expect things of him, you know. Now that he's lost that bit of jewelry."

"Expect what of me?" said Carrius irritably. All three of the others ignored him.

"Don't lecture her," said Theo, raising his voice for the first time. It rasped. "And spare me the firewyrm tears for my safety. We both

know you don’t fucking care.”

Draco twitched, but wrestled past the flare of emotion and found the cold will to ignore him, too. “The only thing that still confuses me, frankly, is what your fiancée stands to gain. One does wonder what *he* thinks he’s getting out of this, since it’s obviously not the sweetness of your affection.”

“You’re rambling, Draco,” said pansy.

“Really, dear boy,” said Cassius. “A man might think you were envious.”

Draco snapped, “If that’s your read here, I marvel that you even remember to breathe.”

“Zing,” said Theo tonelessly. “Boy, you got him. Well done. Now go upstairs and take a nap.”

There was no point in pressing further. With a parting sneer, Draco made to leave.

“Did you happen to call on the Greengrasses, over vacation?” Pansy called in a lofty tone.

He nearly laughed at her. Pansy Parkinson — stupid, selfish, petulant Pansy Parkinson — poor, foolish Pansy Parkinson, who might very well have doomed them all — still fancied herself a spymaster.

“Pout-etre,” he said. “Did you happen to visit Gringotts?”

Her flinch was enough to confirm his suspicions. What inflamed them still further was the twitch that ran across Theo’s: recognition, quickly suppressed, almost too fast to be noticed.

He climbed the stairs to Gryffindor with the weight of their eyes pressed firmly into his back.

“Well,” said Hermione. “I suppose that means Theodore Nott is off the leash.”

There was a pause. Then Daphne said hesitantly: “Is that — such a terrible thing?”

The lake glittered in the dull gray glare of an overcast winter afternoon, faceted with chop, with doilies of frost encasing the stones on its banks. Under the spindly vault of a naked oak, Draco, Hermione, and Daphne reclined in the roots. Down by the water, Harry and Ron were making a slow circuit of the beach, pausing to skip stones across its slate face.

The landscape was the desaturated, ruddy, almost reddish brown of foliage in winter, the sky a foamy swell of rolling clouds. Rain swept down in a gauzy curtain on the hills, not yet approaching the castle, but scented in the wet, cold air.

“He’s the plaything of his father,” said Draco flatly. “A Death Eater. And now he’s able to leave the castle whenever he pleases. I don’t know, Greengrass, do you think that’s a ‘terrible thing’?”

She scowled. “He might not be a good person, but he’s nobody’s ‘plaything.’ Especially not his father’s.”

“Want to bet?”

“I might! I’ve known him since birth, Draco, and you’ve only known him for three years — the worst three of his life, I’ll add—”

“I’ve known others much less, and trusted them more.”

“You’re not being fair. I’m not saying you should trust him, but one mistake shouldn’t condemn—”

“One mistake?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Hermione interrupted. “Theo’s not interested in redemption. He’s made that very clear. So it doesn’t matter whether we think he deserves it.”

Crookshanks prowled around the roots at her feet, hopping here and there to chase the scuttling beetles and doxies that inhabited the marshes by the shore. Occasionally he crept back and rubbed his nose against Daphne’s legs, which earned him a coo and a treat, no matter how many times Hermione chided; the little beast was faithless as well as violent.

January had dawned cold and grueling. New rules furnished the notice board in the hall, which had overgrown the actual board, and spilled onto the stone walls above and beside it in a thin, flaking film of tiny-lettered paper. The thin and flaking face of authority spread wider as the term went on: the Inquisitorial Squad ran concurrent patrols with prefects, so that often after hours, Draco would find one of them wandering around the castle without any particular purpose. In the hallways, the hush of chastened students became a vulnerability for anyone trying to trade information, illicit or not, such as Defense Club meetings. He became aware of how easy it would be for someone to overhear a murmured word of encouragement on the stairwell, or to notice a Potter's Army band flashed beneath a sleeve. The young students rarely went to any prefects outside of their own house. The first years kept mixing up the Inquisitors with the prefects, which usually meant speaking to neither.

Draco took to carrying his wand around the halls. He rarely used it, but the presence of a weapon made the mounting and nameless tension feel more manageable.

Being in the same calendar year as their O.W.L.s. inflicted a subtle psychological change on the fifth years, and an unsubtle change in their professors. In Potions, Snape humbled them all with an eighty-question pre-test that only half of the cohort managed to pass. McGonagall raked them all over the coals for failure to complete the vacation homework, then raked them back the other direction for being unprepared for trans-animal transfiguration. In this, as in most

classes, Hermione was a flurry of activity, her desk flush with a stack of color-coded notes to her right and the annotated textbook open at her left. In Defense Against the Dark Arts, however, she had changed so profoundly that it caused some to wonder if something had happened to her.

For one thing, she had stopped bringing her books to class. When Umbridge asked her a question on the reading, she shrugged.

“Do you intend to pass this class, Miss Granger?”

“Yes, professor.”

“In fact I think you do not,” she said sweetly. “Because you are not taking notes, you see! And only very stupid girls think they are smart enough to pass classes without taking notes. Are you a stupid girl, Miss Granger?”

Hermione gazed into the middle distance, stone-faced. Draco’s fingers itched for his wand. He slipped them in his pockets.

Umbridge snapped her fingers in front of Hermione’s face. “Answer me.”

“What was the question, professor?”

“Are you stupid?”

“I—”

Lavender Brown raised her hand and gave a noisy cough. Umbridge sighed.

“What, Miss Brown?”

“Ummmmm. I thought the question was… like… the counter-curse for tickling? Which is… like…. *Anti-titullara?”* Her voice was a parody of itself. Lavender hadn’t sounded that vapid in years, if ever. “Erm. I

think. Like, titullara, but not?" She fiddled with her hair. "Is that right, professor?"

Umbridge didn't reply. Coldly, she said: "You would do well to learn from Miss Brown, Miss Granger."

But she moved on. Lavender glanced at Hermione and tugged the bandages on her hand, then hid the movement by fussing at her bracelets.

Now, almost a week later, Hermione was frowning at the frosted vista, and tugging the same bandages on her right hand.

"I wonder to what extent he's working with Warrington," she mused.

"Doubt it," muttered Daphne. "He thinks he's an idiot. I doubt he'd work with him on anything."

"He's not an idiot," said Hermione, whose tone indicated this was the best she could say about him. "He pulled off some advanced magic in the Triwizard Tournament. And he's maneuvered himself into a marriage with Pansy, which is politically intelligent, if not particularly enviable."

Draco sniggered. She gave a private, self-contained smile.

"I think the real danger here is Cassius," she said abruptly. "We've been focusing on Theo — and I share your worries about him, believe me — but at the end of the day, he's an underage student, and his father's in prison. Cassius is an adult. He's rich, he's well-connected, and he doesn't have the Trace. He also happens to have acquired tremendous influence over Theo and Pansy both in the span of a year. I have to wonder who's really the mind behind their arrangement."

The idea of Cassius as the person pulling the strings was a startling reorientation of perspective; in Hermione's framing, the fourteen-

year-old Pansy seemed much less like a mastermind than she had on the steps of the Great Hall.

“Theo doesn’t like him,” Daphne said doggedly. “He wouldn’t work with him. He doesn’t trust him.”

“He doesn’t trust anyone that isn’t Parkinson or Greengrass,” retorted Draco, prodding her with his foot. She scowled.

“Or you,” said Hermione.

He made a dismissive sound.

“He did like you,” she said matter-of-factly. “You were the only person outside Slytherin he ever made an effort with. And he tried to recruit you.”

“He tried to recruit me because I’m incredibly valuable,” said Draco. Daphne giggled, and he kicked her again. “Besides which — a valuable *bloodline,* Greengrass, and piss off, you know what I meant — besides which, I’m not bad in a duel, and I’ve rather a lot of money. Be offended if he didn’t, I daresay.”

“Several things can be true at once,” said Hermione, cryptically. Strands of hair still pricked up and danced in the draft off the lake.

He shrugged, somewhat irritated by the suggestions of both women that he had some rare degree of closeness with a boy in several respects responsible for the end of the world.

“It’s been a very long time since he’s liked me,” he said, with a finalistic tone deeming the subject closed. “And a longer time since the feeling’s been remotely mutual.”

Hermione hummed noncommittally.

“Say you’re right,” she suggested. “If Theo cares for Pansy — as you say — her husband would be important to him, wouldn’t he?”

“Fiancé. Not ‘husband.’”

“Does the difference matter?”

“It would to him.”

She blew into her cupped hands and rubbed them for warmth. “Alright. Why?”

“Because there’s a difference between marriage and anything else.”

She rolled her finger in a *go-on* gesture.

“It’s hard to explain. Wait— hang on—”

“If I had a *shilling* for every time someone said that—”

“Not what I meant, listen—”

“—of a patently explicable fact in the magical world, as if it were too *astonishingly* complex—”

“I meant I had to think about it—”

“—only to come up with a trumped-up fancy version of something perfectly comparable to what muggles do—”

“Granger,” he said patiently, and she stopped. Her breath billowed into the air as steam. “I know.”

“Do you?”

“I do. When I say it’s hard for me to explain, I don’t mean that it would be difficult for you to understand.”

She blew out a breath. After a moment, she grimaced and flashed him a look that was not quite an apology, and he touched her knee, which was not quite an apology, either.

“There’s an old-fashioned way to do it and a modern way to do it,” he said, after a moment. “The old-fashioned way is practiced usually by —”

“No, I’ll guess.”

“Right. Not without reason, anyway. The ceremony is complicated. It involves a lot of binding spells, and oaths, and vows of devotion, and such. The truly, arcanely old-school back their oaths with curses— ‘if thou striketh thy bond, thou shalt suffer twice her sufferings,’ or ‘whither thou diest, there shall I die,’ or ‘may the fruits of your flesh wither and die if thou goest afield’—”

“Can you divorce?”

“Well, I’m not married.” He settled back on his elbows.

“Obviously by ‘you,’ I meant—”

“Purebloods, naturally. Just because I’m a pureblood doesn’t mean I know everything about them. Maybe I don’t speak for all of us. We don’t all know each other, you know.”

She wrinkled her nose at him, her mouth taut from its battle with a growing smile. Her eyes were practically glowing with fondness. The weather suddenly felt almost temperate. “Fine,” she said. “I’m dreadfully sorry for assuming. I’ll ask Daphne — Daphne—?”

“Divorce exists, but it isn’t common,” he interrupted, resting his head back on the roots. “And it’s quite difficult. You’d have to undo all the household enchantments, which is a right mare if you’re from an old family. For some places it’d take a team of curse-breakers years to get through them all.”

“There are enchantments involved in your marriages?”

“Naturally. The Laws of Blood bind spouses into each other’s families. So my mother, for instance, has a ward key to the Manor,

even though she isn’t properly its mistress. She can Apparate on and off its grounds. And she can use Malfoy heirlooms, a certain amount of household magic, that sort of thing. You’d have to remove that, in the divorce. And socially, of course, it’s a terrible scandal. Usually it's just easier to kill your husband.”

“Loads,” agreed Daphne.

“I should think the husbands would prefer to be divorced than murdered,” said Hermione, “personally.”

“But it’s not embarrassing to be murdered,” said Daphne, puzzled. “Dying is perfectly respectable. Happens to everybody.”

“I … suppose I hadn’t considered that.”

“If you think of marriage as a strategic alliance between families,” said Draco, “for political or financial gain, you’d like the alliances to be permanent. It’s the same with contracts. You make them binding so people can trust them, and if they trust their contracts, they’ll make more of them. There’s more trade and more investment in enterprise.”

“A wife is not an ‘investment in enterprise’!”

“Certainly not once you’ve divorced her.”

She hit him. It was well-earned and failed utterly to keep him from laughing. She hit him twice more, for good measure, and sat back with a fire in her eyes. He tipped his head back and grinned at her.

“You know what? Thank you. You’ve affirmed my belief that muggle marriages are categorically better, happier, and more humane.”

“You haven’t seen a wizarding ceremony,” said Draco. Hermione’s hair swam in and out of his field of vision like a pattern of lace on the clouds. “It might change your mind. It’s a singular thing.”

“Doubtful,” she muttered, but she was bluffing. Hermione had a soft spot for magic. It was the same spot that made her pause on patrols to take in the view of the grand staircase, and stare in muted delight while she was coming into the Room of Requirement.

She liked splendor. She couldn’t help it. Magic, for her, was a perennially exotic thing, and living with it had gilded her life in a varnish of wonder that had yet to lose its luster after five years.

He was smiling. He sorted it out quickly.

A bandage still fluttered around her wrist. She caught him looking, and tucked it back into her glove.

“Give me a practice question,” she said. “Herbology. Written section.”

“Describe the properties of hellebore.”

“Six sections, twenty-two species. Four are caulescent, the rest have basal leaves. Common ingredient in several poisons. Give me a hard one.”

“That *was* — alright, have it your way. List four metabolites of the genus *Thalictrum.”*

“That’s horrid,” she said happily. “Magnoflorine, hernandezine… berberine… Hint?”

“Alkaloid.”

“Oh, I’m an idiot. Thalicarpin.”

“There’s a girl.”

She grinned and settled back against the tree. Her leg bounced.

He reached out and picked a leaf from her hair. She went still all over, with the charming effect of a startled deer.

The unspoken Thing they had together had grown courageous since the vacation; in the gloom of an empty Grimmauld Place, and in the subsequent gloom of a quiet winter term at Hogwarts, it had started manifesting habits. It had developed a tendency of touching her, at odd times, when she was passing through a doorway or up a staircase; it had, on her side, begun to reach instinctively for his arm or his hand whenever they were alone, and no one was looking; it had, at least twice, driven her to reach across the silence of an empty common room, with the fire crackling low and a splay of forgotten textbooks at their feet, to lean across the sofa and press a kiss to his shocked, waiting mouth; and then to retreat, silently, saying nothing, while fear of frightening off her newfound recklessness held his tongue. He had kissed her back only once, when they were on patrol, under a secluded eave where the portraits couldn't see, and when her he drew back the pink flush rising under her freckles haunted the back of his mind for a few nights after.

He was certain now that he was losing his mind, but pleasantly, in a sort of complacent surrender to the process, which altogether had more rewards than costs.

Gravel crackled. The boys came loping up from the lake, their cloaks snapping like dark standards in the cool wind.

“Better go in,” called Ron. “Rain’s blowing this way. You look cozy.”

Hermione blinked in shock. Daphne glanced up from petting Crookshanks.

“I — I don’t — excuse me?”

“All three of you,” he said awkwardly. “Sat together like that. S’like a painting or something.”

“Oh. Yes. I guess so.”

“What did you think I meant?”

“No idea. I was being stupid.” She laughed nervously and stood up. Draco rolled to his feet, stretching his shoulder, and Ron followed him with his eyes.

“So,” he said, “Hermione, Harry and I were thinking we ought to teach the Defense Club to cast Patronuses tomorrow. What do you think?”

“Fine idea,” she said crisply, brushing off her robes. “It’ll have to wait for February, though. Draco and I are teaching runic traps tomorrow.”

“Can’t we just switch them? Patronuses tomorrow, traps in February?”

“But we prepared a lesson already. And we haven’t talked about how to teach the Patronus at all.”

“We don’t need to talk about it. It’s not that hard to teach.”

“Runic traps are, though,” she said, with a faint edge, “and we’ve already prepared those, so I hope you’ll understand why we don’t want to switch—”

“But you’ve already done the work, so why does it matter?”

“I could say the same of you! You’ll get to do it anyway, why should it matter which lesson goes first?”

Ron exhaled. “Because you and Draco are the only ones who know how to do runic traps,” he ground out. “Alright? And it makes me and Harry look like dolts when we have to just sit there and watch you two go off on your swot expeditions together. It doesn’t feel like we’re a team.”

“We *are* a team,” she said, stung, “but — Ron, you *don’t* know how to do runic traps. I don’t see how those two things have anything to do with each other.”

“So? Maybe Harry and I want in on it, yeah?”

“Leave me out,” Harry muttered. Daphne made a noncommittal noise.

“In on what?”

Ron looked pointedly at Draco.

“In on what?” Draco repeated.

“You know.”

“I don’t,” said Hermione frostily, “and I’m sure we’re all very curious.”

Ron deflated. “Never mind,” he muttered.

“No, really,” she snapped, “don't back off now. It's perfectly obvious you've got something to say, so don't let it stick between your teeth.”

“It's nothing.”

“It's not nothing!”

Ron mulishly put his hands in his pockets and stared at the ground.

She shot to her feet, brushing dirt from her skirt with force bordering violence. “Fine. Go have a sulk about it instead. In fact, wait — you don’t have to go anywhere. *I’ll* go back to the castle. Daphne, would you care to join me?”

“Very much,” Daphne murmured, and gathering Crookshanks with a graceful movement, she disembarked with Hermione from the oak tree.

Draco followed them with his eyes as they scaled the lawns. Ron gave him a hard and searching glance, then followed them.

Harry cleared his throat and turned to the lake, folding his arms. He made no move to go with them, and neither did Draco.

The two of them stood on the banks of the lake, cold and increasingly rained-on, for an interval of time sufficient for a murder of ravens to migrate from one tree to another.

“Potter, it’s raining.”

“Wow,” said Harry. “Is that what those little droplets are?”

“I mean that you’re getting soaked.”

“Boy, you don’t get those O’s for nothing.”

He folded his arms and shifted his weight, feeling brittle.

“Flitwick taught us a water-repelling charm.”

“Yeah? What do I keep you around for, then?”

Draco snorted, and conjured one over their heads.

They turned to the lake, whose surface shattered into a million facets under the downpour.

“I thought you’d follow Ronald.”

“Ronald can use some time to himself, sometimes,” said Harry placidly. “I’m enjoying the lake.”

“Did you know what he was going to say?”

“Not my business,” said Harry. “Besides, I was enjoying the lake.”

“Did he say anything to you about it?”

“No, because that’s not my business. Do you mind? I’m really trying to enjoy this lake.”

It was a gray, dreary, afternoon, and there was not, in his opinion, much enjoyment to be had. Rain sieved off the edges of the charm

and formed an iridescent curtain of beads.

Draco let out a breath that seemed to have been in his chest for some time.

“How’s Professor Malfoy?” said Harry casually.

“I beg your pardon.”

“Your mum,” he clarified. “Narcissa. Occlumency teacher. Likes to knock things around in my brain and then yell at me for it. How’s she?”

“Fine. I imagine.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. Draco shot him a curt look that instructed him to drop the subject. Harry’s look replied quite firmly that he would not.

“Not a sure thing, is it?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Wow,” said Harry. “I wonder what that must be like.”

Draco snorted; a nameless relief came over him as the weight of explaining himself lifted. He cleared his throat and ventured, albeit reluctantly: “We fought over the vacation. Haven’t spoken since.”

“About…?”

“Granger.”

“Ah, shit,” said Harry. “The blood thing?”

“No. Because she wore corduroys at the dinner table. What do you think?”

Harry paused before answering.

“I think your mum's pretty old for her age,” he said. “And it's hard for adults to get their heads around the idea — or to admit, even if they can — their kids know something they don't.”

“That seems to be the way of things.”

A great heron settled into the shallows a stone's throw from them and dipped its beak into the water.

“Bet she still loves you, though,” Harry said hesitantly, as if he wasn't actually sure. “Your mum.”

“She does.”

“Yeah.” It was relieved. “I mean, of course she does.”

“It's a very strange thing,” said Draco slowly, “but one comes to a point where that fact doesn't... actually matter.”

Harry looked like he wanted to say a number of things all at once. But he voiced only one of them. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize for her,” he said, with a sudden coolness in his voice that even he did not understand. Then, tautly, with more awkwardness than cold: “She’d loathe you for trying, you know.”

Harry covered his mouth with his hand. Draco stiffened, wary that he had trod on a raw nerve; but unexpectedly, Harry started to laugh.

“I apologize for that, Potter. It was ungenerous of me to mention.”

“No — that’s fine — it’s just,” he said thickly, “everybody — everyone already loathes me, mate. The whole world. And compared to them, she’s not even good at it. She’s one of, like, ten adults on the planet who are actually trying to help me stay alive, and one of — what, fifteen? Twenty? — who don’t actively want me dead. In the tiers of people who hate me, she’s League Two. She hasn’t even tried to kill me yet. I — I’m sorry, but at this point, I expect a better game.”

“I appreciate,” said Draco, “the optimism expressed in the word ‘yet.’”

For some reason, Harry found this hilarious.

After a minute, Harry gave a long sigh and cast his eyes around the grounds contentedly. “Hey, look who it is,” he said.

The downpour had flushed out two more people from the lakeside path: Dolores Umbridge and Cassius Warrington were rapidly climbing the path to the castle on the other side of the lake, their heads shielded by the glimmering sheen of Water-Repellent Charms.

“What do you suppose they’re talking about?” he said.

“How to kill me,” Harry suggested, polishing his glasses on his robe.

“I was being serious.”

“I am serious,” he said casually. He pointed at them with the corner of his glasses. “Trust me, I know when someone wants me dead.”

-I LIVE!

-HAPPY NEW YEAR!

-If you've been here for a while, you know that this kind of hiatus happens sometimes — deeply sorry — came as soon as I could, even if it's been far too long. But I couldn't let actual New Years' pass without finally letting Draco out of St. Mungo's. Terrible place for a celebration, really.

-This chapter is dedicated to the Succession soundtrack, which has a brilliant way of making the words go, and which powered me through the past two days of editing.

-It's also dedicated to the absolute real ones who stay in the comments section even when it's been months since the latest update. Without you this would not exist, and it would not exist many

times over. You're the petrol in the engine of this story. The comment-essayists are the diesel.

-Next chapter soon. Stay tuned. All my love and wishes for 2025 — it's gonna be great, y'all.

The Patronus

Chapter 73: The Patronus

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“The Patronus Charm,” said Harry, “is a simple spell.”

“He says that about every spell,” Hermione said under her breath.

“Usually he’s right,” said Draco.

“This one isn’t.”

“Well, he assumes it’s simple because he can do it. You have to respect the logic.”

She covered her face in her hands, partly to hide her smile.

Harry had summoned the Room of Requirement that day. The Defense Club gathered in a suspicious and hesitant semicircle around his plinth. Gryffindor tapestries hung from the walls and a healthy fire crackled in the grate; silver instruments tinkled overhead, evoking the Transfiguration classroom.

“We’re starting off easy, with exercises, and we’ll try it with a boggart next month,” said Harry. “Course, patronuses aren’t for boggarts, they’re for dementors, but my boggart is a dementor, and the main thing is test whether you can cast it scared. That a hand, Seamus?”

“Yeah, thanks. Where you getting the boggart?”

“Fair question. The Room can’t make things that are alive, so Ron and I are gonna have to try and nab the one in the staff closet. Accepting volunteers to help with that, by the way. Ginny...? Oh, volunteering. Thanks.”

“Fred, put your hand down,” said Ron.

Harry pointed. “Yeah, Padma?”

“George, put your hand down,” said Ron.

Padma leaned forward. “What does the patronus do, exactly? Obviously it wards off dementors, but dementors can’t be killed except through a ritual enchantment, so what’s the patronus for? Is it incorporeal, or does it have mass? Are you summoning it or conjuring it? Or is it an illusion?”

“Lots of questions,” said Harry, nervously. “Good questions. Wow. Hermione—?”

“They’re great questions,” said Hermione brightly. She stepped up beside Harry, who yielded the floor with gratitude. “It’s an incorporeal familiar. It can also take messages and execute simple tasks. The base of the Patronus Charm is a powerful anti-Dark countercurse, but it’s conjured into a moving ward, which is given shape by a reflection of the user’s magical signature; hence, the memory—”

“Not that this isn’t important,” said Ron, “but why don’t we give it a go, and do the theory later?”

“But the theory is indispensable.”

“Gotta be kinda dispensable, though, if I can manage it,” he said. *“Expecto Patronum.”*

A terrier with high, pointy ears leapt into the air and did a prancing circuit of the room, evoking delighted giggles from the younger children. Victoria Frobisher leapt up and cried out covetously, clearly wanting ten of them. Ron led it around by wandpoint, grinning broadly, and cast a look over his shoulder at Hermione. “See?”

“Yes, everyone can see it,” she said curtly. Ron’s smile faded. He ended the spell.

Hermione's inability did not stem from reluctance. By all appearances, she was trying as hard as she could. She had asked Harry to explain it perhaps a dozen times, and practiced the spellwork often enough to become a master. She could have taught the Patronus to any wizard on the face of the planet. But she could not, to save her life, conjure one herself.

Which meant that, as the lesson went on, she sank into a morass of frustration that drew her away from the group, while Harry and Ron centered a growing flock of silver animals, crowing at each victory.

It didn't help that Luna did hers effortlessly on the first try. With an eerie trill of *"Expecto Patrrrrrronum,"* her wand blossomed silver, and a bird nearly as large as the girl herself swept into the air over the room, did a wide circuit, and landed in the rafters. It had a beak like the point of a rapier, and its eye was nacreous as an oil spill.

"It's an egret!" she said delightedly, rocking up and down excitedly on her heels. It was a very young gesture, and it brought home her fourteen-year-old self, which tended to vanish sometimes in the mysticism and the extravagant hats. "Egrets have loads of magical symbolism. They've got lovely connections to power and foresight — oh, I'd hoped it'd be this! But this means I was right!"

"The form of your patronus isn't symbolic," said Hermione. "It almost always takes the form of an animal that's significant to you. There are studies on it. If you like egrets, that's probably why it's an egret. It doesn't mean you're *like* an egret, and it certainly doesn't mean you've got special egret-y abilities—"

"Let her have it, go on," murmured Ginny, leaning on Hermione's shoulder. "Look at how happy she is."

"But it isn't correct."

"Your mum's not correct. Hey, Luna, what's my patronus?"

“A horse, I should think,” Luna said dreamily. “I saw it once in Divination. A great beautiful lady-horse, with a mane like a flag. And Hermione, yours is a bird, though I don’t know what species — I only saw it a little, because it was flying so high — am I right? What is it?”

“No idea,” Hermione said shortly. “Nor have you. You’ve never seen my patronus, because nobody has. For your information, I suspect it’s an otter. Why don’t you and Ginny try practicing with the boggart?”

Luna, who seemed immune to offense and tact alike, drifted peaceably away.

Draco twirled his wand. He’d not tried to make a patronus in some time, and he didn’t fancy making the effort in front of the whole group. So he kicked Neville’s footwork into better position and shoved Lee Jordan’s wand in the direction of the window, a policy adopted for collective safety, traded a nod with Cedric — whose pine marten was draped cheerfully across its master’s shoulders — and then allowed himself to be wrangled into a few pester-and-answer sessions with the Creeveys.

Daphne took several tries to make a corporeal, which finally spooled out of her wand in a glabrous smear, landed on the floor, and rubbed itself haughtily against her legs. It was a Persian longhair, astonishingly corpulent, with a crumpled face like McGonagall in distress.

She had come back from the Hospital Wing with several vials of Pepper-Up Potion and a prescription for something else, which she had refused to show; when Draco made a polite inquiry about the possible resurgence of a blood condition, she sniffed and made an oblique remark that it was ungentlemanly to be over-curious about a lady’s health. *That* implication well-scalded him off the subject, and he had stalked off in some haste, with a parting snarl at Lavender for giggling.

But she seemed as strong as ever; she continued to power up and down stairs at the same double-step as Fred or George, and to hoist up corners of the Gryffindor couch in search of Parvati's lost bracelet; but she wearied quickly, and increasingly could be found napping around the common room in the middle of the day, shrouded in wool blankets, despite the proximity of a roaring fire.

Lavender suggested that "a girl's time" manifested in different ways. Hermione had, for her part, inquired about the medical linkage between menstruation and fever; Lavender said something dismissive about modern medicine; Hermione had, predictably, vaulted prodigiously off the handle, and the resulting row shook the Tower tapestries.

"Absolute darling," Daphne exclaimed now, and attempted to scoop her patronus up. The patronus, being incorporeal, could not be cuddled. Both creatures regarded this as a tragedy. "Look at the blessed thing! I can't order her at a dementor, she's too precious!"

"That must be the most toffee-nosed patronus I've ever seen," said Draco.

"Pooh! What's yours, a cockroach?"

"Psht. Mine would eat yours for breakfast."

"You'd never!" she said. "I bet it's a hedgehog. A prickly, shy little lump— oh!"

Ginny's patronus, a mare, cantered over and nosed at Daphne's neck. She laughed and ran her hand along its back, her fingers showering stardust from its incorporeal skin. Ginny came running over after it, and in a flare of light from a passing cloud, the red hair flying behind her head flashed the same white as her patronus, her laughter a halting bray. One of George's jackals came nipping at her heels, teasing her, and she jumped up on a chair to avoid it — ducked a dive-bomb from Luna's bird — and whipped her wand

around to cast another silver mare, which collided with Seamus's wolverine in a small fission of white.

Laughter dappled in the vaulted roof as a scuffle broke out; Ginny was tackled to the ground by a wronged Katie, whose dart frog she had stomped into nonexistence; Michael Corner leapt to defend her honor and was tripped by a mischievous Dean; silver animals collapsed in a great sigh of white steam, and the pileup grew into a merry scuffle of limbs and good-natured shouting.

"Ow owowow *ow* you're pulling my hair!"

"Cut it out or I'll tell Hermione!"

"Not if I tell Hermione first!"

"You cut it out or *I'll* tell *Malfoy."*

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Would!"

"Don't be a narc, Dean!"

"Malfoy, Ginny's got my wand and won't give it back!"

"If you're fool enough to let her have your wand, you deserve whatever she does with it," called Draco. Hermione shot him an exasperated glance. "Get it back from her, if you can. Don't start fights and call prefects to end them."

"HA! Eat my shorts, tosser—"

"Easy, Ginevra."

"Sorry. Eat my shorts, respectfully."

She pitched Dean's wand across the room. She had a great arm; it bounced off the window and beaned Neville on the head.

Hannah Abbott, who had been trying to help him, sent Ginny an exasperated glower and snatched up Dean's wand to return to him; Ginny replied with a guilty grin. Draco took the chance to draw Neville aside, a move with which Neville complied, somewhat anxiously, rubbing his head.

"Am I doing it wrong?" he said at once. "That last one looked kind of like a toad, if you squinted—"

It hadn't. "This isn't about your patronus. Here."

Neville almost doubled over from the weight of the book tossed at him.

"Oof. Er — okay? I… uh, I already have a Potions textbook? Thanks, though?"

"Get rid of it."

"Why?" complained Neville, rubbing his abdomen a bit churlishly. "It's the same book."

"Not by half. That's my textbook. I expect it returned perfectly intact."

Neville immediately held the book at arm's length, like it might detonate. It was much nicer than his copy; Draco bought his books new, and Neville, though he did the same, abused his enough with spillage and combustion to disguise it.

"This is yours?"

"Yes. I don't need it anymore, I'm well into the sixth-year curriculum. There are exercises in the back of the book. You'll report to me at the next meeting with how many you've brewed correctly. Where there are corrections, follow the handwriting, not the print. And you're going to register to sit the O.W.L. in Potions."

"I'm not going to pass Potions!"

“Incorrect. You need at least a N.E.W.T. in Potions to become a board-certified Herbologist. Isn’t that so?”

“Correct, but—”

“So you must pass it. Ergo, you will. Simpliciter.”

Neville was aglow in hopeful bemusement. He held the book to his chest. “This — it’s really g-g-good of you, Draco, b-b-but — did Snape say s-s-something ag-g-gain?”

Draco flicked a bit of lint from his sleeve.

“If you drop Potions, it’ll be a waste of years of my teaching,” he said. “It’s a shame to let good work go to waste. Don’t embarrass me.”

“I won’t. I swear. I’ll really t-t-try—”

“Merlin’s sake, don’t get soft. I know you will,” said Draco irritably. Neville continued to radiate forty volts of intense, watery gratitude. “I’ll have you scrubbing cauldrons if you don’t. And stop jerking your wand up on *‘Patronum,’* you’re dashing the spellwork.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“So you should be.”

Across the room, with her back to the door, Cho was working hard to little avail. She kept blowing gusts of silver fog from her wand, and her frustrated expression deepened further and further into the kind of scowl behind which few happy memories could flourish. Marietta extended a tender hand to help her and was swatted away with a word as quiet as it was unkind. The floating carnival of silver animals left a sheen on the beaded flush of her face, and eventually, Harry stepped in to help her. Then she lowered her wand and spoke to him in a quiet, low voice, something that was inaudible, and she slumped as though her strings had been cut. Harry touched her hand, and she leaned her head against his chest, shoulders low.

He found Hermione at the back of the room. She was perched on one of the sofas, ankles folded neatly beneath her, with a spread of papers levitated in the air before her as a makeshift desk.

“An otter?” he suggested, by way of greeting, and leaned his hip against the sofa’s arm. She glanced up at him, and her gaze did a gratifying flicker up-and-down. “Didn’t know you liked them.”

“They were my favorite animal when I was seven,” she said, dropping her quill in a floating inkwell, “and my father bought me a stuffed one as a pet. I slept with it for six years.”

He counted on his fingers.

“Shut up. Yes, it came to Hogwarts, no, it isn’t here anymore, and no, you will never, ever see it.”

“Did it have a name?” he said delightedly. “Never mind — you’re you, of course it did. Something long and mockable, naturally. What was it? Xenophon? Machiavelli? Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus?”

“Like you have a *toe* to stand on. ‘Ulysses.’”

“What sort of obscure muggle figures was the infant Granger obsessed with? Famous dentists? Warrior queens?”

“Peter,” she said, clearly and begrudgingly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, go on.”

“Peter?” He was gleeful. “Thucydides, Crookshanks, and ‘Peter’?”

She dotted an *i* that punctured the parchment. “You know, I think Romilda’s form is off. Why don’t you go help her?”

“Good effort. Who’s ‘Peter’?”

“And that boy Alfie’s been trying to impress you for an hour. You should stop him before he hurts himself.”

“Some snot you fancied in primary school?”

“I didn’t fancy anyone in primary school,” she said, in rising tones, “and I miss it more every day.”

His heart beat powerfully and pleasantly in his chest. He laughed and stole one of her quills from midair.

“Draco Malfoy, *give that back!* And quit being such a pill!”

“I’m not. I’m trying to — *don’t* kick me, witch — learn about your muggle childhood. I’m expressing an — *ow!* — healthy interest in multiculturalism—”

“Multiculturalism! Oh, you’re *such* a—”

“ —spurning my effort to understand the muggle world, rather hypocritical of you, after you’ve go on and on about respect for your culture—”

“‘Respect,’ don’t make me laugh—”

“I *do* respect it, in fact.”

“Expect points for that, do you?”

“Doesn’t one usually?” He leaned on the armrest of her sofa. The light of the windows was to his back, and she shaded her eyes judiciously at him.

“Expect points? For harassing me about childhood toys? You must be often disappointed.”

“No,” he said. “For resisting temptation.”

She leaned forward, her bright little face a wry beam of smugness. Her hands crossed the book in her lap, forgotten. “Not really your specialty, is it?”

“On the contrary. I’m very, very good at it.”

Hermione opened her mouth, still smiling — a little helplessly — and covered her eyes with her hands. “You’re still being a pill.”

“I think I’m being perfectly tactful.”

“I think you’re being perfectly something.”

“Drop the last word, you’d be right.”

“Mm. And humble.”

“Humble? What for? Have you seen me?”

“‘Beauty to make a stranger’s eye distraught,’” she quoted, “‘being made beautiful overmuch, may consider beauty a sufficient end.’”

“God, Yeats was such a dull old codger,” he said dispiritedly.

Faintly gloating, she murmured: “‘Helen, being chosen, made life flat and dull…’”

“I’d hardly say her life was ‘dull,’ no matter what else it was. And if you’ll suffer another excerpt, dear: ‘An intellectual hatred is the worst, so let her think *opinions* are *accursed.’”*

She sniffed. “Well, he couldn’t be right about everything,” she said, and reopened her book, declaring victory.

He smirked at her, which backslid disastrously into a real smile, with teeth and everything, while she wasn’t noticing; when she continued to pretend not to pay attention to him, he prodded her leg with his boot. She kicked him with real force, and his knee buckled.

“Sorry! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry — actually, I’m not sorry. This is *your* fault!”

It took her six words to pivot from high-pitched apologia to accusatory venom. He cracked his eyes at the ceiling and wondered what crimes in a past life now condemned him to like her so much.

Her skirt had ridden up when she kicked him; he revised his opinion on prior crimes.

“It takes two,” he said.

She smoothed her skirt down. He looked at her legs, on principle. “I’m not sure I should dignify that.”

“The question of dignity here seems moot.”

“You’re always dignified,” she said resentfully.

“No comment.”

He straightened, and made eye contact across the room with Ron.

Ron didn’t pretend not to look. He saw and unabashedly kept seeing, with an expression that Draco had seen sometimes as they walked past the quidditch shops, in the impoverished light of a reflected glow.

Harry floated up from the murky subterraneans of something you could, supposably, call a conscience: *He fancies her!*

And so he did. What of it? And it wasn’t his fault that Ron had the common sense to do it. It wasn’t his responsibility to manage Ron’s feelings, any more than it was Hermione’s responsibility to requite them. Draco couldn’t be obliged to indulge them; and it wasn’t as if Ron had some special entitlement to have his feelings protected, either.

Still, it wasn’t as though he didn’t know how it felt. Standing on the other side of the room.

Draco slipped his robe back over his shoulders and smoothed the lapels. His heartbeat jarred the front of his ribs in an abhorrent rhythm. The feeling of her hands on his shoulders lingered like a tight brace over his collarbones.

The wintry sun, sliding through the windows in long silver blades, gave everything a frosted and finely carved look, as if the scene were cast in marble. Shadows puddled under the furniture. The heat of attention seemed to still prickle on the back of his neck, and he found himself restless for the lesson to end; it seemed likely, if not inevitable, that the students were watching him, and drawing insipid conclusions behind the masks of their patently *un*-reassuring smiles. He leaned against the wall by the door, Transfigured an inkwell into a white mouse, and spent the rest of the lesson practicing *Incarcerous,* with increasing efficacy and diminishing vindictiveness, until the clock tolled six.

By Hermione’s edict, the members of Defense Club left in small clumps, so as to avoid the suspicion of traveling together in a large pack. Draco was among the last to leave, usually being delayed by questions about dueling from the more bellicose students. When he finished, he found he was almost alone save for Ron and Hermione, who were chatting in low tones by the door.

When he approached, they broke off. Draco raised his eyebrow and gestured to the exit. Ron set his teeth and rocked back on his heels, bouncing.

Abruptly, he jerked his head at Draco.

“Word, mate?”

“What?”

“Can I,” he said, over-enunciating, “have. A word.”

“About what?” Hermione said shrilly. “What do you want with him?”

“Easy. Merlin. I’m not gonna eat him. Just want to chat, s’all.”

“About what?”

“If I wanted you to know, I’d have said it to you, Mione.”

Hermione stiffened. “There’s no need to be rude,” she said, gathering herself. “I can make myself scarce. I’ll see you two in the common room.”

Ron indicated the room. With a sigh, Draco dropped his bag and stepped back, allowing him to close the door.

They stood under the circling silver instruments while the torches guttered lower and lower in their sconces. Ron was pacing. Draco shifted his weight against a table and folded his arms while Ron worked whatever was in his mouth out of it.

“So what’s the deal with you?” Ron asked cordially, addressing the ceiling.

“Thank you for asking. I’m ankle-deep in an esoteric conversation, and the water’s rising. Yourself?”

“Yeah. Okay. You know what I mean, though.”

“I’ve found that whenever someone feels the need to say that to me, it usually means the opposite.”

“Mate, if you need me to spell it out for you, I will,” he said, “but I don’t reckon either of us would like it.”

Draco folded his fingers over his wand-hilt and was drumming them restlessly. He bit out: “You want to discuss Granger?”

“Sure. You know what, that’s a start. Why d’you call Hermione ‘Granger’? It’s been five years. You even stopped calling me

‘Weasley,’ eventually.”

He was irritated by the mere sound of her name in Ron’s mouth, and the fact that he felt perfectly idiotic for it failed to help.

“I call Potter by his surname,” said Draco, evasively.

“And Daphne, yeah, I noticed. But you call Nott ‘Theodore,’ and ‘Parkinson’ was ‘Pansy’ for a while,” said Ron, unblinking, “and Ginny got promoted to ‘Ginevra’ this year, so can you decrypt this a bit, man? I’m trying to understand if I should be pissed at ‘Ronald’ or not.”

“You shouldn’t be.” He flexed his knuckles on the hilt of his wand. “I can call you Weasley, if you prefer. I warn you, it’ll be miserably confusing in the Tower.”

“Draco—”

“I call her ‘Granger’ because that’s what I call her.”

“That’s a joke, right?”

“Because that’s what I call her,” he said, “and no one else.”

Ron broke off, frowning, and turned back to the lake.

“I see,” he said. “So it’s like. A pet name.”

“Something like that.”

She was Hermione to her fellow students, and Miss Granger to her teachers. Granger, in Gryffindor Tower, meant he was calling her name. And when he paid attention, he could see her posture change when it was him calling: a spine straightened, a habitual glance in the direction of his call.

“So when you guys are like, alone together, in the common room,” Ron said, apropos of nothing, “when we all come back from dinner,

and you're holed up at one of those desks in the window, or whispering over something in the library — or like, when you two come back from patrol, and you're snickering together about something — what are you two talking about?" He swallowed. "Is it prefect stuff?"

"Sometimes."

"But not always?"

"We do have recreational conversations. For practice."

"About what?"

"Quoting an esteemed intellect: that's a joke, isn't it?"

"I mean in general. Like, whenever there's a plan, it always seems like you two have sorted it out yourselves beforehand," said Ron, aggrieved, "and got on the same page about it, and then you both come in on the same side of the argument, and then you win. So I have to assume you're talking about all that when you're off by yourselves, right? Like, are you working on Defense Club stuff, or homework…?"

"We talk about a number of things. She and I spend quite a bit of time together."

"Yeah," said Ron, "see, I'd noticed that."

Two drops peeled from one of the candles and splattered on the flagstone, forming a quivering lemniscate.

"Are you together, then?" Ron said bracingly.

"No."

It was a truth only by technicality, and it must have sounded like it, for Ron's mouth flattened.

“But you want to be, don’t you?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“For fuck’s sake, Draco. Just answer the question.”

“What’s between her and me—”

“Is as confusing as it is bloody obvious. So why don’t you do us a favor and be straight about it, because if you’re messing her around —”

“Messing her around?”

“—I’ll box your ears for you. I’m serious! What are you playing at?”

“You’re far out of line—”

“—turning it on and off with her all the time, like you only fancy her when people aren’t looking—”

“If you were anyone else, I would hex you blind for the insult of saying that.” He wanted to; he could scarcely hear over his heartbeat in his ears. “If you were anyone else, I would have terminated this conversation long, long ago. I’ve endured it, because you have a claim on far more of my patience than most, but even that claim has limits.”

“Why, thank you, sire, for the great gift of your patience! I didn’t realize it was so trying for you to just bloody say you liked her!”

“I warn you again that you are wildly out of line.”

“You can’t. You actually can’t, can you? That’s hysterical. You’ve been welded to her side for years, and you can’t even stand on two feet and say you fancy her. I can’t fucking understand it. Are you trying to have it both ways? Is that it? Do you actually fancy her, or are you just faffing around with her while you sort out what you want?”

He surged forward, carried on the blind wave of an urge to grip Ron by his collar and shake him. Ron stepped back from instinct, but steeled and held his ground.

“Shut up. You haven’t any idea what you’re talking about.”

“No? Because I know what it looks like. It looks like you’re all over her until someone asks you what you’re actually doing, and then it’s mum’s the word, and frankly, mate, she deserves more—”

“I refuse to let *you* instruct me on what she deserves.” His hand coiled around his wand, tight to the point of pain.

“Why not? It’s not hard! She deserves someone who’s proud to be with her, same as anybody—”

His wand snickered out of its sheath and angled at the ground between them. Ron stared at it.

The part of his mind responsible for eloquence had departed to join the part that was shrieking giddily for violence.

“Shut the fuck up,” he said, less evenly than he would have liked. “My regard for Hermione Granger, if you’d like to know — pride doesn’t — it hardly touches the surface of it.”

“Yeah? Great! You’re mad for her. What’s your problem, then?”

“Presently,” he said, sneering, “it’s that you think you’re entitled to know what’s between us. And that you’ve interpreted your confusion as a right to berate me for not making it simple enough for you to understand it.”

Ron wheeled on him. “Right! There it is!” he shouted. “Because I don’t get it, do I? That’s me! Ron doesn’t get it, he’s too slow and common to reach the glorious heights of you and her—”

“Spare me the tears of Saint Ronald the Martyr. Do you ever tire of playing the victim?”

“Maybe I am! You ever think of that? Or of me, at all? After five years of living my sodding life two steps behind you, have you, Draco Malfoy, even once stopped and thought: ‘Wow, I wonder how Ron feels’?”

“Why wonder, when you so readily make it everyone else’s problem?”

“Because you two are so preoccupied with each other you wouldn’t notice if my head exploded!”

“Like fuck. You love feeling sorry for yourself; that’s what this is, and now you’re being an arse over nothing—”

“That’s a lie!” shouted Ron. His eyes blazed like blue fire. “But that’s a lie, and you know it is, you know it’s not ‘nothing’—”

“And what if it’s not?” he spat. He took a savage pleasure in the way Ron recoiled. “Whose business would that be but hers and mine?”

“Because you’re not the only one here with feelings!”

Draco opened his mouth for a denial, but it was stifled by a swell of anger that rose, unbidden, from a deep well inside himself he hadn’t even known. “If you’re talking about yourself,” he said, with strained evenness, “then yes, it’s obvious that you fancy her. What isn’t obvious is why you think that has anything to do with me.”

“Come off it.”

“Do you imagine that if it weren’t for me, she’d be fawning over you? That I’m standing in your way? As if I’ve somehow — what, absorbed the feelings that ought to have been for you? By existing? I do hate to tell you, but if all that stopped her from requiting your feelings was the existence of another person in her orbit, it seems even your wildest fantasies can’t imagine her feeling much for you.”

“Fuck off!”

“Alternatively,” he said, with a mounting edge, “you might think that I’ve spoiled your chances. Did I prevent you from making a go of it? Have I stopped you from laying it on thick whenever she gives you a morsel of attention? Do you think it's somehow my fault it hasn't worked?”

Ron ducked like he’d been clocked on the jaw.

“If Hermione Granger wanted you,” said Draco, through the vise of anger in his chest, “then she’d have you. And either you're just as much a coward as I am, or you already asked her, and she said no.”

Ron took a sharp breath and turned his back on him. The wind kicked up high and cold across the field. The trees moaned.

“So she did reject you, then.”

More wind whistled in the leaves.

“Is that why you're angry at me?” he said, faintly mocking. “Oh, that's very good. You know you're not entitled to be pissed at her for rejecting you, so you're going after the next acceptable target.”

“Shut up, Draco.”

“I'm right, aren't I?”

“That's not what this is about.”

“Don't bother. I've been your scapegoat for years. I know what it feels like.”

Ron nodded, eerily calm.

“You're a fat hypocrite,” he said, voice brittle. “You know that? You get up on your soapbox and tell me off like I’m this prize arsehole because I’m jealous over a girl I fancy. But you’re just as furious at me as I am at you. And you don’t even have a reason to be jealous, because you know she likes you back.”

“I never had any problem with you. You started the row.”

“You can’t stand the idea of me being competition for you.”

“You're not competition for me. It isn't a game.”

“Because it’s not enough for her to like you. It has to be bloody impossible for her to like anyone else. That’s how jealous you are. So you go off at me like I’m an idiot for thinking I could even be her second choice. Which I am, by the way.” His voice took on an edge. “You don’t know the half of what’s there, between Hermione and me.”

“I know most of it has to do with your ego.” Draco’s tone dropped to its chillest register. He ignored a wave of fascinated repugnance at everything that’s there. “The only reason you care about being ‘second’ is because it makes you feel superior. If it were a difference between having her and not having her, ‘second choice’ wouldn’t be any comfort.”

Ron jerked away from him. “Yeah,” he said bleakly. “Well. When you’re never first choice for anything, you have to take what you can get.”

Before Draco could formulate a reply, Ron had stormed out of the Room in a snap of robes.

February brought light snows, fierce winds, and a rainfall of articles in the *Prophet* about skirmishes in the North.

The terrorist organization calling itself ‘Order of the Phoenix’ continued to protest the Runcorn administration with attacks on muggles in Liverpool and Manchester; Thorfinn Rowle, Director of the DMLE, arrested no less than seven different wizards for connections with the group. A Special Commission for the Suppression of Domestic Unrest was formed, at Runcorn’s orders, under the command of Odin Davies, whose daughter Tracey enjoyed

a few days of acute celebrity in the castle as a consequence. She was twice invited to the staff table to dine with Umbridge and Cassius.

Hermione read the papers and set them on fire in quick succession — somewhat dismaying the third year to whom they belonged. But to her visible frustration, she could not consign the whole school's stock of newspapers to the kindling pile.

Nor, in Draco's opinion, should she. "You won't stop anyone by ordering them not to read it," he murmured, watching her shred Daphne's copy of the *Prophet* vigorously and in full view of some ogling first years. (Daphne whimpered, and Hermione begrudgingly surrendered to her the Style section.) "You'll only make Potter seem afraid of the truth."

"He's not afraid of the truth. *I'm* afraid of liars."

"Too bad he isn't. I'll tell you what: if you want to help him, make him stop defending the Order in public. He could stand not to sound like Robespierre every time the subject comes up."

"Didn't he basically bite your head off for suggesting it?"

"Oh, yes. I just hope he's smarter than to try biting off yours."

It would have been easier for Harry, Draco thought, if he would denounce the Order, or at least shut up about it. Instead, he said loudly and to anyone that would listen what he believed — that is, the truth — that the *Prophet* had used the Order for what were in fact Death Eater activities, and that none of the seven arrests were guilty of what the *Prophet* alleged. Because he could not provide any evidence for this without revealing Order secrets, he failed to be particularly convincing even to those few students that listened to him inquisitively and in good faith; and, failing to convince them, he began to appear in public increasingly like the devoted lunatic that the Ministry supposed him to be.

Which might not have bothered them, if it had not diminished attendance at Defense Club. The loyal members came every week, through rain, shine, or detention; but some of the younger students from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw had peeled off, deterred either by Harry's own apparent fidelity to a terrorist organization or by Umbridge's persistent targeting of anyone associated with him.

"You might," Hermione said, hesitantly, "consider pretending — only for the others' benefit—"

"But it wouldn't be 'for their benefit,' would it?" said Harry. He did not lift his eyes from his reading. "It'd be for mine."

"Well, yes. It might also make things easier for you. Is that really so bad?"

"I will not tell lies," said Harry. He turned a page of his book.

It was nature: he was pathologically incapable of turning his back on anything that he loved. In return, the place he loved turned its back on him.

Crowds shifted away from him when he moved down the hallways. Conversations dwindled at his approach, or sank into whispers. No one sat with him, or even near him, except for those who belonged to the Defense Club — though because of the danger of being seen together, they would often pass him by. A small contingent of first years continued to wear Potter's Army armbands until a new Educational Decree amended the uniform code to ban political symbolism. It was, the Decree concluded, a 'distraction.'

One morning, an owl swept down over Harry's breakfast and dropped a dead sparrow on the table. Its throat had been cut.

Cho screamed.

"What is that?" Hermione said sharply. She leapt to her feet and drew her wand. "Who sent it? Harry, don't touch it, it could be jinxed."

“There’s a note,” said Harry dully. He prodded a scrap of parchment tied to its leg with his knife. In jagged, almost illegible font, it read:

VIKTOR KRUM

Draco whipped out his wand and with a brisk motion set the bird on fire. The flames crumpled it quickly beyond recognition, but even as the creature withered to a heap of ash, the image burned healthy and well in his mind’s eye.

Cho was still shrieking, although it had broken into a sort of muffled sob into her hands. Harry stared at it, expressionless.

“Everyone’s scared,” said Ron.

“That doesn’t help. *Ow.”* Harry clapped a hand to his forehead.

“Harry? What’s wrong?”

“It’s fine,” he spat. “I’ll do more Occlumency. It’s fine.”

Cho said nothing for the rest of breakfast. But she came to the next Defense meeting, and the next, and the next. She focused on charmwork, which she was good at, and complex defensive enchantments, runic circles and so forth, the likes of which Hermione took great pride in. But her dueling skills remained weak. Even the broadest openings in an opponent’s guard failed to lure her on the offensive. In matches against Draco, she retreated by the tenth second, and surrendered by the thirtieth.

Like Harry, hers was a problem of nature: she was a seeker, nimble and fleet-footed, but not particularly aggressive. She wasn’t a beater, who played the whole game with an eye to causing harm; nor a chaser, who had to scramble and fight for control of the ball; nor a keeper, trained to stand her ground against enemies soaring at her

at the speed of pain. She was trained to wait for the opportune moment, but if the moment didn’t come, she would hover forever.

When Harry asked after her mother, she bit her lip.

“She wants to pull me out,” she admitted. “Reckons it’s not safe here. In England, I mean, not just at Hogwarts. She wants me to finish out at Beauxbatons.”

“You’re leaving?”

“No. I told her I wouldn't go,” said Cho stoutly. “Not even if she told me to. I — I’m not Zachariah.” The boy had stopped coming to Defense Club meetings after January’s spate of Educational Decrees.

“You shouldn’t stay just for me,” Harry protested. “If you’re not safe — if you’ve got anywhere else to go, Cho — you probably should.”

“You *want* me to leave?”

“No, I’d be miserable, but I don’t want you to row with your mum over me, and if she’s right—”

“So you and the Weasleys are the only ones who get to make sacrifices? I don’t see you telling anyone else to get lost!”

“I’d rather no one make sacrifices, actually!” said Harry angrily. “It’s not a contest to see who can hurt themselves the most!”

“Do you think I haven’t? Because this year hasn’t been a cakewalk, Harry!”

“Yeah! I noticed that! Believe it or not, I’m aware that being around me is a pretty raw deal! And if you were sick of it, I’d understand!”

“I told you, I *want* to stay, but I don’t want to stay if you don’t want me to!”

“Maybe I don’t want you to!”

“Fine!”

She snatched up her bag and stormed out of the Room of Requirement. Hermione sighed, and got up to close the door behind her.

Evening Potions meant the day’s last hours of sunlight were sacrificed to the subterranean darkness of the dungeons. They had a double block with the Ravenclaws, but Cho was noticeably absent, meaning that her usual Potions partner, Marietta, moved over to sit with Neville — usually by himself — instead. Neville was so glad to have a partner he seemed not to mind one who spent the block shooting glares at Harry.

Hermione cracked open the book and slid it over to her side of the desk without waiting for his say-so. He unsheathed the cleaver and sharpened it with a few whisks of the whetstone, giving its blade a hair-fine gleam.

“Powdered moonstone?” said Hermione, poking her wand at the burner. A neat jet of blue flames leapt the gap and took up a cheerful residence under the cauldron.

“Measured. Do you have the stirring wand?”

“Mm.”

He passed the silver cradle of moonstone over and placed it on her side of the desk, avoiding her outstretched hand. Hermione looked at him.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she said, after a moment. She slipped an elastic from her wrist and began tying her hair up. The scent of her shampoo fell out of the dark rolls of hair, infecting the steam from their cauldron. He

turned his head away and considered the far wall, where Harry and Ron's cauldron had already begun to gush smoke like an industrial chimney. The smell failed to dissipate.

Their cauldron hissed and bloomed purple smoke, and she leapt up, swearing loudly, while Snape peered over from where he was siphoning Neville's cauldron, and scorched the back of Draco's neck with his stare.

The class concluded without incident, and Snape gave inspections for the few students who had completed their potions. Draco's and Hermione's received not one word of comment, which was incredible praise. Neville's was the wrong purple, and issuing far too much smoke, but remarkably not, in fact, dangerous to ingest; Seamus's had been Vanished to preserve the structural integrity of the classroom.

Last, Snape peered into the dubious contents of Harry and Ron's effort.

"Tell me, Potter," said Snape, "can you read?"

"So I thought, sir," said Harry.

"Read the third line of the instructions."

With exaggerated lethargy, Harry hauled open his book. He held it open in front of his face.

"Out loud," snarled Snape, through a chorus of tittering. Draco massaged his temple, contemplating the difficulties of scheduling Defense Club if a quarter of its staff were dead.

"'Add powdered moonstone, stir three times counterclockwise, let simmer for seven minutes, then add two drops of hellebore syrup.'"

"Did you do everything on the third line, Potter?"

"...No."

“What was that?”

“No,” said Harry loudly. “But you know what, sir—”

Before he could finish this loud cry for punishment, the door creaked, and Umbridge stepped into the classroom.

Snape straightened.

“Dolores.”

“Severus.”

Hermione twisted around. “What’s she doing?” she hissed.

“Did I interrupt your class?” said Umbridge sweetly. “I had so hoped I wouldn’t.”

“Evidently not enough to consult a schedule,” said Snape.

Harry appeared to be wrestling with the moral dilemma of his lifetime.

“Goodness. How busy. Well,” said Umbridge, “I hate to say this in front of the class, but I am afraid that the Ministry regulations do not permit Potions to be taught in unventilated classrooms. We will be relocating you to the fourth fl—”

“Class is dismissed,” said Snape.

The screech of chairs and chitter of books swallowed whatever she was going to say. Umbridge glowered at him, which Snape returned with a dead-eyed stare.

Harry and Ron were lingering by the door, which clicked shut behind Draco and Hermione.

“What are you waiting f—”

Harry pressed a finger to his lips, and lifted one of the twins' Extendable Ears.

"...inform him that you are deliberately preventing a Ministry employee from conducting Ministry business! Which is, as I am sure you know — given your *previous acquaintance* with the criminal justice system, Severus — is a misdemeanor!"

"You are asking for information that I do not have." Snape's voice was droll, slow, and condescended so severely it could have been addressed to an infant. "And if I did have it, I wonder that you mistake me for your informant."

"You were more than happy to tell me before—"

"An anonymous article pertaining to the whereabouts of a dangerous man. Locating your headmaster, however, who keeps an office in this castle—"

Ron stifled a cough. Hermione whacked him on the arm, wide-eyed, her ear flush to the door.

"You deny, then, any knowledge of a connection between them?"

"I deny any knowledge of what you're talking about," said Snape dryly, with the intrigue of someone counting lint pieces. "I 'deny' any part in this conversation. I was inducted into it by your delusions, and they remain my sole connection."

"You are lying! I know you are lying! *Where is Albus Dumbledore?* What is he doing when he leaves the school?"

"Savoring his limited time away from the faculty, presumably."

"Don't talk back to me, you— you—"

"Careful. I am not one of your students."

Umbridge heaved for breath. “You are under my jurisdiction as Special Inquisitor. And in fact you will find it most convenient to do what I want, in any case, because otherwise,” she said, so eager she stammered, “otherwise—”

“Otherwise, you will relieve me of the post of Potions Master,” said Snape silkily. “Every night, I say a little prayer.”

“You doubt my nerve?”

“Worse. Your judgment. You know my students’ scores, Dolores.” It was matter-of-fact, indifferent. “You may find a replacement caretaker. Wilhelmina will undoubtedly surpass the mongrel’s efforts in Care of Magical Creatures. You might even succeed in replacing Sibyl, if you triumph over Minerva’s appeal to the Board; but these are soft subjects. Remove your Potions Master three months from the exam, and you may have the privilege of explaining to the Board why a full cohort has failed their N.E.W.T. in Potions.”

“You academics always think you are irreplaceable,” she trilled furiously. “You are cheap, overpaid, under-managed recreants who think the fact that you read lots of big books makes you special. But you are not special! And you are *not* important! Not you, not Minerva, not Filius, and not your little ringleader, Dumbledore—”

“The colloquial term is ‘employer.’”

“I’m not talking about your job.”

A pause.

“Are you… attempting… to accuse me of something?”

“Only that you spend more time with Albus Dumbledore than anyone alive. Anything a jury would believe of him,” she said, with relish, “and anything they believed of Sirius Black, they would happily believe of you.”

“I rather doubt it,” said Snape blithely. “Sirius Black is a murderer and terrorist. Besides, to convict him, you would have to lay hands on him. Which, in candor, is not something I am convinced your administration can do.”

“No thanks to you!”

“I have twice offered you information on his whereabouts. It is not my fault you cannot seem to make use of it.”

Harry made a noise. Hermione clapped her hand over his mouth.

“Those leads were cold,” she snapped. “As I begin to suspect you knew! Fletcher knew nothing. His mind was gone.”

“I did warn you about the dangers of overusing Veritaserum.”

“He never had any! His memory had been *tampered with!* By whom, I do not wonder!”

“Then you should have been subtler in approaching him,” said Snape sharply. “The Order is not a group of fools. They are as capable of memory charms as anyone else.”

“So are most spies,” spat Umbridge. “And I suppose you would have the most reason to use them. After all, who knows what Fletcher might have revealed about you, Severus?”

Snape did not reply at first.

At length, he said: “Would you permit a question, Dolores?”

“I would.”

“If you believe me to be the traitor you suggest,” said Snape softly, “may I ask why you consider it a good idea to threaten me?”

Hermione shivered and tightened her grip on Harry.

The click of heels was their only warning. They scrambled back around the corner as Umbridge burst from the Potions classroom, her shoes making a swift staccato of rage up the steps.

The echoes had scarcely faded when Harry gave a strangled cry, and Ron seized him by the elbow. “Private,” he blurted, “we’ve got to get somewhere private—”

“NO! Gerroff me, I’m going to the Owlery—”

“Bloody well not, you idiot, they’re watching the post—”

“Then the Floo! Or I’ll go to Hogsmeade—”

“They shut the Floo, and don’t be a moron — Hermione, we need to get him a room—”

“The undercroft,” she said. “Here.”

In the torchlit vault, Harry was hustled in and shoved down on a makeshift chair of a barrel covered in a dusty sheet. Hermione hauled the door close and swept a route of protective enchantments over them, her *Muffliato* simultaneous with Harry’s shout.

“He told her! Slimy, filthy fucking *snivelling* snake, he told her about Sirius—”

“We don’t know that, Potter.”

“He *said so!* Do you want it in *writing?”*

“He only said he gave her information,” Hermione cut in urgently, “which could mean anything. It could be lies—”

“She said his name! ‘Sirius Black,’ you all heard her—”

“She could have been making a point!” she cried. “She could have been — extemporizing!”

“No, I reckon she’s right,” said Ron, his voice even despite the considerable effort it was taking to pin Harry down. “It tracks. Snape fed her information about him — because, no shit, he fucking hates him — and she suspects Dumbledore’s working with Black, so now she’s plumbing him for stuff on Dumbledore.”

“Yes! Exactly! Thank you, Ron, now get the hell off—”

“But you still need to have a sit and think, mate.”

“Fuck sitting here! I’m going to warn him he’s been betrayed — betrayed *again—”*

“He might not be. You don’t know what he told her. Snape’s a double-agent,” Draco said, his voice breaking loud and harsh over the din. Harry glared at him, chest heaving. “Spreading false information is his job. I’ll bet you my last galleon he was instructed to feed Umbridge false information to throw her off Dumbledore’s scent.”

“Yes, and Harry, think about it,” Hermione added eagerly. “What about Mundungus? Remember? Mundungus Fletcher, who disappeared? Moody himself said he was probably the mole! The only thing we really know is that Umbridge suspects Sirius and Dumbledore both of being involved with the Order, which Dung easily could have told her.”

“Dumbledore trusts Snape,” said Draco.

“I’m not Dumbledore!” Harry roared. “I don’t know why he does things, or what he wants — never explains himself to anyone, definitely not to me—”

“Because you’re fifteen,” Hermione cried, her worry overwhelmed now by exasperation. “God! I love you, Harry, but why *would* he explain to you? You’re a fifteen-year-old! A student!”

“Don’t pretend any of this is normal, Hermione!” he shouted back. “I’m not ‘some fifteen-year-old’! Dumbledore stuck me in a safehouse because he didn’t trust the Dursleys to protect me from people *he knew* wanted me dead, but he won’t explain why he keeps one of them in his fucking pocket—”

“But you know why! Be sensible! He keeps Snape around because he’s a double-agent, and even if he wanted to get rid of him, it’d be far too dangerous, considering how much he knows about the Order! Which Dumbledore must have assumed you would understand without being told, seeing as you’ve been living with spies for *months* now, and in the off chance you didn’t Not to mention there’s a perfectly decent chance that Voldemort can quite literally *read your mind!”*

“Don’t say it,” said Draco and Ron, sharply, at once. They glared at each other. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Fine. ‘The Dark Lord’ might be able to read your mind. Making you, frankly, the last person anybody should tell their war secrets. And if you try to contact Sirius now, the Ministry will follow you straight to the Order.”

“Snape wants him dead,” Harry said doggedly, ignoring her. “Sirius. You know he does. He’s tried to kill him before. Am I the only one who cares about that?”

Ron made a noncommittal sound and shifted his weight, looking at the floor. Harry set his jaw.

“Were you under the impression that everyone in an army had to like each other?” Draco said curtly. “Severus Snape has been a faithful and useful servant of your cause for sixteen years. Would that Sirius Black could say as much.”

“Sirius is my godfather.”

“Snape’s mine. Which by any accounting ought to privilege my opinion about this over thirty seconds of eavesdropping.”

Hermione crouched in front of Harry and took his hands. He gazed down at her with a wild guilt.

“I understand,” she said calmly. “You want to protect him. But tearing off to find him will draw attention, no matter what you do. You have to find a way to trust Snape.”

“I don’t trust him.”

“Then the whole Order’s shot,” she said, without missing a beat, “and we might as well give up, shall we? Seeing as Voldemort knows everything.”

With an answerless groan, Harry bent and pressed his forehead to their clasped hands.

“He’s going to die.”

“He’s not going to die.”

“He’s going to get himself killed.”

“No, he won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

Hermione drew back her hands, forcing him to look at her.

“Harry Potter, I happen to know everything,” she said, in a nasal, shrill register. *“I* read all about it in *Hogwarts: A History.”*

Harry hung his head and broke into a weak laugh, bracing his elbows on his knees.

“If he hurts Sirius,” he said, “I’m gonna kill him.”

Hermione glanced at Ron. Something passed between them. Ron moved his head at her and gestured shortly with his hand.

She read something in his movements that answered her question, because she smiled a small and reassuring smile.

Draco turned away and folded his arms, stinging with a resentment that had no object, for envy of something he couldn't even name.

"I hope it won't come to that," said Hermione. She stood up. "The best thing you can do for Sirius right now is to focus on your Occlumency."

Harry grunted an unenthusiastic response. But he clambered up and followed the others from the undercroft, quiet, as per usual.

With night opaque and mirrored on the window-panes, Draco descended into the dark well of the Entrance Hall. Echoes of the bells sounding a nine o'clock curfew faded into the drafty fathoms above him, and torchlight made rippling masks of the oil paintings that walled the stair. He lit his wand and leaned on the banister at the foot of the stairwell. The many Educational Decrees sprouted above and around the notice-board like a white and flaking skin of mold.

Hermione was ten minutes late for patrol. He cast *Nox* and practiced his impression of a patient man.

He heard her footsteps before he saw her. She came whirling down the stairs with her hair wrenched up around a quill, lilting perilously from its hold.

"Sorry! Sorry, sorry. I had to change."

"You changed your shirt," he said, "for a patrol?"

"Yes." She stuck her wand between her teeth while she finished pinning up her hair. Strays drifted around her temples, charmingly

tousled, an effect her flush did nothing to help. Her face was shiny.

“May I ask why?”

“Spilled on it.” She rolled up her cuffs, revealing a pair of dainty wrists, a bandaged hand. “Ron knocked over one of my Everfull Inkwells, and you can imagine the mess.”

“Why was *he* using them?”

She glanced at him oddly. “He wasn’t. We were just talking. Anyway, I hope you don’t mind the delay. I know you don’t like to be kept waiting, but I was really covered in it—”

“I was hardly going to code you for an inkstain.”

“I wasn’t worried,” she said, stilted, “about being coded. It’s just that I like being — presentable.”

He let the point drop with a shrug of his shoulder. Hermione plunged a hand elbow-deep in her bag and emerged gripping the soft, aging folds of the Marauder’s Map. “I have an idea,” she said triumphantly.

The corner of his mouth pulled up. “When don’t you?”

“I was trying to think of a way to spy on Theodore Nott — and Warrington, ideally — when I remembered that we already had one. The Map tells us at a glance whether they’re on school grounds, and if so, where they are, albeit with the exception of places the Marauders didn’t plot, like the Room of Requirement, but how many of those can there be? Anyway, I borrowed the Map from Harry and spent a few nights going over it before I went to sleep—”

“Define ‘sleep.’”

“—and what do you know?” she said, fiercely satisfied. “Theodore Nott is almost *always* out of bed after curfew.”

He tilted his head, immediately ill-at-ease. “Based on your tone, I don’t suppose he’s dutifully executing his Inquisitor patrols.”

“Alone?” she said smugly. “At two in the morning? In the same place every night? Impossible to say.”

His intrigue sharpened. “Where is he going alone?”

“That’s the funny part. He’s not meeting anyone. He just floats around the second-floor corridor. See? He’s there now.” She leaned close and pointed to the Map. A black dot labeled THEODORE NOTT was trundling steadily up the page, footsteps winking swiftly in and out of sight. He followed its trajectory, but the corridor ahead of it terminated in a wall.

“What’s he visiting on the second floor?”

“My first question,” she agreed. “At first I thought he was using a hidden room, and that’s why the Map didn’t show him leaving, so during yesterday’s lunch I went to have a look—”

“One of these days you might spend a meal period actually eating.”

“Terribly inefficient things, meals,” she said brightly, “never really got into them. Anyway, I conducted a thorough search for passages behind all the portraits and tapestries — let me tell you, some of them did *not* fancy being moved — but unfortunately most of it’s useless. The only way out besides the staircase is a passage behind the tapestry of Witch Lingad the Pink, and I doubt Theodore’s interested in it.”

“Why? Where does it go?”

“Gryffindor Tower,” she replied. “A possibility I dismissed for obvious reasons, and judging by your expression, I expect you agree — unless there’s something going on between him and Daphne?”

Draco did not know what his expression did then, but Hermione laughed awkwardly.

“Right. Er, no. I didn’t think so. I just remembered that she fancied him, for a while, and you mentioned he might have been a bit soft on her—”

“They’re not romantically involved. They are also not, strictly speaking, platonically involved,” he said, quelling the instinctive nausea of discussing Daphne’s love life. “She hasn’t talked to him in months. And she hadn’t a clue about Warrington.”

“I thought so, but I had to check. You’d be surprised how clever she can be about keeping secrets. Anyway, the only other place I can think he’d go is the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.” She pointed to the tiny indicated door. “To meet with Umbridge, you see. But she isn’t there. So I’m forced to conclude he’s doing something else.”

“And you,” he said tiredly, “want to go find out what it is.”

She was already tucking the Map into her pocket. “It’s an unmissable opportunity, Draco. The castle’s empty, we know exactly where he is, Harry gave me the Invisibility Cloak, and if he tries anything, there’s two of us. Besides, don’t you want to know what he’s doing?”

“Have you ever contemplated the phrase ‘looking for trouble’?”

“Yes, often,” she said primly. “I understand it to be the definition of ‘patrol.’ Are you coming?”

He was, though not without grievances, which he made known by pointedly taking the Map from her. He also forced her to wear the Cloak by herself, so that their joined volume would not lift the hem, which drew a predictable slew of objections.

On the second floor he put out his wandlight and cast charms to muffle the sound of his feet, then crept in the sliver of shadow

directly beneath the torches, where darkness pooled in the edges of the halls. A Disillusionment Charm was always helped by poor light, and his Disillusionment wasn't quite as good as Hermione's: a fact she had no reservations about pointing out.

"...reason *you* ought to wear the Cloak, I can practically *see* you. Your refraction index is atrocious; this is just silly—"

"Do keep your voice down, Granger dear. You're the loudest spy I've ever heard."

"First, not true, we've both met Tonks," she retorted in a very loud whisper. "Second, it won't matter if he hears me, because he's going to see you coming up the stairs—"

"And what do you want me to do about it?"

"Put the Cloak on! And let me cast a spell we both know very well I'm better at!"

"No," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because then he might see you."

She gave an irritated huff that was so Hermione he could practically see the motion of her lips.

"You're sneaking up on a man who works for a Death Eater," he muttered. "Indulge me in the fantasy that you're taking it seriously."

He checked a corner, first with the Map, then with his own eyes, and stepped around it carefully. The second-floor corridor branched off from the mouth of the staircase. Moonlight from the castle windows carved pale ellipses on the stone. A row of tapestries depicting the wizarding theater of the English Civil War wafted gently in the evening chill. The Map dutifully reported Theo's location in a small room behind one of the doors on the right.

“I *do* take it seriously,” she said, in a different tone. “I have to. I just don’t want to be scared of everything.”

“Then I’ll have to do it for you,” he said tautly, and held out the Map wordlessly. Her thin hand, dappled in torchlight, appeared disembodied from the gloom to take it; she hesitated, and then the hood rippled back, revealing her small bright face in a shrine of curls, floating.

“Why?” she said. Her eyes searched his. “I mean it. Why? Between this, and the phoenix tears, and what you said on the train, about it being easy. Why?”

He stared at her.

“You *know* why.”

“No. I mean, I know what you mean. But that’s not an answer,” she said, brows furrowing. “Lots of people fancy someone, and that isn’t… that. It’s a different thing.”

“I wouldn’t know the difference,” he said.

Her brows furrowed more, but there was a sharp noise behind him and he whirled around. It came again: a muted *BANG,* metal on metal, followed by a muffled shrill of a woman’s voice.

“Who’s he with?” Hermione hissed, whisking back against the wall. “Who’s that woman? I didn’t see her when we were coming.”

“I don’t know; check the Map. He’s in that room there, you can see the light under the door.”

“But he can’t possibly be in there, it’s a girls’ bathroom, and — oh, *idiot!”* She was vehement. “Idiot, idiot! I’m such an *idiot!”*

“What, for Merlin’s sake?”

“That’s Myrtle’s bathroom!” she whispered, showing him the Map. “She’s in there, too!”

A dot labeled MYRTLE WARREN floated next to, nearly intersecting, THEODORE NOTT.

“Wonderful, explains everything. Why the fuck is he talking to Moaning Myrtle?”

“Probably because she won’t bloody leave him alone. As for the bathroom, it’s the least-traveled room in the castle. Remember when we brewed a potion in there for a month and nobody cared?”

Another loud noise jarred them. Hermione brushed past Draco eagerly and pressed close to the door. He grimaced and followed her. The voices from inside the bathroom pitched into earshot.

“...horrid little boys barge in here and bash it all to pieces! Some thanks for helping you...”

“You haven’t,” said Theo, his voice ragged. “You haven’t helped me. If anything, you’ve made things worse.”

“Don’t say that,” cried Myrtle. “You *asked* me… I told you the answer… I’ve only been helpful…”

“Oh, choke on it. The one helpful thing you ever did for me was die, and you’re still fucking useless, at that.” Another BANG. Something shattered.

“Don’t be mean,” she wailed. “I’ve got it bad enough already… at least you’re alive, you can leave… in fact, leave me alone, why don’t you…”

“Did your brain die with the rest of you? Does it look like I want to be here?” Footsteps crunched over something; shards, probably. “I’m done for tonight. This place had better not be fucking flooded again tomorrow, Warren. Or I’ll give you something to really cry about.”

Draco recognized what was about to happen with perhaps four seconds to spare. He wrenched Hermione away from the door, hauled her around, and pinned her against the wall. He ripped the Invisibility Cloak up and over both of them, drawing the hood tight over both their heads. Hermione gasped and he slapped his hand over her mouth.

The door to the bathroom burst open, and Theo strode out, the glow of a spell still fading from his wand-tip. His robe was missing, leaving him in shirtsleeves and a pullover, both of which were soaked. His hair stood up from its coif like raised hackles and his face, dripping wet, was set in a tight vise of fury. He checked the hallway with a short, impatient jerk of his head in both directions, then stalked off for the stairs.

Hermione exhaled. The hot air rushed over his fingers. Draco eased his hand off her mouth, palm hot.

“Sorry. Did that hurt?”

“No. It’s fine,” she said faintly. “Good reflexes.”

He nodded.

“We should,” she said. “Look in the bathroom. For evidence.”

“Right.”

Neither moved.

Inhaling, she laid her hands flush to his chest and gently pushed. He stepped back, letting the Cloak wilt from his shoulders and pool on the floor.

But the bathroom was a disappointment twice over. Inside there was nothing but a few chipped sinks, a shattered toilet, Theo’s ostensible victims, and a two-inch layer of water on the floor. A broken faucet sprayed. Myrtle was gone.

They probed around, trying to disturb as little as possible, before giving up and retreating to the hallway. Hermione shut the door behind her, wiping water from her cheek. “That was rather useless,” she murmured, clearly upset about it. “We hardly got any information. Except that Theodore apparently spends his nights berating ghosts.” She shook out the cloak and folded it over her arm to tuck it back in the bag.

“That’s not strictly true. We know he asked her something. And he didn’t like the answer.”

“Yes, but what did he ask Myrtle?” she said absently. “I suppose we could just ask her, couldn’t we…? But then she might tell him we did, and I don’t want him knowing we followed him.”

“I agree. And I strongly suspect he asked how she died.”

She blinked at him. “How do you figure?”

“Because it’s the only interesting thing that ever happened to Myrtle Warren,” he said, ignoring her disapproving noise, “and because he said it was the only helpful thing she ever did for him.”

“But Myrtle doesn’t know how she died,” said Hermione thoughtfully. “No one does. She’s listed in *The Ghosts of Hogwarts Castle,* seventy-fourth edition, under ‘unknown cause of death.’ The section on her just says there was a ‘tragic accident’ in 1943 — oh, relax, I didn’t memorize it. I looked her up when she kept bothering us in third year.”

“Thank Merlin.”

She smirked and lifted her chin. “Could’ve fooled you, couldn’t I?”

“Appalled me, more like.” He leaned his forearm on the wall beside her.

Hermione grinned wider. Then her eyes shifted down his face, and her grin faded. She wet her lips, as if to say something, and didn't. The torchlight rippled over her skin like the shadows of tide underwater.

He wanted to kiss her so badly it was dizzying. To snog the haughtiness out of her, however many years it took.

"What you said on the train," she said timidly, interrupting his thoughts. "Did you still… want… to talk about it?"

He looked at her. She was staring pointedly at his chest and twisting the strap of her bag within an inch of its life.

"That depends," he said slowly, "on whether you still think I shouldn't say certain things to you."

"I do."

"Then this is going to be difficult."

She nodded, dropping her chin.

"I just don't think," she said, "that there's any room for… I mean, it probably wouldn't… for one thing, we don't have the time."

"Don't have the time?" he repeated disgustedly. "Granger, you don't sleep. Neither of us do. It isn't about time."

"Fine. It's about functionality, then. It's about making sure that, that, that we can be functional, and won't get stupid about each other whenever there's a problem, which is often, and—"

"If you don't want something," he said, with an acrid bitterness in his mouth, "have the courage to come out and say you don't want it. I've known you too long for excuses."

Her head snapped up. "It's not an excuse," she said angrily. "It's a very real, *very* compelling reason we shouldn't start anything

together.”

“Oh, well done, then, not starting anything.”

“I hadn’t! *You* did!”

“On the train?”

“That was you.”

“The first time.”

She flushed dark red. “Fine, that was me,” she agreed levelly. “Which I apologized for.”

“I don’t want your apology.”

“What *do* you want, then?”

“Nothing you’re willing to give. And that’s fine. You never were obligated to feel anything.”

“It isn’t about what *I feel!* If it was only about what I wanted, we’d have done something like this ages ago!”

Something tight coiled in his chest. He hated the sour little line of unhappiness in her mouth, the furrow between her eyes.

“Would we? Really? Because when I asked you, we were friends and then we were ‘friends,’ and then we were friends that kiss each other, and finally ‘complicated friends,’ whatever that means—”

“It takes two people to have a conversation!”

“And you told me you needed time to think.”

“Is that wrong? Is it so terrible of me to want to reflect before I destroy our friendship?”

“Destroy? Are you serious? Do you really think I would?”

“No! I’m afraid of messing it up!” she snapped. “I don’t want to fail! I told you that, you just didn’t listen, because you couldn’t believe that *everything* might not be *totally* about you!”

“‘Fail’? It isn’t an exam!”

“I know that,” she snapped, blazing, “because if it were an exam, I’d be good at it, wouldn’t I?”

She stepped forward, and he caught her by the hips. She was so warm. Even through the cotton of her skirt, her skin was warm.

Hermione was still scowling at him. Her scowl faltered when he drew close enough to throw a shadow over the torchlight on her face.

“My God,” she said, “see? We can’t even talk about this without bickering. We’re both total nightmares. We’d tear each other apart.”

He didn’t listen to her. She was probably right, but he didn’t care.

“You told me to ask. Fine. I’ll ask,” he said. “What do you *want,* Granger?”

Hermione’s chest rose and fell. Her teeth edged her bottom lip.

“Obviously, you,” she said. It was waspish, but sincere. “As always. Regrettably.”

He kissed her. She kissed him back, angrily, with a brief clash of teeth where she seemed to be trying to bite him and kiss him at once; the white-knuckle grip of her hands in his shirt made him weak in the knees.

He had to shove himself away from her to do what he needed to do. It was quite possibly the hardest thing he had ever done, and that included flying around a dragon enclosure.

“Alright,” he said, through a buzz of want. “We’re not doing this here.”

“Not doing what? Shouting at each other? Because I’ve bad news about that,” said Hermione, with a sweet condescension that made him want to kiss her again, wretchedly, for some reason. “We’ve been doing it for the past five minutes. If there’s someone down there, they’ve had their share of evening entertainme— *what are you doing?”*

He tugged her by the hand up the hallway. For all her fussing, she never tried to free her hand, and by the time they reached the seventh floor, she was almost walking alongside him, keeping pace with a double-stride for each of his. The Room of Requirement bloomed from the flat wall in silent answer to his need, iron curlicues swirling around a silver doorknob that rose to meet his hand.

“What are we doing here?”

“Talking. Privately.”

“Is that it? Do you know how many broom cupboards we passed?”

“I’m not doing this in a broom cupboard.”

“Doing *what?”* She sounded nervous, though not half as nervous as she was cross at being left out of the loop. In this, as ever, she was utterly herself.

He hauled the door open and swept her inside. It clanged shut behind them with a safe, assuring rattle of metal.

It was his dueling chamber again, with its vaulted ceilings, and panels of floriate stained glass. The Room was a different space in the evening, a calmer one. The fire bled yellow into the room’s vault of deep blue shadow. The windows were inked in navy, laced by silver filaments of rain.

With a breath that felt like about a douse of cold water, he drew his wand and walked into the center of the room. Hermione made an angered and bewildered noise, slightly bereft, as if she had been cut off in the middle of something.

“Cast a Patronus.”

She gave a strangled noise.

“What?” she said. “Now?”

“You didn’t cast one at the meeting.”

“Because I can’t,” she muttered. “It doesn’t work when I do it. I don’t know why.”

“Let’s fix it, then.”

“What, *now?”*

“Draw your wand, Granger. I bet you can.”

“This is embarrassing.”

“I know,” he said. “Do it anyway.”

Tight-lipped, she drew her wand and lifted it.

“Expecto Patronum.”

Wisps fluttered from her wand like cigarette trails. She gestured with frustration.

“There. See? I did everything right, the spell was perfect, I don’t know why it didn’t work. Can we go back to what we were talking about, please?”

He circled her in slow, measured steps. She pivoted to watch him, hesitant and suspicious. Her footwork was perfect, as was her spell

construction. There was nothing wrong with her form. She wouldn't have allowed it. Harry and Ron could offer nothing to correct her on, nor, frankly, would she let them. There was merely the indelible fact that it didn't work.

"Which memory do you use?"

She twitched and glanced away.

"Transfiguration class," he said resignedly. "The library. No. Worse. It's marks, isn't it? Exams? Prefect meetings."

"My Prefect letter," she said hotly, and continued, over a trumpet of triumphant laughter: "And there's nothing wrong with being proud of myself—"

"No, but you can't make a Patronus out of pride. There's a reason Potter and Ronald are good at these."

She rolled her eyes and swished her wand absently, scowling, throwing sparks. "That's wishy-washy and you know it. For a spell this useful, it's not good design to put this much stock in whether or not you get the feeling right. Magic should operate on the grounds of predictable, controlled phenomena. Scientifically, that's all a feeling is, anyway."

"Maybe," he said, privately disagreeing. *Predictable* and *controlled* did not, in his experience, tend to apply. "But you might also say that it's an animated creature, and animation requires passion. The word 'spirit' etymologically descends from the Latin word for 'breath.' The moving bellows of the body. The part that stirs."

"It's so colossally unfair," she said, "that you were tutored in Latin. It's just ridiculous."

"Structural injustice is not the reason you can't do a Patronus. Think of something that moves you."

“Hm. A train.”

“A piece of music, for example,” he said, refusing to concede his amusement. He continued to circle, and she turned her head to watch him, following curiously from her periphery. “Your parents. That beastly cat. I don’t know. Remember a moment you wanted to keep. Something you were glad to be alive for.”

She tilted her head, considering. At length, she lifted her wand and, hesitantly, swished it.

“Expecto Patronum.”

A wiggly mass of something leapt from her wand, swirled through the air, and was lost. Hermione startled.

“That was— did you see—”

“Much better. Try again.”

“But it worked,” she said, almost cross. “It shouldn’t have *worked.”*

“Technically, it didn’t. Do it again. Try another memory.”

“It can’t be that simple.”

“Typical you, wanting it to be harder.”

“Expecto Patronum! Oh, did you see that? It was almost there!”

“Better. Try again.”

She rolled her shoulders, feet fidgeting. Her brows tightened infinitesimally, as if she were almost in pain.

“Expecto Patronum.”

Silver unfurled from her wand in a slow billow, swirling together as if stirred by an invisible hand. A head resolved from the mist, crowned

by two small, round ears; it wriggled out of the primordial fog, followed by a long, sinuous body, four short limbs, and a long, lashing tail.

“Look at that. You were right.”

Her eyes flared open. She gasped and covered her mouth.

The otter hopped across an invisible series of shelves, climbing a circuit in the air, and then dove as if through water, its body undulating in a smooth glide.

“That’s — I did it.”

“Yes.”

“That’s my Patronus,” she said softly. She was staring at it with a starstruck expression that she reserved for the increasingly rare pieces of magic that, in their wonder, overwhelmed her natural sensibility of pragmatism. “An otter.”

“As you suspected.” He twirled his wand, feigning decorum, though the corner of his mouth was bent irreparably into a smile. They watched the otter frolic cheerfully around the chandelier. “A shame Lovegood was wrong.”

“Thank you,” she said, still soft, and her head still upturned. “We are — going to be truly, horrendously late for patrol, but — thank you.”

“Do I get to know who ‘Peter’ is, now?”

“No.”

“Fine.”

The otter swirled around her shoulders, shrouding her in white mist. She giggled a little, and reached up to stroke its back, her finger passing through the silver like gossamer.

There was tension in his shoulders. He cut deep into his reserves of courage, which were usually shallow, but now opened for him beautifully, easily, as if they had been holding their contents in reserve for this moment.

He called upon a memory of heat on a wide lake in summer, lemonade pitchers in crystal glasses, her laughter, a warm breeze, a place where nothing could hurt them.

“Expecto Patronum.”

A thread of white issued from his wand, swirled, and knotted together in a weave. From this nebula of white, a pair of wings sprouted, as did a short, angular beak, and finally the twin curves of a high, heart-shaped face.

The barn owl beat its wings, twice, and then alighted into the ceiling, carving a long, glistening circuit around the room.

Hermione made a sound. He lowered his wand without looking at her. He knew the expression on her face — wide open with wonder, backlit by joy. Her expression for all magic.

“It’s lovely.” Her voice was velvet. He twitched.

“Thank you,” he said brusquely.

She couldn’t understand — could not have known, could not have been expected to know — what it meant to say so; the etiquette of patronuses wouldn’t have been taught to her. She had learned them as weapons and tools, not as social gestures.

“It’s… an owl,” she said. “I recognize the species, I think.”

He drew his handkerchief and began cleaning his wand, mechanically.

“You should,” he said. “I bought you that owl. I’ll be quite put out if something’s happened to it.”

There was a pause. The heat of her attention warmed the side of his face.

“It’s my owl?”

“Or any other of the species *Tyto alba.* Meaning, literally, ‘white owl,’ making my rendition here somewhat literal.”

“But it’s *my* owl in particular. Tyto alba. The one you got me.”

He glanced up at his patronus, which was still making lazy spirals in the rafters. Her owl.

“That’s the one,” he said. “Theocritus, or what-have-you.”

“Thucydides,” she said softly. “Because I sent you *History of the Peloponnesian War* as a Christmas present. And you didn’t get me anything—”

“I didn’t know we were *doing* presents, mind you, no one said anything—”

“—so at the end of the year, you bought me an owl, because my parents wouldn’t. And you said you’d write.” She was coming closer to him. A tattoo drilled inside of his ribs. Her voice was unsteady. “I was — and I was so, *so* excited—”

“Little wonder. He was a thoroughbred.”

“—because I’d never had anyone to write letters to, before. No one else had ever wanted to — hear more of what I had to say. Most other children thought I said quite enough, actually. Which I probably did.”

This made him look at her. Her face was guarded and yet glowed, faintly, with some inner light.

“Do you know,” he said, into a silence that seemed deeper than all the oceans of the world, “the memory I use to conjure a Patronus

with?”

“No. What?”

He did not answer, but continued to look at her. Her eyes widened.

“Not — you don’t mean—”

“I did try,” he said. “With other memories. Nothing quite does the trick.”

Hermione was staring at him as if he was something breathtakingly grand, cast from marble, and it made him feel about eight feet tall.

“You know very well,” he said, “that it isn’t friendship. For me. You’ve known it for some time.”

It was the first time he had said it to her out loud.

“I wanted things to be normal,” she said frankly. “I wanted nothing to change. I wanted — to go back to the way things used to be, you see.”

It was a shadow’s shadow of an apology, but he understood it.

“You can’t,” he said. “Nothing’s ever the way it used to be. You can’t have it back by pretending.”

“But I was close,” she said plaintively. “Sometimes, when it was just the four of us… it was close. I was good at pretending. *We* were good at it.”

“It wouldn’t last.”

“No,” she admitted, “probably not.”

She worried at one of her cuticles with a thumbnail, minute little fidgets of her knuckles.

“I told you this already,” she said, “but your letters were all I thought about, that first summer.”

She hadn’t put it that way. He would have remembered how he felt to hear it.

“I got up early every day to see if Thucydides had come back. I was worried he couldn’t find me in muggle London. I was worried he wouldn’t find you, wherever you were, or if he did you wouldn’t write back, because maybe you were just being nice, on the platform, or maybe you’d changed your mind—”

“Changed my mind?”

“I would remind you that you were a different person when you were twelve,” she said, “and so was I. But one day, I woke up and found him sitting on my window — and it was very early, and the sun was coming in. And Thucydides, you know, has white-and-gold coloring on his back, and the sunlight coming in behind him made him sort of — glow, everything seemed all shiny. It felt like magic. I know it wasn’t, not literally. But you can’t imagine how it feels, when you grow up in the muggle world, and then come here, and then you go back to it and you can’t bring any magic with you — you’re just back in the real world for the summer, and everything’s a little bit duller and slower and less interesting — and then suddenly there’s this piece of it in your house, waiting for you when you wake up. And you have a letter waiting for you from someone who understands everything. So it’s like this shiny piece of a dream fell into your lap while you were sleeping. That’s what you gave me.”

She ran her wand between her fingers, abruptly shy. “You were the only magic I got to keep,” she said in a quiet voice.

And: “That was the memory I used, just now. By the way.”

His patronus was forgotten. It disappeared, unobtrusively, in a whiff of white smoke.

“I was pretty well done for, at that point,” she said. “In retrospect.”

“In what sense?”

He already knew, but he was a liar, and she knew that, and she was going to tell him anyway.

She hiked in a breath and closed her hand around her wand. Lifted her chin. In her posture was the same blazing resilience she’d always had, which had to well from some deep furnace in the core of her. She had a kiln between her lungs. He could feel the heat when he stood near her.

“That I wanted you,” she said, with a panicked, dutiful bravery, as if she were confessing to a crime. “So much it left me sick, sometimes. And I can’t be your friend, I don’t think. Because, you see — the things I want, from you, have always been — larger than anyone else.”

The castle creaked. Her otter silently scattered into mist.

She took a breath. “You don’t have to say anything. To that. It’s just that I’ve been feeling this way for so long, and I thought it would stop but it hasn’t, and I did a lot of thinking about this and I’m pretty sure it’s hopeless. Friendship, that is. Based on the data, I mean. It’s the only plausible explanation for certain things. Like how I feel about your handwriting. And your hands. Or the way you say ‘Granger,’ and the way you do your tie crooked sometimes so that I’ll fuss at it, which I know you do, and you know I know you do, and I know you know I know you do, which I think is what I like about it, on some level, and Draco I know I said you didn’t need to say anything but actually you could say something, if you wanted to, any day now, really—”

He took her head in his hands and kissed her.

The surprise froze her for all of a heartbeat. With a high noise that could have been relief or pain, she buried her hands in his shirtfront

and dragged him in to kiss him back.

His hand slid around the back of her skull, cupping her in place, tilting her head against his. Their mouths caught and dragged, clumsy, more urgency than skill, and the feeling was still blinding. The feeling still whited out the world. Why didn't it wear off? It should have worn off. Nothing could possibly be this good forever. No one would do anything else.

She had a fist in his shirt and had snuck one into his hair and was pulling, insistent, like she wanted to fuse with him. Her lips moved against his in short quick brushes, never drawing away far enough to do more than breathe. He held her head in place and kissed her once, deeply, and she shuddered still and then kissed him back the same way, with a long, slow movement of her mouth that sent heat plunging through him like fever. She was pulling his hair hard and he was caught between two pressures, her mouth and her hand, heat blooming in two directions, her hand on his chest in a white-knuckle grip like she intended to let him go never, this thing of hers she'd caught for keeps. He caught her waist and pulled hard.

Hermione made a sweet, happy sigh against his mouth, and he opened it to her, letting her slide her tongue along the underside of his lip. The jolt of sensation swayed them. He did it again, and she shuddered and rolled her whole body up, front to front, pressure on pressure on pressure. There was a live wire running down the back of his spine, a jagged scar of white pleasure, throwing volts. Everything felt so much.

He made a sound, a cross between a groan and a sigh, when her fingernails grazed his scalp. She echoed him and the sounds twined together in the rafters, bounding back and forth on the wood.

She was soft everywhere. Soft in the curve of her waist and the plane of her back and the warm rose of her mouth. Her hair was soft where it tangled and spilled through his fingers. He could move her with it, twist her head back to kiss her, pull her in, hold her there. She didn't object. When he tugged it her hand slid down his chest and

pulled where the yield of the fabric ended, rucking it out of his waistband, almost petulant. Her hand skated across his skin and he broke the kiss to breathe out hard.

“Hermione—”

“Mm?” She leaned up and caught his mouth again, which stopped him from saying whatever the hell it was that had seemed so important.

Probably just *fuck,* and then *fuck* again, with gravitas.

He made a valiant effort, though. He lifted his head, trying to breathe evenly, and her mouth slipped down to his jaw.

The effort ended indecently and immediately. He was fucked. He was so profoundly fucked.

Heat poured from wherever her mouth went. The skin was sensitive and even more so where her mouth left it, wet and cool and warm where her lips went, and he was holding her hair too tightly and didn’t really know what to do with his hands, nor could think of it, nor could think. Nothing seemed connected to each other, it was just sensations outside of time, unrelated except in the sense of a gradual escalation, a slow rising burn in his sternum, a heat escaping from every tingling cell of his skin. Want, satisfaction, then more want. Not a logical progression. Would have to take it up later. With her.

He kissed her again to stop her from driving him mental, which didn’t work, but she seemed pleased enough. She wrapped her arms around his neck and arched up and slid their mouths together until the room spun.

At some point, she broke off and breathed against his mouth, ragged for air, and palpably frustrated by the need for it.

“I’m the only one who gets to do this,” he said.

“Obviously,” she said. She swallowed. “I'm quite plainly yours. In every respect. God help you for that. And you’re...?”

“Yours,” he said, “obviously.”

She considered him, her face a brilliant collision of giddiness and fear.

“Mine,” she said. Her hands tightened, impossibly, in his shirt. The rain trilled on the windows. “Yes. That's right, isn't it?”

Then she kissed him again, and finally, without reservation, without doubt, and without fear, he fell into her.

-Another classic GT 15,000-word omnibus chapter, brought to you wholly without knowledge or intent. I didn't realize this bad boy had gotten so big. I had a bit of ground to cover between "Deputy Special Inquisitor" and the next chapter, so I had to onboard a lot of stuff, and I thought about chopping it up. But I didn't want to keep you waiting any longer, especially coming off the heels of a hiatus like the last one, and I really like big chappies as a reader. Means more stuff for the bus ride to work.

-Lord forgive me for how late I stayed up editing this. By which I mean Lord, please do not let me do it again.

-The plot and structure for Book 5 recently underwent a piledriver of an editing pass and the last act has been substantially revised in terms of chapter count; if you're reading this from the future after Book 5 has completed, this affects your life not at all, freely disregard; but if you at some point saw a chapter title list floating around on my Tumblr, just know that it's officially out of date now, and that the last act of Book 5 is officially 120% better than it used to be.

-I know Luna's canon patronus is a hare, but I picked up one of them old creative licenses at the fanfiction store, and I'm using to drive this

crazy train exactly wherever feels best and coolest. Also, egrets rule.

-If you left a comment on the last chapter, please know that I have read it, cherished it, and I hope you find a copy of your favorite book in a beautiful hardcover edition. Like those clothbound Penguin Classics, or an old burnished leather binding. And I hope it's on sale.

-Next chapter (release date to be divined by your local haruspex upon consideration of the relevant entrails): "The Pureblood Sisters."

The Pureblood Sisters

Chapter 74: The Pureblood Sisters

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

When he woke it was half six, but the fetters of sleep, once cast off, vanished irrecoverably, and he sat on the edge of his bed, watching the grounds. The frosty trees were like points of green agate, and the fields were smooth and silver with veins of blue heather; the sun, a heatless red dot; and the ice, dark as iron, on the face of the lake. It was March in Scotland.

Looking out at it he was eleven and fifteen at once, and twelve and fourteen and thirteen, too, rising to greet any one of a thousand mornings, on any one of a thousand days. He was fifteen, and a prefect, at a school under the command of the Ministry's Special Inquisitor; and all that notwithstanding, somewhere in the same tower was a girl who had made him a promise.

Holding that information, in the midst of everything else, felt like cradling a candle in the middle of a storm. But then, there it was, like a bowl of something simmering and precarious balanced somewhere around his sternum, every moment risking a spill. By candlelight, he knotted a red tie in a Windsor and pinned the prefect's badge to his lapel. He slipped his ring onto the fifth finger of his left hand, and watched the light dapple on the black garnet, the double-headed snake, the ornate *M.* It occurred to him for the first time that it might be odd for him to wear it; it meant nothing to anyone in Gryffindor, besides being a bit of nice jewelry that Malfoy liked to wear; and the only people at Hogwarts whom it communicated anything to were people he otherwise had no intention of communicating with.

And what did it say, really, that anyone didn't already know? It asserted that he was Lucius Malfoy's son. At some point, it had asserted that he was proud of that fact. What did it say now? That it

was possible, perhaps, to be himself and also be *Malfoy.* That the rot of ages did not descend inexorably from one generation to another. That he could be himself, whole, and free of it. That he was not, in fact, a contradiction in terms

Ron, shuffling past him to the bathroom, grunted and gave him a short nod of greeting. Draco nodded back in silence. The simmering vessel inside him gave a jolt.

In the common room, Hermione was curled up reading in a nook by the window. The diamond grate of Tudor windows sieved the light coming in, and her face was a quilt of shadows.

It was so early that the room was empty. He leaned against the stairwell, watching her. She wet her finger to turn a page, then smiled at something she'd read. The self-contained little expression of someone doing something she loved. The wrinkle of her nose when something confused her. The snort of derision when she read something insufficiently researched.

The floorboards creaked to announce him when he joined her. She drew her knees up to make room for him in the nook and closed the book, folding it against her chest.

"Hello," she said, like it was a question.

"Hello."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Worst of my life," he said, and she laughed, relieved. She shifted her knees off the sill to move closer, and her leg brushed his knee.

"I was hearing birds when I fell asleep."

"Terrible waste. Could have stayed in the Room, if we were both awake anyway."

Her blush flared; she glanced around the common room. He nudged her knee. “Easy. No one’s here.”

“They could hear on the stairs.”

“Who? Lavender? She’d get us a cake.”

She blushed harder and elbowed him. He smiled indolently and leaned back against the window. “Harry,” she whispered pointedly. “And—”

“Ronald. Yes, I remember. But I told you, he already suspects. Both of them do.”

“There’s a difference between suspecting, and… seeing it. You agreed we weren’t going to tell anyone for a bit.”

“I agreed to be discreet. If someone asks me, I don’t intend to lie.”

She rolled her eyes amusedly. “Yeah, but no one’s going to *ask* you.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Because they’re afraid of getting murdered. Do you know how you come across? How many personal questions are you asked on a weekly basis? Monthly, even?”

“Thousands.”

“Mine exempted.”

He considered. “I think Longbottom asked me my favorite color, once.”

She snickered. He caught her chin in his hand and drew her in to kiss, and she went soft against him for a moment that was altogether too short. Her hand found his tie, pulling him in absently. But she broke off with a frustrated hitch of breath.

“Common room.”

He sighed irately and sat back. “Ronald and Potter aren’t blind. We live in each other’s pockets. How long have you ever kept a secret from them?”

“Long enough,” she said stubbornly. “I *will* tell them. I just want… privacy. For a bit. Before everyone makes a thing of it. And you *know* they’ll make a thing of it. The whole house. And then the school, too. You being who you are. And Harry being Harry, and us being close to him, and… I keep thinking about that Skeeter article from fourth year. Sometimes girls still bring it up to me, you know.” Her fingers picked at a cuticle. “And. Not that it matters, really, but. I’ve never done this before.”

He reached out and brushed her hair away from her face, making her look at him. It seemed like such a ridiculous, unthinkable thing that he should be able to do that. That she should let him do that, and look at him with such acceptance, even satisfaction, when he did.

“It’s not possible for you to fail at this,” he said. “It’s you and me. We’re the only ones that matter.”

She swallowed. Her eyes were dark and uncertain.

“It’s you and me,” she repeated. “You’re right.”

“Of course I’m right.”

Then she smiled, and even hesitant, it erased the common room and castle beyond in its corona. Being alone with her was like having a country to themselves.

He would have kissed her again, but the stairs creaked, and Hermione sat upright to put distance between them.

Neville came down, balancing awkwardly under the weight of heavy bags and a large cauldron. “Oh! Hullo,” he said. “Either of you got the t-time? Curfew’s lifted, hasn’t it?”

“It will in five minutes,” said Hermione, checking her watch. “Why? Where are you going?”

“The greenhouses. Sprout lets me brew p-p-potions in the back, if I’m careful not to make a m-mess.”

“The Potions homework this week is an essay, Nev.”

“I know,” he said hesitantly, glancing at Draco. “But M-Malfoy’s f-forcing me to sit the O.W.L.”

“...What?”

Draco examined his cuffs. “If you’d rather give up on being an Herbologist, it’s nothing to me,” he drawled. “It isn’t *my* future.”

“Okay, b-b-but, you said I actually wasn’t allowed to d-do that, though—”

“Are you helping him?” she said suspiciously.

“No.”

“Yes,” said Neville, traitorously.

“Please. I’m taking an hour a week to yell at him, is what I’m doing.”

“I think that’s helping,” said Hermione. She was staring at him so radiantly you’d think he had the cure to all illnesses in the palm of his hand. It made the simmering cup in his chest thrash and spill. Discretion would do precious little for either of them if she kept looking at him like that, Neville be damned.

He flushed and folded his arms. “Well,” he said tartly, “you would.”

With O.W.L.s perched on the horizon in May, the collective nose dipped to the grindstone, and pushed. The moments not consumed by classes, meals, or a piffling quantum of sleep found them ensconced in by a fortress of textbooks. Hermione had checked out half the library and put the other half on reserve. Harry and Ron glued their faces to their workbooks as if proximity would make the information move faster. Long after others went to bed, Hermione would find a table and crack her books again.

Cassius Warrington continued to rove around the castle grounds, often seen in Theo's wake, if not Umbridge's. At night, Theo's name floated alone with Myrtle's on the second-floor bathroom, but when they returned to follow him, they found the door warded and cloaked in Muffling Charms.

"What do you think happened to Myrtle?" Hermione said absently. The low burble of the Great Hall shielded their conversation from prying ears: the four of them were working through a dinner of shepherd's pie and a hearty gravy, with roast chips stacked high in silver bowls.

Harry tore his attention away from the high table, where Umbridge was explaining something to a frowning McGonagall. "Moaning Myrtle?" he said. "You mean the ghost?"

"No, my great aunt. She's ill of late. Yes, Harry, the ghost!"

"Jeez. Okay," he muttered. "Didn't realize you were on a first name basis."

"This is the Theodore Nott thing, right?" said Ron evenly, assembling a forkful of pie. "You think he's after some kind of information?"

"Yes. And I think *he* thinks Myrtle has it. But what does she know? She died in 1943. She's been here ever since."

"Maybe she witnessed something." He popped the fork in his mouth.

“What, in the bathroom?”

“Yeah, in the bathroom,” he retorted. “We used it in third year. Great place to work without being noticed. Fifty-odd years, we’re probably not the first ones to think of it.”

“But she said she didn’t remember.”

“Maybe she’d forgotten,” said Draco. Ron jerked his chin at him and nodded.

Hermione hummed to acknowledge it, but her fingers drilled on the table. “I suppose... I don’t know. I really think it’s something to do with her death.”

“Why would he care?” Harry muttered. “He’s not the type to get choked up, is he, if she fell and broke her neck—”

“That’s the thing! I don’t think she *did* break her neck,” she broke in passionately, leaning forward. “If she died in a normal accident, why wouldn’t the book say so? And why doesn’t she look injured? The Bloody Baron and Nearly Headless Nick both look as they did *when* they died, blood and all, but Myrtle seems perfectly fine. What kind of ‘accident’ doesn’t leave a mark? What kind of *death* doesn’t leave a mark?”

Ron grimaced. He looked at Draco, who pursed his lips and laid down his fork.

“What?” she demanded. “Don’t do that, don’t just stare at each other like you’re afraid to—”

“The Killing Curse,” said Harry.

Ron winced. Harry glanced at him, then at Draco, and added in a flat tone: “Famously.”

“That’s… not an accident,” said Hermione, after a moment.

“No. But you don’t think it’s an accident, anyway.” He shrugged and reached for his pumpkin juice.

“I … *think…* it’s an open question. Your… theory… would suggest someone killed her.”

“Yeah, it would,” he agreed.

“And then covered it up.”

“Yep.”

“Be serious, mate,” said Ron. “Students can’t do Unforgivables.”

“Pansy Parkinson used blood magic to perform a permanently incapacitating petrification curse at twelve,” said Draco.

“One: not an Unforgivable. Two: a teacher taught her to do that, yeah? She didn’t come up with it on her own.”

“I didn’t say a student did it,” said Harry.

Draco traded a glance with Ron and Hermione.

“Are you suggesting a teacher killed a student?” Hermione said delicately.

Harry shrugged again. “Almost happened to me in first year.”

Hermione began to reply, but they were interrupted by a trumpet of throat-clearing. Draco turned around. Alfie Chrissenpoffer had presented himself, his spine straighter than a sword.

“Good evening! Malfoy! Sir!”

“He’s only a prefect, Alfie, you don’t have to call him ‘sir,’” said Hermione.

“In fact, please don’t,” said Ron.

“Belay that. ‘Sir’ is fine,” said Draco. “We reserve ‘lord’ for formal occasions. What’s the matter?”

“I’ve a letter! From Professor Dumbledore! Sir!”

Satisfied at having fulfilled his duty, the child departed with a bow.

The letter was written in an elegant hand.

The headmaster’s office is home to some jonquils that would be beautified by the addition of jasmine.

There will be no need for haberleas today.

There will be no talk of carnations.

“I’m going to the headmaster’s office,” he said. He passed the note to Hermione. “Occlumency lesson. Potter, no need to come.”

Harry, relieved, made no effort to question it; but Hermione said, “How can you tell?”

“Carnations are insults. ‘Haberlea’ means Potter. You can infer the rest.”

“She has a name for me?” said Harry.

“She’s comprehensive.”

“Do I have one?” said Hermione.

“You do.”

“What is it?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Draco!”

“See you in the common room, Granger. Gentlemen.”

Her indignant noise turned several heads, which he enjoyed more than he should have, walking out.

The headmaster’s office was dark when he arrived. Lightning flickered from the domed skylight overhead, sending occasional bolts searing through the gloom.

His mother sat in a chair by the fireplace, her profile traced in firelight. Her thumb spun the ring on her right fourth finger in endless rounds about its berth.

“Draco,” she said.

They hadn’t spoken since December. Not one word, neither pardon nor reprimand, had disturbed their silence.

“Mother.” He shut the door. She watched him shuck his robe and fold it over the coatrack, then roll up his sleeves.

Before that, she’d begged him for a promise. Then she’d begged him for a lie.

She rose and stood against the fire, veiled with red glow.

“Why isn’t Potter here? He could use the instruction.”

“I wanted the privacy to speak plainly,” she said. “This will be the last lesson for some time.”

“What? Why?”

“Because your headmaster is sending me somewhere that will take me considerable time to return from.”

“Are you leaving the country?”

“No. I would prefer that considerably.”

“Where, then?”

“Witherfell.”

The name stung him with fear.

“You can’t.”

“‘Shouldn’t’ is what you mean. Precision in everything, my dear.”

“The place is cursed.”

“Curses require casters. They don’t come from Merlin, Draco. You’re old enough to know that.”

“It’s haunted.”

“You think the Manor isn’t it?”

“Why haven’t you been back, then?” he snapped. “To Witherfell. If it’s *safe.”*

Narcissa lifted her chin coldly. “Because I cannot bear it,” she said. “Although lately, people have found all sorts of ways to test what I can and cannot bear.”

With an indifferent lift of her shoulder, she slid the knife between his ribs. It left him fairly breathless.

“And I didn’t say it was safe,” she remarked, turning away.

“So you admit it’s dangerous.” He swallowed around an edge of anger. “What you’re doing.”

She drew her wand and lifted it, examining the silver crossguard, the angled pommel. “What?” she said softly. “You think the only one allowed to endanger my life is you?”

Point, set, match, a knockout in a single blow, and he came off the piste with his head spinning. He'd be surprised if there wasn't blood splattered on the floor behind his chest; that was how it felt.

"I never wanted," he said, in a small voice that came from a body not his own, "for it to be like this. I would have done anything — anything I could have done—"

"Except disobey them."

He curled his lip. "I'm not *following their orders.* This is about right and wrong."

"Two things you understand exhaustively, of course, at fifteen."

"Fine. Fine! Fine. If you think I'm wrong, explain it," he snapped. "Make your case. Tell me why blood matters. Explain why perfectly magical children aren't the same as any other magical child. Point to the facts. Can you? Or do you admit you don't honestly believe it, because it's ridiculous, only you never questioned what your parents told you, so you resent that I did—"

"You never took my advice," she said bitterly. "You never thought I could counsel you in politics. Nor in war. I was too frivolous, I suppose, or too mad. Would you have obeyed your father? I sometimes wonder."

"I'm *sick* of you fantasizing about the son Lucius Malfoy raised."

She broke off. His voice rattled the frames on the wall.

"You didn't get him," he spat. The intensity of his anger numbed him, made him almost calm. "You got me. And I apologize for whatever pain it's caused you, but for better or worse, you have only ever had me. The father of your child is dead. You've had seven years to come to terms with it. And I find it ghoulish," he said, raising his voice, "that you still try to resurrect him every time you want me to heel—"

“Because you *respected* his memory more than me,” she cried furiously. “You wrote me off. You thought I was mad! You ask me to explain myself *now?* Now, when your mind’s made up? When did you *ever* seek my counsel except after it was too late?”

“I told you everything. What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play the fool,” she snapped. “It was *years* before you admitted the extent of your friendship with Potter. Or the muggle-born.”

“If you don’t use her name, we’re finished talking.”

It should have been against the law to see one’s mother so vulnerable to pain. It should have been a death sentence to cause it on purpose.

“Granger,” she said tightly. “Your friendship with the *inexorable* Miss Granger.”

“I’ve always done the best I can to please you.” He was carefully deadpan. “I’ve tried to honor the name of Malfoy. If you disagree, that’s your right. But it isn’t your name. And until someone pries this ring from my corpse—”

“Draco!”

“—then *it remains* my name. Mine to waste, mine to save, mine to kill,” he said savagely. “My father gave me that right when I was eight years old, and if he regrets it now, he can come and fucking take it back.”

Narcissa made a noise of anguish and swept away, leaning on the mantelpiece. Black lace fanned and shrank like a raven’s tail.

Time passed. Thunder marked its passage on the roof overhead.

“He loved you,” she said. “Before you were ever born, he loved you. He wanted you so badly.”

She must have expected this to move him, but it didn't. Nothing in him recoiled, for there was no pride to injure — only the aching cavity of love, a relationship that had never been. A man he could count the number of times he had touched.

"Prepare yourself," she rasped. He had only a moment to grasp what she meant before she raised her wand. *"Legilimens."*

They dropped through the waters of his memory like a pair of wrestling birds in free-fall.

The courtyard under the clock tower, smelling of blood and wet stone. Two boys wrestling by the lake on a cloudy day. St. Mungo's Hospital, bitter bleach, linoleum, jazzy horns on a scratchy radio. The gnarled door of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. His mind's eye glided in hungrily, narrowing to the handle, which turned on their approach. Voices murmured behind it: Mad-Eye. Arthur. Hermione.

Panic flared. He tore them away, and flung them into the past.

A horse patronus, Ginny's, galloping past in a blur of silver. Seamus Finnigan, wrenching his hand up with a victory roar. Cheering, applause. Closing the door to Umbridge's office. Hermione's hand cradled in his own, her blood running through his fingers—

Deeper, faster, he tore them down.

Lavender Brown, catching his salute like a kiss. Katie Bell flipping him a pass behind her back. Percy Weasley slumped on the Atrium floor. Peacocks and lemonade. Salt, sweetness. Brown curls ribboning on the breeze, a linen shirt, thin and translucent—

He shoved his hands desperately into the earth, and threw up darkness.

Viktor Krum's last grin. Bone-white masks in a hedge maze. Cigarette smoke stinging his lungs outside the Shrieking Shack. Four children bellowing at each other in a dark common room. A golden

dress beside a red mountain of a man in a fur ruff, her hand in his, drawing her further and further away from Draco, while some part of him was drawn helplessly, miserably, into looking.

Because a waltz was playing, she was dancing with Viktor Krum in an enchanted ballroom, the loveliest thing in a castle of enchanted objects, glowing with light from without and within: of Hermione Granger and the man she might have loved, if she'd had the chance. And Viktor Krum was holding her carefully, clumsily, with the awestruck tenderness of someone who knew what he had in his hands; for he had already loved her, had died loving her, naturally, as anyone who ever loved her would.

On her face was the smile for which he would live forever in envy of a dead boy. He nauseated himself.

He drove deep into the pits of himself for something worse. It came eagerly to him.

Dementors converging on a moonlit lake. Hermione sprawled unconscious on the beach, her hair dark as spilled blood on white stone. No: not stone. Hospital bedsheets. Features frozen in an endless gasp of fear. Brave, bold, terrible little thirteen-year-old Hermione Granger, shouting at him, and the worst word he'd ever said sliding out between his teeth. The feeling of oil where a soul should be. A yearning to wrestle back through the past and catch himself by the throat, close his fist.

He was the first person who'd ever called her *mudblood.* On the train to Hogwarts. Before Sorting, before Gryffindor, before Draco-and-Hermione or anything that mattered. She hadn't known what the word meant before he taught it to her.

To close one's fist and hold, and hold, and hold. To choke out the breath that did the harm, to annihilate the past, to black it out, unmake, unhurt, unbreak. To soar into the cloudless sky, and forget the ground beneath him. To remember oneself only as their protector, and not the thing they had to tame to survive.

His mother's mind writhed in distress. He felt triumphant. She didn't like it. Well, he didn't like it, either. Let her see what he thought of the boy she raised.

The quidditch pitch, mud-slicked and raining, the day he broke his arm. The Whomping Willow. The girls' bathroom.

An owl patronus, its face a heart-shaped thing with dark, curious eyes.

Hello. I'm Hermione Granger. Is anyone sitting here?

Said breathlessly, like she'd run her whole life just to make that train, and she got there as soon as she could.

His mother strained against his grasp. He pinned her viciously to the floor.

If you'd rather not be disturbed that's fine. I just want somewhere to sit and read my book.

There was a strident pulse of displeasure from his mother. Her mind blazed in the hopeless protest of watching an irrevocable, fatalistic mistake.

And it wounded him. And it made him furious.

He hauled them back into the gauzy darkness between memories. His mind went clear and flat as a piece of obsidian. He could feel her scrabbling for a hold, throwing sensations at him — she tried Hermione's face, her voice, a shared memory at King's Cross — but none of them caught. He drifted above them. He let them slide over and through him without interest. They were in his mind. It was his kingdom.

The pressure diminished. He could feel ripples of her thoughts, like vibrations of sound without the sound itself: her agitation, her frustration, her cunning.

They stilled, and a single spike of intention flared in the distance. She threw herself against him, her mind rushing up against his like a clash of tides.

Her destination: a funeral. Midsummer in Wiltshire. Mourners crowding a fresh tombstone. An eight-year-old boy making a promise to his mother.

Fury burned the bottom of his stomach. He shattered the memory, pitching them into freefall, and summoned the face of Andromeda Black.

Her mind became a detonating object. It became a caged animal. It became wild.

He trapped her there, locking them both in with clamps like teeth, driving points into his skull: Andromeda's elfin chin, her thick black braid, a face feathered with the same beginnings of age that lurked in Narcissa's features. And next to her, a twenty-something daughter, styled in the image of Bellatrix Lestrange.

His mother's sisters gazed out at him from an endless hallway of black tile, a dyad of unrecognition and horror.

Pain ripped through his thoughts like an ax cleaving the plate of his skull.

Thoughts dissolved. So did feeling. There was nothing but void and pain.

Something dropped beneath his feet. He was sailing again, but through a different space, this one was smoother, emptier, more cavernous. Nothing guided him; his mother didn't seem to be pushing anywhere at all.

They landed with a jolt that shook his skull.

Sunlight seared his eyes and made him blink black spots from vision, clearing gradually into the scene: a garden party. A flock of wizards in white dresses and white suits drifted like swans over a vast and luscious green, which started at the foot of a black reflection pool and shot into the blue distance, narrowing under the encroachment of hedges and elm trees and marble statues, vaulting furrows of white rosebushes, looping fountains that perfumed the air with silver spray, and finally shattering into ivy against the face of a vast stone hall, twice the Manor's size at least, with turrets crowned in rust-blue copper, and fanged spires slitting a cloudless sky. The white crests of the party's tents dotted the lawn like the sails of great slow-moving barges from which wizards swum out, on occasion, to fish a cocktail from a floating tray, or board another vessel with a spray of laughter, and disappear.

"Where is she?"

Draco tried to turn, but his head wouldn't move.

"How should *I* know?" said a small, waspish voice. "Cissy and I have been here all afternoon."

His head turned without his will, and he found himself perched on a sedan chair in the shade of a tent. Wind stirred the tent and the linen chairs and the tablecloth hangings, so the only still objects seemed to be himself, and the girl next to him, and the pair of women whose shadow loomed over himself and the girl.

The girl sat haughtily upright, as if her spine refused to bend, and her striking black brows drove an intractable ridge into her face — a dour impression not helped by her wide mouth, which she screwed into a ferocious pout. A single black plait knifed open the white back of her party dress, but dozens of curls had frayed out around her face; a silk wand-purse dangling from her wrist, above the cuff of a white lace glove, marked her as at least eleven.

"Because she's your sister," said the first woman, a narrow-faced witch with pale hair piled high on her head.

“I’m aware of that. You told me to stay here.”

“Then you shouldn’t have let her leave.”

“Fine! Next time she wants to use the loo, I’ll tell her to sit there and soil herself like a gentlewoman.”

“Bella!”

“Don’t be crude,” said the other woman coldly. Her face had once hung from the stairwell of Grimmauld Place. “And don’t backtalk to your mother. It doesn’t matter where she went. Go fetch the girl and show her to the Greengrasses’ tent; they’ve brought their younger boy to introduce him.”

“But—”

“Bellatrix.”

“But she doesn’t *want* to meet a stupid boy!”

“And I care almost as little for her opinion as I do for yours. Go.”

Neither Druella nor Walburga waited for the girl’s answer. They retreated with a springing, elegant step across the field, white skirts flickering behind them.

“Fine,” muttered the girl who would become Bellatrix Lestrange. “Yes, milady. Terribly sorry, milady.”

She hauled herself up and stomped over to his — Narcissa’s — chair. “Come on,” she said, sticking out her hand. “Up with you, fatty. Enough sitting.”

“Am I coming?” said a high, soft voice. Narcissa allowed herself to be lifted, and her body pulled free from Draco’s in a dizzying moment of detachment: now he seemed to be floating weightlessly, like a tethered ghost, behind the tiny girl that was his mother. She was a

petite and dreamy-looking child with long cornsilk hair tied in a blue bow.

“You don’t have to. You can always run back to Mummy and Aunt Wally.”

“Oh, no. I want to stay with you.”

Bellatrix grinned. “Good,” she said, “because I *do* know where Andy is. I lied.”

She twined their fingers together and tugged. They set off running over the lawns, rousing a flock of silver pixies that rose chittering from the bullrushes; they dodged a jewel-colored lyrebird with a razored beak, and waved at the koi-red scales of nixies darting alongside them in the wading pools. They dodged between Attic columns of tiered white cakes, ducked through a hedge full of gnomes that spluttered and squawked at Bellatrix when she kicked one out of her way; they sped giddily across a fresh-mown lawn whose dark and light squares alternated when a foot touched them, and tore through a game of bowls on a plain of white sand, the balls of which sprouted legs and scrambled around frantically whenever they were struck. Bellatrix snatched one up and pitched it far from the court, prompting the strangled cry of a tall wizard with antlers growing from his top hat; then, laughing, she dragged Narcissa away.

They ran past the music tent where four elven violinists trilled Vivaldi, and ignored the wizards in silk and jewels whose greetings spilled from every tent they passed; ignored the fond choruses — “Hello, Bella!” and “Attagirl, Bella!” and “Where are you off to, Bella?” — of familiar faces; they threw jubilant waves at a pair of dark-haired boys in white suits, a toddler and a boy no older than four, squabbling over a toy broomstick.

They escaped the pavilions at last and came along a rugged stone wall that circuited the lawn, and scrambled over it in a place where

the stones had crumbled away; then plunged into a glade of oaks and sycamores, perfumed by the dark scent of wet earth.

The sights and sounds of the party faded behind them. A song drifted from the trees ahead. It was a girl's voice.

Bellatrix slowed and cocked her head to the wind, gauging the direction of the melody. Her eyes narrowed. Then she hurtled into the trees, hauling Narcissa along by the hand.

My heart is pierced by Cupid

I disdain all glittering gold

There is nothing can console me

But my jolly sailor bold.

"Andy?" Narcissa cried. "Andy, where did you go?"

"Do shut up. I can't hear."

His hair it hangs in ringlets, his eyes as black as coal

My happiness attend him wherever he may go!

"This way," said Bellatrix.

They stepped into the clearing of a giant sycamore tree. There was a wooden bench beneath it, gnarled with age, and a set of muddy footprints traced from its seat, to its back, to the pale sycamore trunk, and disappeared into its branches. The singing was quite clear now.

From Tower Hill to Blackwall, I'll wander, weep and moan

All for my jolly sailor, until he sails home!

Bellatrix led them to the base of the tree and craned her neck.

“Hello, Princess,” she called.

“Hullo, Boss!”

Andromeda peered down from her nest among the branches. Her muddied slippers swung free beneath her, and her white skirt bloomed gauzily over her chemise. Her curls were wild as black wool, half-pinned by a white ribbon, half abandoned to a frizzy helmet at her shoulders, and dirt caked her fingernails. She bared her teeth in a grin.

“Am I in trouble? Have they noticed I’m gone? Am I for a spanking?”

“Worse. Mummy’s sent for you,” Bellatrix called back. “They want to pawn you off on the Greengrass boy.”

“Ooh. Is he handsome?”

“Gross. He’s a boy.”

“He can still be handsome.”

“He looks like a frog shagged a ghost,” said Bellatrix, “and both were new money. If he speaks to you I’ll make him wish he was dead. Come down anyway, I want to play It.”

“I shan’t,” said Andromeda bravely. “It’s boring. Plus you always win ’cause you’re bigger. Can we play a story instead?”

“Fine. But we have to do the Warlock’s Hairy Heart, and I get to be the warlock, otherwise I won’t play.”

“You always get to be the warlock!”

“I don’t like Warlock,” whined Narcissa. “I’m always the servant, and I never get any lines—”

“Because you forget them!”

“You do forget them, Cissy.”

“—and it’s a sad story anyway! I hate sad stories. I want to do Three Brothers.”

Andromeda rolled her eyes. “Nobody cares. Bella, we can do Warlock, but you can’t hit me in the death scenes.”

“It’s called realism, numpty.”

“It’s called ‘I’ll tell Daddy.’ Numpty.”

They glowered through a silent contest of wills.

“I still want to play Three Brothers,” said Narcissa, with sad fatalism.

“Deal,” Bellatrix told Andromeda. “Let’s use the Mausoleum. They won't find us there.”

“Deal!” Andromeda hopped up on the branch and began walking its length, arms extended for balance. “Although I’m sad to leave this tree. I do love it. I think me and this tree have a common spirit, like forest nymphs… In my next life I should like to be a nymph. In fact, we should all be nymphs, and we can be like those old trees that grow together in the deep heart of the forest.”

“Please. You’d go running inside as soon as it rained,” said Bellatrix. “And then *we’d* be stuck out here without you, a pair of dumb ugly trees. Silly idea.” She sniffed. “We ought to be dragons, instead.”

“I think you’d both make marvelous dragons,” ventured Narcissa.

“Yeah? You wouldn’t.” Bellatrix pinched Narcissa’s nose, and she squealed. “You’d pick fights with all the big ones, and I’d have to come kill them for you. I’d be the most tired, banged-up dragon you’d ever seen.”

“Would not!”

“Would so.”

“I wouldn’t let them bang you up. I’d fight them off.”

“Oh, yeah? What if they did *this?”*

Narcissa screamed in delight and dodged Bellatrix’s attempt to tickle her.

“What kind of tree do you think you’d be?” Andromeda called dreamily, ignoring their scuffle. “I’ll be a silver birch. Cissy, you’re prettiest, so you’d be a big lovely willow; and Bella, you’re oldest, so you’re an elder, of course!”

She hopped to another branch, which creaked under her weight. Bark splintered.

“Careful, Andy,” cried Narcissa.

“Don’t be a baby, baby!” She bounced up and down. “See? The tree loves me. She wouldn’t—”

But Narcissa had been right: the branch groaned and snapped. Andromeda shrieked and tumbled down through the air.

Bellatrix thrust out her hand.

Andromeda never made it to the ground. Like the fingers of a great hand, the branches swooped to catch her, and enclosed her in a cradle of wood. The whole great bulk of the tree drooped gracefully until its uppermost branches swept the ground, and ladled the girl gently onto the earth.

When it was done, the tree rolled over beside her and flopped down lifelessly in the dirt. Its trunk was splintered open.

Bellatrix dropped her hand with a gasp. Sweat beaded her temples. Narcissa whimpered in relief.

Then Bellatrix stormed over to Andromeda and hoisted her up by the front of her dress.

“Ow! Bella!”

“Are you hurt?”

“No!”

“Cuts? Sprains?”

“No!”

“You’re entirely well?”

“Yes!”

Bellatrix slapped her. Andromeda wailed and clutched her cheek.

“You shouldn’t be,” she shouted. “You should’ve snapped your neck from a fall like that, and if I hadn’t been here you would’ve. I wish you *had* broken something, and I wish it hurt for the rest of your life, so you’d remember not to be such a dumb little cow. Are you really this stupid? Is this all you do while I’m at Hogwarts? Scheme up mad ways to get yourself killed?”

Andromeda looked up at her. Her lip wobbled. Her eyes were large as dinner plates.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and burst into tears.

Bellatrix released her. “Oh, don’t do that,” she said gruffly. “You’re alright, you — you’re just a silly little thing, you get scared easily.”

“Bella, I’m sorry,” wailed Andromeda. “I’m so sorry, Bella, please don’t be mean. Forgive me — you’ll forgive me, won’t you?”

“No. I’ll loathe you for ever and ever — oh, f— that was a *joke,* Andy, don’t — stop crying. You’re hideous when you cry, it does nothing for your complexion.”

“I know!” bellowed Andromeda, unconsoled.

“Merlin’s sake. Manipulative chit, we ought to run you for Minister. Come here.”

Bellatrix opened her arms, and Andromeda buried herself in them. She rubbed her face desperately into Bellatrix’s neck, like a kitten. Narcissa hurried forward and threw her arms around Andromeda’s shoulders.

“You’re fine,” said Bellatrix softly. She leaned down and kissed the red imprint of her own hand on Andromeda’s cheek. Andromeda popped up her face, wet-eyed and shiny, and beamed at her. “See? Little fool. I’m right here.”

“I’m here, too,” piped up Narcissa, nosing into them, and Bellatrix looped an arm around her shoulders with a huff.

“Yes. And Cissy’s here, too.”

“Do magic, Bella. Can you do magic?”

“Yes, please, do magic for us!”

“Do the spell that makes birds,” said Andromeda excitedly. “Can you make the birds again? So we can chase them?”

“I’m not supposed to do magic outside of school,” said Bellatrix warningly, but she was drawing her wand. “If I get expelled because of you, you’ll be really sorry.”

“You won’t be expelled,” said Andromeda. “They wouldn’t *ever* expel the *great* and *terrible* Bellatrix Black!”

Her voice sounded distant. A white vignette began gnawing away at the corners of the scene.

Bellatrix smirked. “Dippet might try,” she said. “He doesn’t like me very much. He thinks little girls should know their places.”

“I hate him,” cried Narcissa.

“You never met him, pet.”

“I hate him anyway!”

“Forget him,” laughed Andromeda. “Who cares what *he* says? It’s only us here, and we won’t tell. Do magic, go on.”

“Do magic! Oh, please!”

Fog was closing in through the trees, but none of them seemed to notice it. Bellatrix lifted her wand, dark eyes glittering, and opened her mouth.

Her spell vanished into the aether. The fog closed. Dirt disintegrated beneath his feet, and Draco plunged through a cascade of it, end over end, a diver torn from his broom.

Dark wood soared up to catch him.

He never got there. The spell lashed him in the heart and threw him back. He was soaring, then, the room a whirling streak of silver, and he slammed into something sharp and unforgiving with a firework of pain.

When his head ceased spinning enough for him to open his eyes, he found himself sprawled over the upended desk of Albus Dumbledore, while a maelstrom of loose parchment fluttered over his head. Everything that had been on the desk now lay in a sad, glittering ruin

around him: a cracked Sneakoscope, a snapped quill, books with crumpled pages face-down in puddles of ink, and an ornate gold hourglass, one bulb of which had shattered, and trailed a white waterfall of sand into the cracks between floorboards.

Narcissa huddled against the opposite wall, her head hung, wand outstretched. With a shell-shocked twinge of betrayal, Draco's eyes fell on the hand that had jinxed him.

He tried gingerly to push himself upright. A fang of pain sank deep into his hand. He snatched it up and cradled it, watching blood well from a crooked line across his palm: a shard from the inkwell had sliced it open. He sucked breath through his teeth.

The sound made Narcissa's head jerk up. She blinked the fog from her eyes.

"Draco?" she croaked. "Are you alright?"

"Fine." He pressed the heel of his other hand to the cut to try and staunch the bleeding while he searched, not without urgency, for his wand. "Small cut. That's all."

"You're bleeding."

"Not much. Have you seen my w—"

She flew across the room in three strides and fell to her knees. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I — I didn't mean it — Mummy didn't mean it — she's sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm sorry…"

She sounded on the verge of tears. He stared at her, hardly knowing who she was.

"Mother. Mother? Mum. It's fine."

"You're hurt, I hurt you—"

"You didn't. It doesn't hurt," he lied.

She seized his face. He felt her press a bruising kiss to the crown of his skull.

“I love you,” she whispered. “Mummy loves you. Mummy’s sorry.”

“I’m *fine.* I’m alright, Mum.”

She shook her head. The rush of warmth stirred his hair when she sighed.

“I saw Bellatrix in your memory,” he said.

Her breath caught. He was glad he could not see his mother’s face.

“She didn’t seem like a madwoman,” he said.

“She isn’t mad.”

“Most people say she is.”

“Most people don’t know her.”

“They know she tortured the Longbottoms into insanity. And killed countless people.”

“Draco.”

“Including my father.”

“Bellatrix—” She flinched, breathed deeply, and pushed on. “For her many faults, she wasn’t foolish, nor careless. She may have been passionate—”

He barked a laugh.

“—yes, passionate, and relentless; stubborn, wrathful — possessive, territorial, more than occasionally cruel — but she was never uncontrolled.”

“You think she was rational?”

“She was more than rational. She was deliberate. Perceptive. Frighteningly intelligent; surprisingly thoughtful. And she was most certainly prudent. She was the favorite knight of the Dark Lord, and she didn’t earn his trust by making mistakes.”

“She made one with Lucius.”

Narcissa tipped her head, equivocating.

“What did she gain by killing him? The aurors only caught her because she came back to England. And another thing — if she knew the Dark Lord could be resurrected, why didn’t she *resurrect* him? ‘Favorite knight,’ and she never thought to bring him back?”

“Resurrection is difficult.”

“Not too difficult for Peter Pettigrew.”

She rubbed her eyes. “Pettigrew was chosen because his flesh was expendable. He was slave meat, and remains so. As to why she never attempted — I’m sure she tried to. But the ritual requires the bone of one’s father, and I assure you, the Dark Lord never disclosed his sire to any of us.”

“Bloody oversight, that.”

“It wasn’t an oversight; he intended to never die, and we had no reason to doubt him. It was treason to speak of his death, or prepare for it. It’s why the war went so badly after he died.”

“Did it go badly? I thought it lasted years.”

She nodded. “Mm. But it was decided the night the Potters died. Barty was captured immediately; he was at the Potter house, and he stayed there, like a fool. I think he believed the Dark Lord would rise again from the very floor… he’s dead now,” she added, with startling blitheness. “Killed in Azkaban. Travers turned cloak... Dolohov and

Mulciber were hounded down, like chattel, by the barbarian Moody… he threatened to send Mulciber's wife to him in six-ounce increments. Barty's father captured Rabastan at the Battle of Stirling, and baited Rodolphus into a rescue attempt. Nearly got himself killed. *Did* kill his regiment, which was a third of the remaining soldiers, and nineteen Death Eaters. After that, the Lestranges fled to Albania, and your father went back to Wiltshire."

"Why did they leave him behind?" he said, indignant despite himself.

His mother looked at him. Her mouth was a tight seam of pity.

"You'd just turned two," she said softly. "We had cake at the Manor, just the two of us. Bella and Roddy sent you a toy broomstick for a gift. Your father gave you a set of coloring chalks. I enclosed your drawings with my letters, so that he could see them."

"I don't remember that."

"Bella was jealous. She kept demanding to know if you were using the broomstick. I told her you were enough of a menace with your feet on the ground." A distant smile curved her mouth. "She liked that."

Her tone chilled him. "You sound fond of her."

"I am fond of her," she said calmly. She rose to her feet, and offered her hands; he took them, and let her draw him up. "I love her."

"You're joking. You cannot possibly *still—"*

"Why not?"

"She killed my father!"

To this, Narcissa offered the staggering reply of a shrug, as if to say: *And so it is.*

“And yet love endures,” she said. “It endured the murder of the man I married. It survived the collapse of my house, and my life, and the end of the name she and I once shared. But mark this well: I loved Bellatrix Black against reason, against duty, and against judgment. As I ever loved anything. Including my only son.”

She extended her hand. He took it. Her fingers sealed over his like a vise, painfully tight. She smiled cryptically and kissed his hand. Then she drew him into her arms and held him tightly, her heart beating like a rabbit’s against his ribs.

The rain trilled along in a steady alto, joined by the occasional roll of thunder.

Some time later, once Narcissa had left, he went to the Hospital Wing for his hand. Curfew had fallen, and the torches guttered high along the stone walls.

His head swam with afterimages of his mother’s memory. Of Walburga Black, young and well and sneering. Of Bellatrix Lestrange, hardly older than Victoria Frobisher, snapping a tree in half with her outstretched hand.

As he approached the Hospital Wing, the echoes of shouting bounced around the corner. Alerted, he drew his wand, and stepped into the hallway in time to see a trio of students rush through the doors. He followed, and their voices resolved as he stepped into the glaring light of Pomfrey’s chamber.

Blinking the spots from his eyes, he saw Cassius Warrington striding up the aisle with a barefoot Astoria Greengrass in his arms. Pansy hurried along at his side, half-running to keep up with him. Pomfrey was running out of her office to meet them, and their shouting collided in the center of the room.

“—down on the bed, Warrington, be careful—”

“—some kind of fainting spell,” Cassius announced. He ladled Astoria onto the bedspread. “Perfectly normal, especially around exams; stress and low blood sugar—”

“No, you idiot, I *told* you!” Pansy cried. “She needs a transfusion, Pomfrey, listen—”

Pomfrey did not need telling, however. She whirled away from Astoria’s bed. *“Expecto Patronum!”* she cried.

Her Patronus leapt from her wand and coalesced into a hooded snake.

“Find Orpheus and Dido Greengrass,,” she commanded, rolling up her sleeves. “Ask for permission for a blood transfusion between their daughters. Mr. Warrington — Ms. Parkinson — some space.”

Cassius obeyed with nervous haste; Pansy did not so much as loosen her grip. Pomfrey fed out the cord from Astoria’s wrist; a tap of her wand split it into three, and she slotted one into the base of a silver cloche-shaped instrument on the table. When the cord touched it, the cloche began to chime: *ding… ding… ding…*

At close range, Draco noticed the blood on Pansy’s wrists. A dirty smear ran from palm to forearm on either side, like she’d made a sloppy cut, and healed it sloppily, too.

He met her gaze. She wrenched her sleeve down.

“Did you try to heal her?”

Her face crumpled, and she turned her head sharply to hide it. She didn’t answer him.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said.

“Stop.”

“Runes are powerful tools for simple functions. Healing, warding. They can’t address a complex medical problem.”

“Draco,” she said unsteadily, “are you actually so stupid — so piss-poor empty in the head — you think I need you to explain how runes work?”

The doors flew open. Theo stood between them, gripping Daphne by the hand like he’d pulled her from the depths of hell. Pansy gasped, actually gasped, and wilted against the wall.

“Here,” he barked. He surged down the aisle, and Daphne hurried after him. “I got her.”

“Is she alright?” Daphne cried, overtaking him. “Did I come in time?”

She leapt up on her sister’s bed and swept back her sleeve, reaching for a needle from Pomfrey’s tray. It had the practiced fluidity of a motion done a hundred times before. But Pomfrey didn’t give it to her.

“Hurry up! What is it? I told you, I’ve had sugar — is it fluids? Teddy, fetch me some water—”

“Your parents changed their policy,” Pomfrey said. “Standing permission for transfusions has been revoked. In the meantime, I’m placing your sister on a heartclock—”

“They *can’t* revoke it! I’m her only match! She needs *my* blood!”

“—to stabilize her, and giving her a fluid drip—”

“That won’t work!” Daphne screeched, and she lunged. Theo caught her, hauling her back from what appeared to be a hail-mary grab for the needle.

The heartclock was starting to slow down: the distance between chimes was growing. Each swell of Astoria’s chest failed to meet its previous height.

Theo's move cost him dearly: Daphne was stronger than him, and with a snarl, she threw an elbow that almost put him on the floor. "It won't work!" she shouted. "There's only *one* thing that worked, and the only supply of it is *right here,* and I ought to know, because it's *my disease!"*

"It isn't my decision. Your parents fear for Astoria's health—"

"She's dying!" Daphne screamed. "I'll show you fear for my sister's health — *give me the needle—"*

She lunged again, and this time, it took Pansy and Theo both leaping on her to stop her from tackling Pomfrey to the floor. Draco stepped in front of Pomfrey, his wand drawn, his heart racing. He had never seen Daphne this way. He didn't know what she might do.

"Merlin's blood, just let her," Cassius exclaimed. "You can't possibly intend to let them throw away one daughter out of — out of spite for the other."

"It isn't spite, Mr. Warrington — Miss Greengrass, please stop struggling—"

"Listen, you can hear her dying, *please* don't —" Daphne's wail broke into sobs. "Don't make me listen, don't make me listen to her die—"

"Pomfrey," Theo said furiously, "I'll handle her parents, just *do* something—"

"Daphne Greengrass is not legally cleared to give blood."

The bell gave a weak, faint chime. Then another.

Pomfrey's chest heaved. "I'm sorry, child," she said. "At your last reading, markers went up considerably."

Another chime. Daphne went still and expressionless.

“Markers of what?” said Theo. “Markers of what, Pomfrey?”

Daphne sank to lean on the bed. She blinked like she was trying to wake up.

“Answer me,” Theo snapped. “Markers of what?”

“Alpha-L immunoglobulin,” Daphne said, with a musical mnemonic lilt.

“Okay?” Pansy threw up her hands. “Hell does that mean, Daph?”

“It’s a marker for lycanthropy.”

The bell kept chiming its sad, slow song.

“Mother of Merlin,” Cassius said quietly. He was looking at Pomfrey. “And you kept her in a school.”

Theo leapt at him.

Cassius barked and seized his wand, but Draco’s was already out. A book-perfect *Stupefy* struck Theo in the back, and he dropped like stone.

Pansy’s reflexes alone rescued Theo’s nose from a nasty impact with the floor. She caught and lowered him carefully, while Cassius skittered back, staring at him in astonishment.

“Thank you, Malfoy,” Pansy said quietly.

Draco jerked his head in acknowledgement. There was no love lost between himself and Theodore Nott, but he had no desire to see the winner of a duel between him and Cassius Warrington.

“What happens,” he said to Pomfrey, “if you give her the blood anyway?”

“It’s inconclusive. Bloodborne lycanthropic pathogenesis hasn’t been studied, because it doesn’t often happen; the usual vector is a saliva. Lycanthropes are barred from giving blood in most circumstances.”

“Suppose you only did a small transfusion. Would that avoid the risk?”

“No.”

Pansy whimpered.

“There’s always a risk,” Pomfrey said. “I could tell you the odds of infection were low, as the concentration of pathogens in the bloodstream is minor compared to the concentrations in werewolf saliva. I could tell you I would anticipate optimal outcomes in a reasonable timeframe. I could *tell you* that in a choice between death and a treatable, if challenging, medical condition, not one medical professional on the planet would hesitate. But I could not tell you with confidence that she would not be infected, because I am not confident that would be the case.”

The doors slammed again. Orpheus Greengrass, Dido Greengrass, and Albus Dumbledore flew up the aisle in a confusion of shouting. When Dido saw Astoria, she gave a strangled scream and flew to her side, nearly shoving Cassius to the floor.

“Prepare her for transfusion,” Orpheus shouted at Pomfrey. He hurled a briefcase on the table. “We’ve brought blood for her.”

“What blood?” said Pomfrey. “Whose?”

“Donor organisms.”

“Daddy,” said Daphne, “did you know about me? Did they send you my results?”

Dido smoothed the hair back from Astoria’s face, murmuring.

“What ‘organisms’?” said Pomfrey.

“House-elves.” Orpheus threw open the briefcase. Inside lay three bags of blood on a bed of steaming ice. “Our researchers have confidence the blood will match.”

“Daddy?” said Daphne. “Mummy, did you know, either?”

“I entreat you,” said Dumbledore, speaking for the first time since coming into the room,“to consider what you are doing to your daughter.”

Orpheus drew himself up with righteous anger. “Spare me your sanctimony,” he said. “One of my daughters was poisoned under your care. I will do what it takes to save the other.”

He gestured furiously at Pomfrey. With an aggrieved sound, Pomfrey snatched up one of the house-elf bags and fed it into the intravenous cord. Its length flushed from gold to red.

The bell chimed again, and then once more, stronger. It picked up a faint but steady rhythm. Pansy keened and keeled over, burying her face in her hands.

Daphne slipped off the bed and staggered a bit, catching herself. She looked at her mother, but Dido was furiously darting kisses over Astoria’s face. Orpheus knelt and took Astoria’s limp hand, pressing it tightly to his lips.

Daphne stood apart from them with a distant expression, like a sailor standing in the shallows of an island he didn’t know.

Dumbledore ambled over to her and offered his arm. She stared at it, not understanding.

“Would you care to join me in my office?” he said, in a low, soft voice. “You need not stay here, if you do not wish.”

She shook her head.

“Of course. You prefer to be with your sister. May I extend an invitation, then, to come when you feel comfortable leaving her? It would please me very much.”

“I don’t… Professor, I…”

Cassius said, “You’ve broken the law.”

Dumbledore turned. Cassius lifted an unsteady finger.

“You harbored an unregistered lycanthrope. In a school full of children. For months. You… I lack the words for what you are. I lack the words for your audacity, your sheer degeneracy — I lack the words.”

“Apparently not,” said Dumbledore mildly. “You seem full of them.”

“Do you hear me? She’s a dangerous creature! I can’t believe people like the Greengrasses could be so irresponsible. It’s a tragedy to lose a daughter, I admit, but that’s no excuse for exposing other children to a predator. Something has to be done about it.”

Dumbledore’s expression changed. It slipped from its usual glaze of intelligent, disaffected concern into a piercing stare of great intensity, blue eyes flashing like small collapsing stars, the ancient lines folded deep and bitter with loathing.

The expression on Dumbledore’s face had seen far worse things than Cassius Warrington, but it liked none less.

“Perhaps you have forgotten that this is a school,” he said. His voice was gentle and firm. He could have been addressing a first year. “Given recent events, I understand the mistake. But if you attempt to have my student apprehended, I will be forced to stop you. And I will regret it. But not nearly as much as you will.”

Cassius stepped back, and bumped into the wall.

“Is that a threat?”

“Is that a question?” said Dumbledore pleasantly. “Deputy Special Inquisitor, you can escort the Greengrasses out. I have other items to attend. Miss Greengrass, do remember my invitation, please. And might someone remove Mr. Nott from the floor? He does not seem very comfortable.”

“I’ve got him,” croaked Pansy.

“Thank you, Miss Parkinson.” He glanced at Draco. “Good evening, Mr. Malfoy.”

Draco gave a wary nod.

Dumbledore’s smile became sad. His sadness unnerved Draco more than his threats; he didn’t know what sorrow the sight of himself could possibly offer that a dying girl wouldn’t.

The headmaster offered no explanation. He swept out of the Hospital Wing while the heartclock chimed faster and faster.

-Coming to you LIVE from the BOTTOMLESS BLACK PIT, it is your author, crawling briefly out to throw a chapter at the world and then crawling back in. When will she emerge next? Only the BOTTOMLESS BLACK PIT can say! For further information, please consult BOTTOMLESS BLACK PIT.

-If you have left a comment on the last chapter — and there were so many wonderful ones that I have fattened my Beloved Comment Folder by twofold, let me tell you — I hope you have a great week. And that life gives you the opportunity to pitch your enemy into a BOTTOMLESS BLACK PIT very soon. Metaphorically speaking. Or literally speaking! Chase your bliss.

-The next chapter title is still being hammered out, else I would give it here. You are my reason for writing. Thank you!!

The Crimes of Albus Dumbledore

Chapter 75: The Crimes of Albus Dumbledore

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“I feel so stupid.”

They were alone in the Hospital Wing. Astoria had been transported to St. Mungo’s around midnight, which was when her vitals returned to normal, and her parents went with her. Daphne had stayed.

Daphne curled at the head of the bed, her knees drawn up to her chest, and with her chin perched on her kneecaps she looked very young. She wore a cornflower blue dressing-gown, and when she dipped her chin, her hair fell over the scarred half of her face.

A house-elf had brought her some tea, which lay cooling on a tray, along with a plate of shortbread and lemon cakes. Draco drank from his cup and listened to the clock tower give a single, mournful toll.

“I started giving transfusions when I was seven. Tori was three. It was obvious to everyone very early that her condition was worse than mine. She was extremely frail. Walking was difficult for her. She would get these muscle spasms that made her legs lock up. We both did, but mine were less frequent. Less severe. I could get around with a cane, but before the chair, she couldn’t get up the stairs.

“I hated giving blood. I hated needles — I still hate needles — and it meant I spent even more time in bed. It wasn’t fair. I mean, why me?” she said bitterly. She lifted her head. “Why do I have to stick around the Hall in the summers, when Millie’s in Greece, and Blaise is in Rome, and you’ve got Pans and Teddy in France? Why couldn’t I be free like the rest of you?”

She ducked her head low again, pressing her nose between her knees. “I was a fool.”

“You were seven years old.”

“Thirteen,” she spat. “A fool at seven and a fool at thirteen, and as foolish at sixteen as ever. I spent my whole life wanting to be free of her, and then I got what I wanted, and it ruined my life. Isn’t that just Daphne for you! She wants to be well again? Try a werewolf bite! She wants a date to the ball? Now Hermione loathes you! Sick of Daddy’s fussing? He can’t bear to look at her. Wants to be rid of her sister? Very good, Daphne, anything for you: she’ll learn to hate you, and *die.* And maybe that’ll finally teach you not to be so selfish all the time, you, you vain, stupid, spoiled little bitch—”

“Stop it.”

Daphne stopped.

He conjured a handkerchief for her. She buried her face in it.

“Hermione doesn’t loathe you,” he said. “For one thing.”

“She’d be right to. I’m hateful.”

“You’re not hateful.”

“I’m stupid.”

“Less so than most.”

“I wish I was clever,” she cried. “Then I wouldn’t mess everything up. I don’t know why I always mess everything up.”

“Don’t be dramatic,” he said tiredly. “Brilliance is no guarantee of character. Take me, for instance.”

It seemed to clear the fog of misery. Daphne lifted her head, daubing her eyes, and snorted.

“You’re not a bad person, you know,” she said. “You’re just a very silly, very sad little boy.”

“A thief knows a thief.”

Her smile grew. “Don’t we just?”

Thunder rolled. The frosted windows blazed white and then dimmed again.

“I would like you to promise me something,” she said distantly.

“Tell me what it is.”

“Promise first.”

“No.”

She smiled thinly. “Spoilsport. Fine. If I become a monster—”

“Pomfrey said you didn’t have lycanthropy.”

“That was before my readings went up.”

“Those are just readings. You’re still missing the principal symptom.” His voice was edged.

“The one where I turn into a monster?” she said, frowning into her cup. “Yes. But I don’t suppose it will be long, the way things are going.”

“It’s been almost two years since your bite. If something were going to happen, it would have happened by now.”

“Transformations don’t always start immediately,” she said, with the same distant, philosophical affect. “It happens around puberty, some say. For girls, in particular, it’s later. Some say. Anyway, if I do transform, I have to — to put my trust in someone. And trusting you was the first smart thing I ever did.”

He set down his cup with a sharp noise.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” she said helplessly. “The Defense textbook says that silver works well enough. I looked it up, you know. You’re not the only one who can read ahead.”

“Silver kills werewolves. It doesn’t cure them.”

She shrugged. “Yes,” she said in a small voice. “If you can find another way, that would be nice, but I’m trying to be realistic.”

He shoved his chair away and stood, repulsed. “No one is going to kill you. Especially not me. And I resent you for asking.”

Daphne bent her head and hid her face behind her knees.

“I always knew I wouldn’t live very long,” she said. “Ever since the diagnosis. Aunt Cilla died at twenty-one; Aunt Cassie was gone by twenty-four. Grandmama made it all the way to thirty-five. So I never thought I was going to have a career or see the world or anything. And I’ve already lived loads more in sixteen years than some of them did in thirty. If you look at it one way, it’s not a great loss.”

“Fuck’s sake. Greengrass. Stop.”

She tried, haltingly, to smile.

“I just don’t want to hurt anybody,” she said, as her voice dwindled on the threshold of tears. “I never wanted to hurt anybody. I wanted people to like me.”

“They do.”

“They won’t if I’m a monster.”

“You’d be surprised what people can overlook.”

She frowned up at him.

“You’re not going to die,” he said curtly. “What you will do is pull yourself together. If you don’t want to hurt anyone, then don’t. Take measures. Learn how to manage it. Solve the problem. Find a way out.”

“What if I can’t?” she said, trembling. She might cry. “I’m not strong. And I’m not clever. I can’t do the things you can.”

“Then get others to do them. You were willing enough to ask for help in dying; I don’t know why you think you can’t ask for help to live.”

She wrung his handkerchief fretfully. “Do you think I ought to?” she said. “Is there any point in it? I don’t want to get my hopes up for something, and be looking forward to things, and all that, if I’m just going to… I mean, can it be fixed? Really? And do you think that it’d be worth it to… I mean, can you even say for sure there’s a life for me out there, if I do make it? Because I don’t know that you can.”

He put his hand on her shoulder. The black garnet of his ring seemed lightless against the blue silk.

“I’m Lord Malfoy,” he said. “I can do anything I want.”

She smiled at him wistfully. She put her hand over his on her shoulder and rubbed it with a fond, fraternal touch.

“Then here’s to silly and sad little pureblood boys,” she said. “And the pureblood girls who never learn.”

By the time he left the Hospital Wing, blue light suffused the frost-filmed windows. Daphne stayed behind, claiming she wanted Pomfrey’s opinion on a brewing headache; he suspected the remedy she desired was actually some time alone, but he gave it to her.

Distraction shrank the distance between the Hospital Wing and Gryffindor Tower into nothing. His brain ached, and the intensity of the previous evening asserted itself with itinerant performances of all

scenes — his mother, his mother's memory, Astoria's transfusion — such that he lacked the space to consider any one at length.

The common room was still and quiet as the corridor, but at the creak of the door, there was movement by the fireplace. Hermione raised her head over the sofa's back, scrubbing sleep from her eyes.

"Granger?"

She froze. Then she scrambled upright. He moved quickly to meet her, roused to fear by the look on her face.

"Merlin, what are you doing awake? It's nearly four—"

Hermione grabbed him by the front of his shirt. Her expression was so furious he was surprised it didn't burst into flames at the touch of her hand.

She wrenched him around and reached up and — his brain blanked — hauled him into a kiss.

It was a fast, angry kiss. Her mouth slanted hot and bruising on his, her teeth needling his lip. Her tongue slipped past his. He stumbled and kissed her back without finesse, worry warring against desire. She made a sharp sound and yanked his hair.

It was a cross between a punishment and a fascinating incentive to keep her angry at him all the time.

She tore back and gave him a hungry once-over, seeking fretfully anything that might be wrong with him. Her ensuing relief survived for a gratifying few seconds before irritation erupted in its place. "You went *missing,"* she snapped. "That's the occasion. You swanned off to Dumbledore's office, alone, after a coded message that wasn't even *signed,* and you didn't come back to dinner and you didn't come back to the common room. Oh! And then! Theodore Nott shows up and breaks the door down, screaming his head off for Daphne, and she goes running, and the rest of us have the full night

wondering when someone's going to let us in on what the hell is going on in this castle — which of course *no one does* — so now I'm up waiting for you—"

She broke off and swiped the back of her eyes. He looked at her in amazement.

"Sorry," she said, in a normal voice. "I'm under a lot of stress. And — if something happened to you — right after we — it'd be the last straw. You know. I can't handle, I wouldn't — I couldn't take it. So that's why. I wouldn't react this way, normally. Obviously."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"This is all very embarrassing."

"Look at me. I'm famously hard to kill."

"It's fine," she said tightly. "I overreacted. It's fine."

Something hot and sharp ignited in the back of his throat.

"My mother and I had a long conversation," he said. "Then I went to the Hospital Wing. Then I saw Greengrass. I'll tell you what happened, but you can't tell anyone. And the 'anyone' in that sentence is ironclad."

Curiosity sliced through the morass of misery and embarrassment on her face.

He drew her over to the sofa, and she sat warily with her legs balanced across his lap.

When he had finished explaining, the birds had begun trilling at the window, and the fire was almost dead. Hermione pressed her hand to her mouth, brow knit.

"If she transforms," she said, "she'll need potion. I don't know where —"

“Snape can brew Wolfsbane. I can ask him. If Dumbledore hasn’t already.”

“Is it difficult?”

“Well, if you could get it off the shelf, you’d think he would have.”

“No, I’m sure, but I mean… well, that’s a thought for down the road. She still might not transform.”

“That’s my hope.”

She leaned forward, folding her arms over her knees. “How are her parents reacting?”

He raked a hand through his hair, uncomfortable. “They didn’t acknowledge her.”

“They didn’t *talk* to her?”

“Her mother might’ve said a few words before they left. I don’t know. They’ve kept her at Hogwarts and haven’t told her anything, which suggests they’re trying to keep up appearances. Frankly, I’m less worried about them than I am about Warrington.”

“God, he’s everywhere. What’s his problem?”

“As I understand it, the new tests legally qualify her as a lycanthrope. Even latent ones are supposed to register with the Ministry.”

“And what would that entail?”

He rubbed his eyes. “She couldn’t go to school,” he said, grimacing. “That’s the main thing. Registered werewolves are highly regulated. They’re not allowed to get within ten kilometers of any school, or place where children live—”

“She *is* a child!”

“—or wizarding settlement — I’m only telling you. It’s why most of them end up living out in the wild. With other werewolves, if anyone.”

“That’s — that’s horrendous. But she’s a pureblood. And wealthy. Doesn’t that make a difference?”

“Not for Warrington,” he said. “In his mind, she’s already dead.”

“Christ, that’s disgusting.”

He shrugged: *And so it is.*

“And is that what they all think?” she said coldly. “Theodore and Pansy?”

“Well, there’s an interesting question. If I had to say a word for Nott and Parkinson — and to be clear, I preferably wouldn’t — I would say their devotion to Daphne, as a person, is genuine, and it runs deep. I would also say their devotion to any ideology whatsoever is strategic and, to the extent it exists, shallow. I venture they would accept her as an exception to the rule. When Warrington called her an animal, Nott swung on him.”

“On Cassius?” she repeated incredulously, sitting up a little. “I thought they were allies.”

“Alliances have limits. Maybe she’s one of them.”

“But that’s incredibly foolish,” she said flatly. “Cassius is Theo’s best connection in the Ministry. And his arrival prompted Theo to start doing… whatever it is he’s doing with Myrtle.”

“You still think they’re connected? The castle walls aren’t as thick as Warrington’s skull.”

“He’s cruel, not stupid,” she replied evenly. “And more importantly, he’s an adult. That means he’s capable of leaving the castle.”

It took him only a moment to understand what she meant. “Making him the only way to get information out of the castle that doesn’t require it to pass Umbridge’s desk.”

“Exactly. But to what end, I’m still not sure.”

Abruptly, she leaned over and pressed her head into his shoulder. He shifted to accommodate her, and she pressed tightly into his lap, her head set under the arch of his chin. He wrapped his arm around her waist and wondered how anyone so small could produce so much heat. It was like having a furnace pressed over his navel.

He could feel the twitch of her heartbeat against his palm on her back. When he noticed it, his heart slowed to match it.

Embers snapped. The light was so low that only a faint warm glow from the grate spared them from darkness.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen,” she said, as if she were confessing a humiliating secret.

“No one does.”

“But something will, won’t it? Something has to. We keep saying there’s going to be a war, but what does that mean? Attacks in the papers? Things happening in the Wizengamot? There haven’t been battles. We don’t know how large the enemy is, or how many of them are out there. I used to think if someone threatened my friends, I’d find a way to fight it. But now there is, and I’m — what *am* I doing? Hosting study groups. Prefect patrols. Trying to pass my exams.”

“We’re students. That’s what we should be doing.”

“It’s what we should have been doing,” she said, brittle. “In a world that doesn’t exist, and maybe never could. Draco, I want to do something that matters. When the war comes, I want to know I didn’t waste the time I had left pretending it never would.”

Instinctively, he wanted to ask why it would be such a waste to pretend. If everything had to end, it didn't seem like such a terrible thing to remember what it felt like to be free.

"Peace in our time is not your personal burden to bear."

She drew back and frowned at him. "Yes, it is," she said. "It's mine as much as anyone else's."

"Merlin's fucking sake."

"It is! We're not ignorant, we have knowledge, we have skills—"

"We're not yet seventeen."

"Lily Potter was my age when she joined the Order of the Phoenix."

"Lily Potter is *dead."* His throat was tight. "This isn't dragons and mermaids. It isn't an adventure. When wizards go to war, it's a killing field."

"All wars are a killing field. And I never said it was an adventure." Hermione lifted her chin, head high. "And Lily Potter killed Lord Voldemort."

Draco repressed a surge of revulsion. He put the back of his hand to his mouth, quelling bile.

White masks leering through the hedge and mist. Green light. A boy's body on the floor.

"Don't," he snapped.

"It's a fact," she said stubbornly. "I didn't mean any—"

"Granger, don't say that to me," he said quietly. "We both know damn well what you mean by it."

Hermione swallowed, caught out, and turned her head to regard the fireplace. She did not acknowledge that she had tried to lie to him, and he did not further the point. Even with her face to the flames, the circles beneath her eyes were deep, and abiding.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” she said.

“Something that will convince me you value your life as much as I do.” He ran his hand down her wrist and turned her bandaged hand. “You haven’t used the phoenix tears.”

“I’m saving them. And I *do* value my life, Draco, I just happen to value other things more—”

“I know it well. That’s my problem.”

“You don’t mean that,” she said, frowning at him. “You care about freedom. And fairness. And justice, you wouldn’t still be here if you didn’t.”

“Where’s ‘here’?”

“With me,” she said incredulously. She gestured between them, furiously, as if trying to illustrate a thick, heavy cord connecting them. “Together. Partners. Whatever we are. In every sense, and in every way there is. You *wouldn’t* be with me if you didn’t believe it.”

“You think I wouldn’t be with you if you weren’t on the side of the angels?” His tone bordered on withering.

She shot him an equally withering look. “No. But you can’t pretend you don’t know where the angels are, you’ve been standing with them too long. A sneer and a one-liner don’t change that. They might work with other people. They certainly don’t with me.”

“If you amassed the world’s justice,” he said, “and its fairness, and its freedom, and you set them on a scale against you — judged

according to the bearing they have on my mind, the command they have of my choices—”

“Oh, don’t even—”

“It would not move.”

“I don’t believe you! I don’t believe that I would win, and that’s a good thing,” she said snappishly, folding her arms. One could always trust her to get peeved at a compliment. “You don’t have to take this line. You can care for me and still admit you’re a good person. I’m not going to be irritated—”

“I did not say it would not *win;* I said it would not move. The scale would break before it lifted you.”

“Why won’t you admit you’re on our side?” she demanded. “I know you’re with Harry. Everyone in Gryffindor knows you’re with Harry. Nobody who knows you thinks for one moment you’d abandon him.”

“Maybe I care for him. Did you think of that? Maybe I think the world has dealt him enough suffering. Maybe I would like to see the next chapter of his inexcusably sad life redeemed, however briefly, by some measure of safety and happiness.”

“Yes,” she exclaimed, “that’s the *war.* It’s about safety and happiness. For Harry, and for everyone. If you’re for that, you’re on the side of the angels. It’s really that simple.”

“I’m not on your side. I’m with you.”

“That’s the same thing, Draco.”

Are you sure? he wanted to say, but he didn’t want her to look at him the way she would if he did. He glowered at the coals.

“It’s never ‘for everyone,’” he said. “That’s why it’s not simple.”

Hermione drew breath to reply — assuredly something cutting and intelligent that would have made him feel even more wretched — and the stairs creaked. She whipped around as Draco turned his head, and they both watched Ron emerge from the boys' staircase. At the sight of them perched closely on the sofa, Ron's mouth gave a sour twist, and his eyes narrowed.

"I heard you from the bathroom," he said stiffly. "If you're having a lovers' spat, could you save it for the morning? Rest of us are trying to sleep."

Hermione bridled. "Cast *Muffliato,"* she said sharply. "Or do something. You're a perfectly capable fifth-year wizard, and it isn't our fault you forget it."

Ron scowled and dropped his head. Draco remained silent, drumming his fingers on the back of the sofa, and waited to see what he would do.

"I heard you talking about the war," muttered Ron.

Draco stiffened. He was tempted to say: *And since?* But he did not want to give Ron the satisfaction of riling him.

"How much did you hear?" said Hermione warily.

"'Peace in our time.' And something about fighting." He raised his chin. "You two planning something, then?"

"No," she replied. "We're talking about how useless I feel, actually."

"Yeah? You sure?"

"Excuse me? What does that mean?"

"I dunno," he said aggressively. "I come out and you two are cozied up together, talking about Harry and war—"

"That was a private conversation! It wasn't meant for you!"

Draco sighed. “Don’t be dramatic, Ronald.”

“I’m not being dramatic,” Ron exclaimed. “You know what? Fine! You two can go off and snog each other’s brains out, fine! None of my sodding business. *Fine.* But if you start making war plans without the rest of us—”

“We’re not making ‘war plans’ without you!” She shot up off the couch as if scalded, and her departure left Draco feeling cold. “What possible reason could you even have for that? The fact we’re having a conversation without you in it?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I said, Mione. Good job. O for listening.”

“Then tell me what you *are* saying, Ron, because you’ve just come have a go at me for the capital sin of talking in private—”

“Sorry! I guess the rest of us should just leave you and your boyfriend alone, yeah? Stop interfering?”

“If you’re going to be horrible, then *yes,”* she shouted. Her hair swung free around her shoulders with the force of her gesture, broad and crackling with the static of her anger. “Leave me and Draco alone, why don’t you? That’s what you want, isn’t it? You picked a fight and you got one, and now you get to run off and sulk and tell yourself it’s my fault you’re feeling shitty. So go on! Save us some time! Make yourself someone else’s problem!”

Draco glanced at her sharply, then at Ron, keeping his expression still. His face was warm.

“You don’t mean that,” Ron said faintly. “You’re just — cross at me. S’all. Mione, you don’t mean it.”

“Oh, go cry to Harry,” she snapped.

She whirled around and sat down hard on the couch, every muscle rigid. Ron made a furious noise and fled up the stairs, his feet

pounding on the steps.

Draco tipped his head back, inhaled, and exhaled for a long time.

“Don’t say it,” Hermione said thickly. When he looked over, she had her head in her hands, and she was muttering through her fingers. “I know I was horrible. I am horrible. Just — please don’t say anything for a little bit.”

“Granger—”

“Don’t,” she gasped. “Please don’t say anything. If you do, I’m going to scream.”

Wordlessly, he reached for her. With a gasp, she clambered into his arms, and she flung her head into the cradle of his neck and shoulder. Her arms wound tight around his neck. She made a long, thin sound of despair.

“You’re not horrible,” he murmured. He rested his chin over her head, and felt her shiver. “It was a row. You and I have had them. So has Ronald. It isn’t the first.”

“I’m getting worse,” she whispered. She sounded afraid. “I’m getting meaner. I’m less patient with him. With Harry. Draco, it’s getting harder. I’m getting angrier, and I can feel myself getting worse.”

“You’re still yourself. You’re different, not worse.” He ran his hands through her hair, freeing the sharp, sweet scent of citrus. “That’s life. You can’t be the same person you were at eleven. Though candidly, you were none too patient then, either.”

She laughed wetly into his chest. “Was I horrible then, too?”

“Wickedly.”

“Do you promise?”

“You were an impatient, thankless, horrible creature from the day we met,” he said, “and if you ever improved, I would never forgive you.”

He drew her face back, holding her chin cupped in her hands. She leaned up and kissed him, her lips grazing his chastely, soft and wet. He kissed her back, gently, and settled her back to his chest. He pressed his nose into her crown, and she gave another little shiver. The wind began to howl.

The term crawled on. Fleeting gasps of daylight slipped through the frosted windows, and shadows turned rounds on the ancient stones. Evenings blurred into each other. The nights were so long that sometimes they could spend an afternoon in the dungeons and emerge to perfect darkness at the windows. Quidditch practices took place with the floodlights on, regardless of the hour — for the other three Houses, who had resumed play for the Cup in a sequence of slow, ill-attended matches, since attendance was capped.

Daphne returned to Gryffindor Tower with a smile and an alibi. She had been called to comfort her sister in a medical emergency, she said, and the others accepted the explanation as reasonable, which it was. Astoria’s chair made the revelation of her infirmity less than shocking for most, and Daphne played to it by interpolating threads of truth: the poor dear, she’d been sick her whole life; grew up alone in a big house with no one but Daphne and her cats for company; and who but her big sister could soothe her in a moment of pain and fear?

She did not breathe the word ‘lycanthropy,’ and Draco respected her wishes by striking it from his vocabulary also. He steered the conversation away from her health, where possible; he silently removed werewolves from Defense Club’s March curriculum. Feigning normalcy seemed to be the only thing to be done for Daphne, and so he did it, persistently and well.

She lied blithely and well about it, which surprised Draco, for some reason. He never doubted that she could, but it was disconcerting to

realize that if he hadn’t known the truth he would not, most likely, have been able to tell the difference.

A shrinking set of objects in his life did not dispirit him to remember upon waking. There were his studies, which he had always enjoyed, and now approached the reaping of his efforts in; there were his books, his music, the headphones and cassettes he hid beneath a secret compartment in his bedside drawer; there were the empty corridors on prefect patrols, peaceful and dark, as if nothing had changed since first year; and there was Hermione.

Hermione, scowling and scheming and fishing quills out of his pockets whenever she needed one. Hermione, clever and cunning and banging his door at six in the morning to go over notes. Hermione, crabby and stubborn and refusing to go to bed, dozing on his shoulder in the common-room.

Hermione whom he could touch, with her dark eyes and her hard scowl and the way she steered him around by the robes or the wrist when she wanted something, and he let her, because it pleased him that she wanted to.

For when the common room emptied, as it did late at the night, he could do things he couldn’t in public. He could reach for her hand and tug it pointedly, until she understood and rolled her eyes and climbed over to sit nearer, and sometimes he could turn — quash the instinctive feeling of unreality — and draw her face up for a kiss. And she would make a fussy little noise, feigning surprise, as if to say: *How shocking that I, Hermione Granger, have been kissed by a boy I have been staring at like some sort of edible object for the past hour. The unmitigated gall of men!*

And then she would break off and scold him for distracting her. Then she would usually kiss him again. He soon gave up on trying to understand her modes of seduction, and was happier for it.

There was a certain kind of pleasure in keeping a secret.

It still seemed indecent to make displays. There wasn't a reason it should be; both of them understood, insofar as one ever could, what was going on, or beginning to be going on; but after so many years of habituation in one mode of being with each other and others, their inertia prevented any sudden changes. She sat at an appreciable distance when the four of them were together, and he kept his hands to himself. He touched her back when she climbed a stair ahead of him, and she leaned on his shoulder when she needed to remove a stone in her shoe, but these things they had done before, and if anyone noticed them, they had the good sense not to remark on the relationship of the Gryffindor prefects, which after all had always lain well outside the parameters of common understanding.

It was unclear to what extent they succeeded in discretion, since Ron still made a point of removing himself whenever Harry wasn't with them. Moreover, he seemed determined never to be left with Hermione or Draco individually. He stuck doggedly to Harry's side through the last weeks of term, leaving the library when he did, taking meals when he did, and following him to bed at night.

"I don't like the idea of him alone," he said. "Not now. That's all."

"You're right, but you don't have to do it all yourself," said Hermione. "Draco and I could—"

"No. I've got him," he said brusquely, shouldering his bag to leave them.

These and other changes seemed to mark a shift in Ron's relationship with Hermione. He had stopped asking her for help with his homework, and rebuffed her inquiry about his O.W.L. study plan. He did not invite her to play wizard's chess, or Snap, or any other game the Weasley family might take up on a cold evening. When he came upon her reading in the common room, he did not strike up a conversation about the book, but went off to find Harry, or — more startling still — simply sat down with his own books, and worked.

He was not rude to her, or to Draco, for that matter; if anything, he was unusually civil. He spoke to them with brittle but unchipped politeness, as if he did not quite know who they were, or how to be with him, but he was still trying to treat them well.

It was a reversion, of sorts, to a mean that had never existed — to a state of disknowledge they had never assumed with each other, because even if they had not always liked each other, they had never been strangers. His first hours in Hogwarts Castle had been punctuated by a fight with Ron Weasley. Most of the rest of them had been engaged in a long, emotionally complicated friendship. They had never been strangers, and it made the castle an emptier place.

Cho took to lingering around the common room before curfew, speaking to Harry in low tones in some corner. They had repaired the rift in their relationship, but in consequence spent a lot of time in each other's pockets, chatting quietly in the window or playing games of Snap in an odd, un-companionable silence. Draco had seen them walking together in the hallways, her hand in his, and exchanging short, awkward kisses at the doors; neither of them seemed to know much what to do with the other. The most comfortable they seemed to be with each other was when they were sitting together by the Gryffindor fire, her head on his shoulder, watching the flames in a remote and disparate silence.

"Not to be rude," Ron said under his breath, "but is he ever going to tell her to fuck off?"

They were coming back from Ravenclaw quidditch practice, which was one of the few reliable sources of fresh air. Harry came to watch, with a forlorn expression that Draco wondered wasn't more painful than not coming. The other three had used the excuse to procure some grindylows for the next Defense Club lesson, which now resided in shrunken mason jars in Hermione's bag.

Harry walked several paces ahead with Cho. The girl silently picked her way over the rocks. His black cloak flickered next to Cho's blue uniform.

“That *is* rude,” said Daphne agreeably. “Her father’s a muggle. I’m sure she must be positively overwhelmed by despair.”

“One manages,” Hermione muttered.

“I don’t know what she wants Harry to do about that.”

“I don’t know what you want her to do about it, either,” said Daphne indulgently. “Captain the sunshine brigade?”

“Tell you what I want her to do. Three words: Pack it in.”

Daphne’s laugh was sweet and tinkling. “Ronald,” she said, “we’ll make a pureblood of you yet.”

A strange, cycling sunset darted through the spokes of passing clouds, and wind whipped the hems of their cloaks.

As they approached the clock tower courtyard, someone gave a cry. Draco was first to draw his wand, but Harry charged ahead of him, almost skidding on the wet cobble.

Four members of the Inquisitorial Squad stood in file around the comparatively tiny person of Victoria Frobisher, whom Blaise Zabini had pinned with an arm behind her back. She was struggling like a trapped dog, and Blaise had to jerk her to hold her still.

Pansy stood in front of her, hip cocked, a black armband dangling from one crooked finger. She was flanked by one dark head and a gold one: Theo and Cassius.

“...expect me to believe that, you little rat? Who gave it to you?”

“Your mum,” snarled Victoria. “And then she begged me to shove it up her—”

Pansy slapped her. Victoria shrieked.

“I’ll ask you once more, brat: who gave this to you?”

“She’s ELEVEN!” Harry roared. He shoved off Cho’s clutch on his arm and stormed into the courtyard, tearing his wand from his pocket. Pansy jumped, and Victoria gave a triumphant cry. “Take your hands off her! She’s eleven years old!”

Cho cried out, but Ron tackled Harry to the ground.

“Harry, NO!”

“Get off me! *Let me go—”*

Startled, Blaise dropped Victoria. She sprawled into the ground face-first, but soon sprang back up, grinning. There was a bruise on her chin.

“Now you’ve done it,” she told Pansy with relish. “Bitch! You’re in for it now.”

“Stop it,” Hermione hissed. “Go back to the common room.”

Victoria stabbed a middle finger at Pansy and shot off into the cloisters.

None of the Inquisitors were pleased by Hermione’s intervention, but least of all Cassius. The sneer he bestowed on all of them was less than amicable, but the way he looked at Hermione — with her chin high, and her teeth all but bared in a frigid smile — was warlike. His eyes spoke the language of loathing. His white knuckles added an exclamation point.

Draco stepped into the courtyard beside Hermione. Theo tensed. Draco mistook it for apprehension.

Then Daphne emerged from the cloisters behind him, her cloak drawn back, her hands raised high on either side of her head.

“Shall we all calm down?”

Her housemates regarded her with a menagerie of unhappiness.

“I quite agree,” said Cassius. “Are you feeling quite recovered from your illness, Daphne? Your sister is well, you will be glad to know.”

He said it mildly, but Theo wheeled on him and snarled something harsh and inaudible. Daphne stepped back, flattening her hand over her mouth, and shook her head. Her eyes were wide and pleading.

Confusion flickered in Cassius’s face. He hesitated, glancing between Theo and Daphne, and then said: “What the devil is into you people?”

Draco noticed it too swiftly to give it thought, but Cassius frowned at Daphne, as if he were concerned for her. What could have surprised him? Surely Cassius had made enough threats in his life to understand why she’d been shaken. Surely that was what he intended.

Unless he *didn’t* think it was a threat. But what would be the benefit of mentioning it? He’d called her a monster; he couldn’t possibly be sincere.

Before anyone could speak, footsteps clattered on the cobble. Neville spun into the courtyard and clutched the wall.

“Draco!” he shouted. “Harry— *Hermione!* Entrance Hall! Come on!”

“Longbottom, what—”

Neville slashed his hand. “No time! Come *now!”*

That Neville had ventured to interrupt Draco had immediate effect. Hermione spun on her heel and followed him, drawing her wand, and Ron scrambled up. He clasped Daphne’s elbow on his way out, and with a fretful glance over her shoulder at Theo, she let him draw her out of the courtyard.

Draco did not spare such a glance behind him when he followed, but Cassius’s laugh rang out in his ears as he left the courtyard.

The doors to the Entrance Hall hung wide. Draco shoved through a tightly-packed crowd, wand drawn.

A ring of students enclosed a gladiatorial space at the center of the hall. A large haunting of ghosts formed a second audience overhead. Professors and students mingled shoulder to shoulder in the medley; above them all, Umbridge presided from the first stair, her purple robes flush against the dark sea of onlookers, like a lilac planted in tar. Three patrolmen stood behind her, their caps drawn low over their faces, watching expressionlessly.

She lifted one of the Potter's Army armbands.

"So!" she cried. "At last! Evidence of what many of you may have long suspected: that Harry Potter has tried to foment violent rebellion against the Ministry."

Above her on the first landing of the Grand Staircase, Dumbledore stood alone, his hands folded before him. In a rare change, he wore a professor's robes, with the ceremonial hood and cap, rather than his usual blues. The effect thinned and swallowed him: the many lines in his ancient face seemed to multiply by the second, and the little blood in it withdrew so much his skin looked cold to the touch. The professor's robes made him seem shorter, somehow, and so feebler. His pince-nez rested on the long tip of his nose, and he peered over them at Umbridge with the intent concern of someone trying to intuit a language he did not speak.

"This movement," she added, twisting it to and fro, "which was conceived and assembled in violation of Educational Decrees, has stationed itself firmly in opposition to the Ministry, the school administration, and any attempts at law and order. You may see here evidence of its organization, which has spread its fingers through the student body; examine the lightning-bolt, clearly modeled after Mr. Potter's facial disfigurement — the red, for his House — not to mention its proliferation among students with disciplinary records! Of whom Mr. Potter is himself a singular example!"

Harry shoved forward, his expression as close to murder as Draco had ever seen on his small, dark face. Hermione stood beside him, her hand wrapped tightly around his wrist.

“Dolores,” cried McGonagall, shoving her way abreast of the crowd. “Abandon this circus! At Hogwarts, we handle disciplinary matters in private.”

“This is not a disciplinary matter. This is national security.”

“National security? This is a school!”

“Yes,” agreed Umbridge. “And where better to strike at a nation than the minds of its children? Albus?”

“Indeed,” he said. “I quite agree.”

“For you see, Harry Potter is not solely responsible,” she continued. “In fact, a young boy like himself can do quite little in his own right. Why should Mr. Potter have any resentment for the Ministry? Why should he abhor what is good and just, what is right and orderly, when he himself is the victim of great injustice and disorder? Why should he revile the Ministry unless someone had first taught him to? What is anarchy, after all, but contempt for authority, and reverence for those who think themselves above it?”

Draco caught sight of Snape rising from the stairwell to the dungeons, his robes unfurling from the shadow like smoke. He glanced at Umbridge, then swept his eyes through the crowd and fixed them unerringly on Draco.

A piercing pain split the front of Draco’s skull. He buckled and gripped the wall to stay upright.

Snape’s voice cut through the pain, loud and strong as a fresh memory.

SAY NOTHING.

“Draco?” Hermione grabbed his shoulder. Her face swam.

SAY NOTHING. DO NOTHING.

With some difficulty, he cleared his mind. He pictured black glass, ice on a lake, the color at the center of a candle. He summoned a place where thoughts turned flat and cold, where there was no feeling and no perception, only data and more data. It was difficult. He pushed harder, until he could feel his mind itself receding from the body, numbing to the sensations of the Entrance Hall.

Snape’s voice receded. The Potions Master’s expression flickered — pride? Or relief? — and he turned away from Draco, stepping through the ring of students at Umbridge’s feet.

“You will remember, Mr. Warrington, the testimony I gave to the Minister in October that Albus Dumbledore had been identified as an affiliate of several persons known to be in rebellion against the Ministry? Will you recite them for me?”

He smiled. “Mundungus Fletcher, Undesirable Number 273. Remus Lupin, Undesirable Number 94. Sirius Black, Undesirable Number 3 —”

“On what evidence?” McGonagall cut in loudly. “Or was the bother of proving your allegations too burdensome?”

“And Alastor Moody, Undesirable Number pending, currently suspected of treason,” Cassius continued, raising his voice over hers, “in conjunction with increasing evidence of affiliation with the aforementioned.”

“I ask again: *on what evidence?”*

“Alastor is an old friend,” said Dumbledore calmly. “I send him Christmas cards. We fought a war together, you see.”

“Through these affiliations,” continued Umbridge, “Dumbledore has knowingly aided, abetted, and I daresay *directed* the activities of the underground terrorist cell known as the Order of the Phoenix. On the basis of affiliation alone, he could be summoned for questioning. He has also violated several laws compelling the disclosure of any information about the whereabouts of wanted criminals, which is a second-class offense subject to penalties not excluding imprisonment.”

“But you have no evidence,” cried McGonagall, with mean satisfaction. “You have no proof! Only one of those persons has visited Hogwarts in the last year! You are indulging in a childish grudge at the expense of the rule of law — I invite you to see what your baseless suspicions will purchase in front of a judge!”

“Minerva,” said Dumbledore, his weariness laced with tenderness. “Please.”

Umbridge’s expression did not alter from a placid, beatific smile. “But I do have evidence,” she said. She lifted her chin and spoke to the far end of the room. “Eyewitness evidence, in fact. Severus?”

Opposite her, with his back pressed against the doors to the Great Hall, Snape’s expression did not change, either. It remained empty, even as McGonagall rounded on him with visible anger in every line of her body.

“Will you confirm,” said Umbridge, in tones of recitation, “that Albus Dumbledore had secret meetings with the aforementioned persons? In Hogsmeade, Edinburgh, and London?”

Slowly, his dark eyes glittering unreadably, Snape dipped his head.

Hermione went stiff. She seized Harry’s wrist as if to restrain him, but he wasn’t moving. Draco could not see his face, but he could imagine it.

He thought: Impossible. It wasn't possible for Snape to betray Dumbledore. It just wasn't in Snape's nature to do; he was vicious, but he was loyal. Narcissa had said he was loyal. She had said that he should trust Snape, even if he could trust nothing else. And he had; not just because she told him to, but because he knew his godfather, and he knew what pulled his strings. Snape was Dumbledore's man, not for Dumbledore's sake, but for the sake of a muggle-born girl who had died fifteen years ago.

No, it *was* impossible; it was insane, it was unnatural and anathema, for a man to keep a woman's memory for fifteen years and forget her on the sixteenth. It was beyond the powers of the heart to evict something embedded so deeply, and it was beyond the powers of the mind to forget it.

"Will you confirm that he entertained these meetings for the purpose of coordinating the activities of the Order of the Phoenix, to which he belongs?"

Snape dipped his head again.

"Will you confirm," she finished triumphantly, "that the sighting of Undesirable Number One in Godric's Hollow on Christmas day resulted from an unsuccessful attempt to rendezvous with Albus Dumbledore?"

"Does procedure require you to confirm every item in the witness's report?" said Snape idly. "Or do you fear an error in reading comprehension?"

"There is no need for rudeness," she snapped. "I made a note of *your* involvement, as well, Professor. I remind you that the goodwill of the Ministry can be withdrawn, once earned!"

McGonagall said: "Severus, what have you done?"

"Followed orders," said Snape, without looking at her.

“Orders!” She hitched up her skirts and swept forward with a face of vengeful promise — for a moment it looked certain that she would draw on him — but Dumbledore cleared his throat, and she wrenched herself back.

Umbridge unfolded a slip of parchment and some reading glasses from her breast pocket. “Indeed,” she said cheerfully. “To the letter, as is his duty. Now. I have here a warrant for the arrest of Albus Dumbledore. In a moment, my friends Albright and Munkover will take him into custody. But before they do, I wanted to show the student body — well, firstly, to show them that not even the highest and noblest in their regard are above the law! A sad lesson, but a necessary one. It is such a risky business, having heroes, isn’t it, Albus?”

“Oh, yes,” said Dumbledore. His voice sounded as far away as his expression. “For my part, I never do.”

“Do something,” Ron muttered. His fists were balled, and he was glaring at Dumbledore as if he could perform the Imperius wordless and wandless. *“Do* something. Stop standing there like an idiot. Fight.”

“He can’t,” said Hermione under her breath.

“He could try.”

“Try *what,* Ron? She has a warrant—”

“Jinx Snape. Jinx Umbridge! I don’t fucking know, Hermione!”

Harry had started to shake. Draco drew his wand.

Say nothing. Do nothing.

It was impossible for a man to cast off vows like Snape’s. There were some things the law could not command. Forgetting was one of them. He had to believe, even if no one else did, that his godfather

was the kind of man who did not forget his promises. Because it was the only way he could believe that Snape would try to keep his promise to him, Draco Malfoy, a boy he had known since birth and before it. A boy whose life had been entrusted to him by Narcissa, in case of the worst. A boy whom he once sent Lucius Malfoy's cigarette lighter as a Christmas present, and taught Dark curses from the margins of his book.

It was an odd language of affection, to be sure. But perhaps it was the only tongue available to someone who had lived so long and so far beyond the light of others' love, and by the time the light grazed him again, his heart had grown strange and hairy in the dark.

Say nothing. Do nothing.

Umbridge handed the warrant off to Cassius and signaled to the patrolmen, who drew their wands.

"Moreover," she announced, "I want to offer all students with any knowledge of this… 'Potter's Army,' or the Order of the Phoenix, or any other insurgent movements of which they may be aware, the opportunity to come forward. I am not unreasonable! Come to my office with any information about the crimes of Albus Dumbledore, and you will have my protection. And remember that I will reward generosity in kind."

A round of whispering erupted. Umbridge waited for it to dwindle, smiling patiently, before she spoke again. "I will also offer you the chance to confess. Those who do not will be prosecuted, but dealt with privately, discreetly... I remind you that for those students who are of-age, that crime is punishable by imprisonment in Azkaban. For children, expulsion, and a permanent revocation of your license to practice magic." She regarded the crowd seriously over her reading glasses. "I will warn you now that for some of you, evidence of such involvement already exists. The guilty should hence feel *especially* forthcoming, as they are in most need of my generosity."

Whatever thin strand held Harry's patience snapped. He dove into the crowd and cleaved apart the wall of students, who parted with mingled cries.

"It's not their fault!" he screamed. "It's me you want, isn't it? It's me —"

"HARRY!"

"Harry, *no!"*

Agitation cracked the horrified hush. Behind Harry, Ginny wrestled out of the crowd with her own wand drawn, no doubt encouraged by his example; Fred and George flanked her. At her elbow, Luna Lovegood was rocking on her heels, red-faced, as if physically buffeted by fury.

Suddenly it felt as if everything was happening very slowly, or Draco was living in double-time. He could see the whole room at once, each scowl and grimace, every bared snarl, each hand poised on a wandsheath. He saw the patrolmen gazing with keen and dangerous interest at Harry. He saw Umbridge, whose eyes gleamed covetously as Harry stepped into the ring.

"Take me, then!" Harry was shouting. His voice was high and strained and not entirely lucid. He kept striding toward Umbridge, who subtly gestured for the patrolmen to stand down. "You win! Take me and be fucking done with it all — you want something to arrest me for? *FINE!* Here you go!"

He reached for his wand. McGonagall gasped.

Ron lunged for him only too late. Hermione cried out, but it was Draco who raised his arm.

It was a clean line, a perfect hit, the pride of any duelist: the Stunning Spell streaked neatly through a chink in the crowd and struck the square of Harry's back. He collapsed, and Ginny dove to catch him.

Noise erupted. The students surged back in a buffering wave, knocking everyone back. Umbridge, with a shade of disappointment coloring her face, called over the din: “Thank you for that… heroism, Mr. Malfoy. It was quite unnecessary, but I thank you for it.”

Draco said nothing. His heart pounded bruises on the inside of his chest. He lowered his wand and jerked his chin in acknowledgement, which thankfully was enough for her to move on.

“Oh thank God,” Hermione breathed. “Oh, thank God. Thank God. Thank God for you, thank you, thank God.” She was staring at the unconscious Harry and gripping Draco’s offhand so that his fingers grew numb. Fred and George quickly fumbled the unconscious Harry out of Umbridge’s line of sight, and McGonagall shepherded them closely, her own hand never straying from her wand.

There was too much babbling to hear what happened next: Umbridge said something to the patrolmen, who turned and began to advance on Dumbledore. Dumbledore watched them approach curiously, as if he really had no idea what they intended to do. One of them extended a hand and began talking quickly, gesturing at the door. The other kept his hand on his wand.

“Ah,” said Dumbledore, cocking his head in understanding. The clamor dimmed at the sound of his voice. “You would like me to come quietly.”

“It is not a question of what we would like,” said Umbridge, her disappointment fading quickly into a sunny smile. “You see, I do not think even you would be so reckless as to start a fight in a room full of children.”

Hermione’s grip tightened, then slackened.

“Oh, you bitch,” she said, with a low and wondrous passion.

“What is your end here, Dolores?” inquired Dumbledore. “I ascertain that you mean to convict me. Very well. What then?”

Her face wrinkled. “That will be decided by the jury,” she sniffed. “It will be out of my purview— I may give recommendations, of course, as a witness—”

“Yes? And where will you tell them to put me?” He cut across her effortlessly, his voice crushing hers beneath its velvety grandeur. “Azkaban? Nurmengard? I fail to grasp your intentions. Do you think you possess a prison that would hold me, if I wished to leave it?”

Umbridge’s mouth fell open; a wave of murmurs crested over the crowd.

“You,” she said, “may think that — many wizards do — that they are invulnerable, but—”

“Did it never occur to you that a prison could fail?”

“—but you *will* obey the law, in the end, as everyone must—”

“Did you never imagine a wall could break?”

“You will surrender yourself to Ministry custody,” she said angrily, mastering herself. “You will be tried. And you will be imprisoned. And we will *build* a prison to hold you, if we must.”

“Another prison?” he said sadly. “Is that the best you can do? Try, Dolores. Just once, for your old teacher. Try to think a little harder.”

“Do not lecture me! You have obstructed justice and engaged in political scheming to indemnify Harry Potter from prosecution. Your mismanagement of this school has resulted in countless injuries, an international political crisis, and the death of an auror, not to mention a seventeen-year-old boy. You have conspired against justice, order, and goodness, to effect a violent revolution, and enlist children in your petty wars. You are a corrupter, a manipulator, a rabble-rouser — a pitiful old man with delusions of grandeur,” Umbridge spat, panting, “and you will face justice — if it is the last — thing — I do!”

“My justice has been much delayed,” agreed Dumbledore. “But I have a long road yet to tread before it finds me. Your justice, on the other hand, I suspect is not far behind you.” He turned to the Deputy Headmistress, who stood rigidly at the foot of the stairs — poised, it seemed, to attack.

“Minerva, keep the fires burning,” he said. “When I return, I will not come quietly, either.”

“Yes, sir.”

He drew his wand. Something glittered at his wrist: a silver keyring, strung with charms, whose shape he recollected as if from a distant dream.

“And to my students,” he said, “I leave my best advice, which is a warning. The enemy lies not before you, nor ahead, but in your mind, where its power is deepest and strongest; in times of grief and suffering, when you fear you cannot stand the weight you bear, the enemy is the lie that you must stand alone. Remember your enemy; to resist him is to resist anything.”

He lifted his hands over his head. Umbridge cried out.

There was a thunderclap like a giant snapping its fingers.

Light filled the castle, blinding as the birth of a sun. The room’s features sank into pure white. Draco threw his arm over his eyes. Around him there came the rolling cries and thuds of a room dropping to its knees. Hermione’s hand clenched his as she sank down, head buried in her arm. A piercing whistle split the air.

The doors slammed against the walls, thrown open by some great thrust. Wind flung itself moaning into the hall, and fingers of fog trawled in. The grey and sodden courtyard lay dull under a curtain of rain. High overhead, a flame-bright bird with a long tail flapped its wings and gave a shuddering cry.

Hermione gave a throttled sob, and then clapped her hand over her mouth angrily, as if chastising herself. Whispers ran in rising cross-currents among the students. A few gave cries of dismay, but they were soon silenced by prefects and patrolmen.

Dumbledore was gone. As the rain began to fall, the patrolmen came down and picked over the courtyard, looking for evidence of where he had gone. They did not find it, and by and by, they left.

-Thanks for sticking with me, lads. We're crawling back out of the black pit, but we're like, making a home for ourselves in the shallows.

-I've been struggling to keep up with comments, but I do read as many of them as I can. Thank you so much for your generosity and your continued attention, it's a pit-lantern. If you've commented on the last chapter, I hope you find an elaborate and beautiful lamp.

-Next chapter should be along in a couple weeks; title: "Potter's Army."

Delilah in the Lethe

Chapter 76: Delilah in the Lethe

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The hall was warded off until the aurors arrived. Umbridge stayed in the Entrance Hall with her patrolmen and a rapidly growing number of Ministry representatives — one of them seemed to hurry in from the courtyard every few minutes — while the Heads of House ushered their students out. Slytherin disappeared downstairs. Prefects were enlisted to guide stragglers. In these ways it felt vaguely like Opening Feast, only colored in a very different feeling.

Draco was among the last on the grand staircase, after the hall had emptied and the sun had set. Snape did not reappear; McGonagall, who had carried Harry upstairs in her own arms, likewise did not; nor did Umbridge seem to notice that Draco was in the room, so engrossed was she with the aurors.

He had climbed the stairs to Gryffindor Tower for five years. He knew them better than any part of the castle, and perhaps the Manor, come to that. Each creaking board and narrowed step, the chip in the banister where Neville dropped his cauldron, the windowsill where the Tower cat slept on sunny afternoons. When he'd first learned the winding stair, his name had been a muttered curiosity in the castle corridors, the echo of a man ten times his size and breadth and height, and he'd cowered under the carapace of it. The Tower stairs had left him breathless and aching, ending each day in a grueling ascent from the bottom of the castle to the top. So he had climbed them, though it made his legs hurt, and he crawled into bed miserable, wishing for an easier way home. And still, he had climbed, and climbed, and climbed these stairs, until he could take them two at a time, rising past classrooms, girls' bathrooms, broom closets; rising by portraits in red robes who cried out in familiar tones; rising through classmates who fell in file behind him as he went, and first

years who stepped aside to let him pass, naming him in whispers, *Malfoy, Malfoy, Malfoy;* rising past windows full of sunlight, rising through stories of stone and air, until he stood at the crown of the world, in front of a solemn portrait door.

“Password?”

“Alea iacta est.”

The whole House had gathered in the common room. Faces gazed alertly from every sofa and armchair, tucked in sills, flush to the walls, sitting on cushions and carpets and cold stone floors. Angelina sprawled on the staircase to the girls’ dorm with Lavender and Parvati. Romilda sat beneath them with Natalie Macdonald, who was always getting demerits for leaving her collar open, and her friend Jimmy Peakes, who had once subbed in for Harry at a quidditch practice. Victoria Frobisher and Alfie Chrissenpoffer sat four deep on a sofa with Colin and Dennis Creevey — when had Colin grown spots? — while tiny Euan Abercrombie perched on a windowsill with a grim and vigilant expression. Dean and Seamus and Katie huddled together with Fred and George and Lee Jordan, a tall gangly boyish collection that featured in prefects’ nightmares; Neville sat with the first years by the fireplace, whispering in a low, soft voice.

Ginny was splayed deep in an armchair, her knee cocked up, twirling her wand. When the door opened, she caught it and glanced up.

And in the middle of them there was Harry, pale and furious, hunched in a chair with a blanket around his shoulders, and Ron’s hands pressing both blanket and shoulders firmly down. Hermione was daubing ointment on a bruise on Harry’s cheek.

“There he is,” Harry said sourly. “My savior.”

“Get ahold of yourself,” said Draco disgustedly, shutting the door. “I’m sorry, *did* you want your wand snapped? Give it here, I’ll do it for you.”

“My head hurts, you know.”

“Stupidity is known to sting.”

“Oi,” said Ron.

“By the way,” said Harry, raising his voice, “what was it you said about Snape, again? We should *trust him?”*

“I said it was likely he was double-crossing her. I stand by that assessment.”

“Stand *by* it? How can you seriously still think that Snape’s on our side?”

“Because I would believe almost anything before the contrary,” he snapped. “You don't know him as I do.”

He couldn’t explain it. He just knew his godfather; he knew the long, impatient length of his stride, the hunch of his back, and the way he swung his head around doggedly to scan a room once he entered it. He knew the way he held his arms dead straight at his sides, and walked with his head down, ill at ease in his own skin. He knew the way Snape’s fingers curled for his wand whenever someone reached too close to him.

Severus Snape would not have betrayed Lily Evans’s memory, because he would not have betrayed anything he cared for enough to bind himself to it. And he would not have betrayed Narcissa, lost to the world in Witherfell, even for a seat by the Dark Lord’s throne, let alone the Minister’s.

“Maybe not. But I know some things, ” snapped Harry. “Like how Padfoot’s good as dead if you're wrong.”

“Dumbledore left two hours ago. That’s more than enough time for a wizard to get to London. If you’re correct—”

“If I’m correct? *If?* Draco, open your fucking eyes—”

“SHUT UP!” Ron bellowed.

It rattled the ceiling; several children squeaked.

Ron folded his arms and stabbed two fingers at Harry. “Give. It. A rest. Bloody hell. Half the Ministry’s down there trying to figure out how to lay hands on Dumbledore, and you think anyone’s bothering right now about fucking Padfoot? And if they are, you think he can't manage himself? If there’s one thing he’s good for, it’s clearing off.”

It was not without bitterness; several people glanced around, clearly wondering who Padfoot was.

“And not for nothing,” Ron added, “but it’s not actually Draco’s fault if Snape’s an evil shit .”

Harry sealed his mouth and dropped his chin mulishly. Draco gave Ron a short, startled nod of acknowledgement, which was not returned.

“Potter, think about it. He told them about Dumbledore,” said Draco. “He didn’t tell them anything about you.”

“You don’t know that—”

“I know that because you’re not in Ministry custody,” he retorted. “Snape could have given them a pretext—”

“They don’t need a pretext!” Harry shouted. “They don’t need a *reason* to hurt me, it isn’t about fucking reasons, it’s about the fact that they *can* — they hurt people because hate them , and they hate anyone capable of stopping them—”

“They’ve been looking for a pretext to arrest you all year,” Hermione said. She folded her arms tightly. “I'm sorry. Ron's right. I’m sure they would have tried to arrest Dumbledore anyway, but targeting you — the smear campaign, cancelling quidditch, dosing your friends with Veritaserum — they’re trying to get you to do something they can

expel you over, so they can take you into custody. Like they would have a year ago, if Dumbledore hadn't struck his deal with the Wizengamot."

"Then they should have just arrested me," said Harry savagely. "I don't understand why — why they had to hurt everyone else—"

"Because they need something to ruin you," she replied evenly. "Publicly. That's why they went after you for Viktor, and when that failed, they changed course and started painting you as a revolutionary. People *love* you, Harry, you're a symbol of the Second Wizarding War. They need people to lose faith in you before they can take full control. If there's no Harry Potter, there's nothing to fight for."

Harry trembled. Then he made a wounded sound and hung his head, covering his face with his hands. Ginny unfolded herself from her armchair and knelt beside him, letting him rest his weight against her, as he canted to the side in a swift collapse — either of muscle or of will. She touched his face gently, with a tenderness uncharacteristic of Ginny. Her flame-red braid sat high on her head and trailed down her back, like a train of fire.

"We won't let them get you," she said, fierce and low. "They won't take you. With an army, they couldn't take you from us."

"I'm not worried for *me,"* he said. "I don't care about me."

"It's not your choice."

"It's me you're risking your lives for. It should be my choice."

"No."

"'No'? What do you mean, 'no'?"

"Because they're our lives," she said. Then Ginny pulled his hand away from his face, flattened it carefully between her own and pressed her lips to his knuckles, lightly, a knight's kiss for a prince.

Hermione glanced at Draco. Her knuckles pressed tightly to her mouth in thought. The white bandage clashed like snow against the bright pink of her lip. The world leaned off-kilter, the center of balance shifting perilously far. He knew the depths of his own guilt — in the weak and cowardly maw of him, in the empty chapel of his heart, where nothing immortal had ever really lived — that Ginny thought she spoke for all of them, and she was wrong. He would let them take Harry, if it came to that — under one condition and one condition only, but the difference between one and nothing was the difference between a coward and a knight. He felt heat in his stomach, his throat, his face.

But it was true for Ginny. It was clear in the guileless and unflinching honesty of her smile that she loved him; perhaps she had never stopped loving him, only charted her way to better waters in the sea of her love; from the fervent lovesickness of a ten-year-old to the steady, selfless sacrifice of a girl almost grown. It was remarkable, to love that long without hope.

“Let us help you,” said Ginny. “Fight. It’s what you taught us to do, isn’t it? Let us.”

“I won’t ask you to do that,” said Harry.

“You don’t have to ask us,” said Ron shortly. “And you can’t stop us, so don’t even try. If you turn yourself in, it’ll be me coming to spring you, and I’ll be bloody put out about it.”

“You can’t,” said Harry, pitching up in panic. “Hermione, you realize this is stupid — they could snap your wands. You could lose your magic.”

“Then I’ll lose my magic,” said Neville suddenly. Harry flinched.

Swallowing, Neville added, “Big d-deal. Never was much good at it anyway.”

“Yeah, let them,” said Katie, raising her voice. She jutted out her upper lip, and two piercings gleamed defiant in the firelight. “They have to get my wand first, don’t they?”

Harry cast his eyes around the room, desperately, on an array of faces hardening against fear. One could see, as the panic welled in his face, how swiftly it became clear to him what he had wrought: that his family, the one he must have longed and prayed for all the nights of his childhood, when it came, had come vast, and fierce, and loving; and on the second edge of love there lay sacrifice, the steady march into darkness, the column charge into the fire.

He had given all of himself to the place, little unloved Harry Potter, and now Gryffindor sat at his feet, patiently offering all of itself back.

“Draco,” he rasped. “Tell them to give it up. Tell them it’s pointless.”

The temptation would follow him for the rest of his life. An affirmative hovered on his tongue, coupled with an order to be reasonable. He knew his talents: he likely could persuade them not to go. Hermione would be the last holdout, but knew how to win that argument, too. If the plans went wrong, she would steer them all into ruin at the hands of the creature in the world she hated most. And she wouldn’t mind a gamble, Hermione, if she wasn’t playing with other people’s lives.

But she kept looking at him, half-pleading and half-commanding, and he realized it might not matter if he won the argument. Harry had said he was going, and so she would go. Wherever he went.

For a moment he wanted a different past, where the hat had said *Slytherin* or *Ravenclaw* for both of them, and she’d never met Harry Potter, and she had never sectioned her apostle’s heart into thirds. Where she belonged to Draco in the selfish, torrid, ordinary way.

But her bandage hung limp from her wrist, a heavy white flag.

Traitor. *Traditor, tradere.* Hand over; deliver; offer up. Sacrifice.

“It wouldn’t be pointless,” said Draco. He lifted one shoulder in acknowledgement of Harry’s betrayed look. “It wouldn’t be wise. But it wouldn’t be pointless.”

Harry exhaled. He slowly pushed himself to his feet.

The attention of the gathering sharpened and fixed on the boy’s narrow shoulders. The older students broke off from their private conversations to listen. The young students sat up straighter. When Harry drew breath, the room breathed with him.

“I’m not the Chosen One,” he said. “I’m not the Boy Who Lived. I’m not the savior of anything, I’m not a symbol of anything. I’m a real person, and if you ever have the choice, I would never — not in a hundred years — ask any one of you to put yourselves in danger for my sake. None of you. Not ever.”

He carded his hands through his hair, which was already so wild it hardly hurt. “Anyway,” he said, “I need to… I need time. To think. And we need time to come up with… a plan. But if you… if I go, we all go. I’m not leaving anyone here. No one left behind. That’s my… order, I guess. That’s what I say.”

The world outside of the common room seemed to exist again, suddenly, reflected at once in terrible glory by the scars it had left on those present.

The firelight gilded Harry’s scar like a sacred rune, splintering the skin of his forehead. The glint of it turned his glasses into white rounds, and with his flat expression, the result was not entirely recognizable to Draco as the boy who had lived for five years in the bed beside him.

The room rose, as one, and moved toward him. Fred and George clapped him on the shoulders; Katie cuffed him on the head; Dean and Seamus elbowed him. Victoria, daringly, threw her arms around his waist. The others crowded in a shower of light touches,

murmured words, and Harry stood in the center, terribly still and quiet, like an idol of stone.

Hermione cut through the crowd to Draco and caught him, her hand encircling his arm. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he said. “I don’t want him dead, either.”

“I know you don’t see it the same way.”

“I didn’t lie,” he said. “It wouldn’t be pointless. I didn’t say it was a good idea.”

Her other hand caught his other arm and she looked at him gravely, as serious as a Killing Curse. Hermione reckless was normal and, however unpleasant, endurable; Hermione gentle was like watching a tiger try to prowl on eggshells, only more awkward and piteous. “It’s worth it,” she said. Trying to balance gentility with earnestness. Eggshells shattering on every word. “I’m sorry. I know you think it’s dangerous. It is dangerous, maybe. But we’re together. Just here there’s so many of us, and there could be more of us, too — people do love him, they love him without even knowing him, and if the world knew what he was like—”

“Granger,” he said. His hands found her waist. An unspeakable landscape of terrible truths waited for him to unveil it with a word. She was asking him to say that he had agreed for Harry’s sake, and not hers. Asking him to relieve her of guilt, to relieve her of the burden of whatever happened to him after, but he wouldn’t, and perhaps he couldn’t.

He was a bad person, but he wouldn’t free her of that knowledge. It tethered her to him. She had tethered herself to him. She deserved to own that weight.

“We’re both fools,” he said, as softly as he could, though the eggshells were breaking.

“Me? No,” she said brightly, too brightly. “I’m ‘the finest magical talent of this or any generation.’ And you’re quite good, too, on your better days.”

The room was too crowded for them: they ought to have been alone. Hermione, with her fingers digging into his arms like she could stop the future from taking him anywhere else, should have been able to do so, and he should have been able to put his arms around her waist. If the world were just, nothing would ever change. She would stay ferocious and bold and cocky and she would keep the frightened little grin on her face, and nothing would have taken it away from him, nothing.

For some time now the days had been growing longer, but not until a dry evening in late April did Draco notice that the sun still shone in the west when dinner ended, throwing deep shadows under the high table. Atop them, Umbridge held the headmaster’s chair. She was chatting with a square-faced middle-aged man in the Deputy seat that once belonged to McGonagall. The Transfiguration professor sat at the end of the table, six seats distant from Umbridge, and twice from Snape. Neither end of the table raised their heads from their plates.

The other aurors had remained, but ate at their own new table beneath the faculty, where they could keep full sight of the room. Sometimes they hung in the hallways outside of classrooms, or drew a student aside for questioning.

In the silent hall, the shuffling feet of hundreds echoed on the stones. Above the doors, the last Inquisitorial Decree hung in a frame of lacquered wood, announcing the new headmaster.

It was no use trying to avoid the Inquisitorial Squad. Tracey Davis and Blaise Zabini lounged at the foot of the staircase, taking demerits more or less at random; their job was to ensure students went directly to the library, or else their (own) common rooms.

Another Inquisitor would be stationed at the library doors to take note of all visitors.

The corridors smelled of dust and mold and wet stone. Filch had been sacked a week after Dumbledore left. It closely followed a decree that the Ministry would not employ non-magical persons, which set off rumors that he had been a squib. Only in his absence did the miserable old crone's love for the castle reveal itself: soot filmed thick on the sconces, and puddles of melted wax pooled beneath them, which no one had bothered to remove.

Slow days dripped into slow nights. Spring frosts iced over the bolted window-panes. The libraries filled in the evenings with students bent low over their desks, quills scratching at workbooks, while the smell of melting wax thickened under stuffy coils of smoke. New quiet hours kept the common room chatter to a minimum. Inquisitors perched around every corner and under each stairwell, directing straight files of students to and fro their appointed destinations. Cassius Warrington had taken to prowling around the grounds with the aurors, his purple cloak flickering among the pack of trench coats.

No word came from Sirius, Remus, or the Weasleys. Owl traffic in and out of the school had thinned. The *Daily Prophet* listed Albus Dumbledore as Undesirable No. 1, and a poster hung in pride of place on the notice board. His pallid eyes gazed deeply into Draco's as he passed them on his way to meals. They seemed to mirror the memory of Snape's dark ones: *Say nothing. Do nothing.*

But were they Snape's orders, or Dumbledore's? Had the old man been betrayed, after all, by his dogsbody of fifteen years? Were Snape's final instructions to Draco in fact an act of self-preservation, an attempt to coax Draco away from the cliff's edge of heroism? Or were they the standing instructions of the Order of the Phoenix?

He missed his mother with an ache that often seemed physical. It caught him unawares, a pang in his sternum, a wishing for one of her tart *bon mots* or crisp scoldings that snared him during moments

of distraction at his books, or beats of silence at meals. It was not just her person he missed. She would know, he felt certain, the truth about Snape — whether he could be trusted, whether it was all a play — she would read from twenty years of experience the strange levers of Snape's mind, and what inducements could provoke him to treason. But with Umbridge in the headmaster's office, and Snape rarely seen without an auror at his elbow, the opportunity never appeared. In a fit of desperation he borrowed Victoria Frobisher's owl and penned a missive in code, on the assumption that even if Umbridge read it, nothing in its descriptions of jasmines and red roses would incriminate them. The owl came back days later, seal unbroken: his mother was either still at Witherfell, or somewhere beyond the reach of owls altogether.

It was hard to account for the difference in feeling before Dumbledore's flight and after it. Perhaps some resilient part of him, and of the student body at that, had believed that Dumbledore would save them all. That one bright morning, he would unleash the full height of his awesome power to banish the Ministry from the school, smite Umbridge, and restore the castle of yesteryear. Like Ron, they had all been waiting for Dumbledore to fight.

But he had fled, and stripped bare the ugly facts: no one was coming for them. They would save themselves, or nobody would.

Spring washed off the castle's cloak of snow, and daubed sapphire nets of crocuses at the bottom of the oak trees. On Tuesday nights, Neville returned from the greenhouses with his Potions homework, drenched by rain, and carefully took notes as Draco explained what was wrong with it. He had stopped making the same mistakes, although each time invented some creative new ones. Sometimes, after his critique was finished, he gathered his notes and went back out to the greenhouse to try again.

Defense Club ceased holding meetings, for safety. They communicated by little slips of parchment that Hermione charmed to burn themselves up once read. The tension frayed them all to thin strands, impatient, unforgiving.

Michael Corner blacked Zachariah's eye. Ron caught the counterjinx meant for Michael, and blacked the other one.

Millicent Bulstrode body-checked Padma down a flight of stairs. Tracey Davis gave Padma a detention for trying to trip her.

Draco pried Gregory Goyle off a bleeding Justin Finch-Fletchley; Hermione threatened Crabbe away from a cornered Euan Abercrombie; Cassius Warrington caught Euan again at the end of the hall. It was never enough. There was always something happening around the corner.

Draco slid down banisters and rounded corners with the haste of someone running from something, or to it, even when what awaited him was nothing more urgent than the library. Hours slipped through his fingers. Study, eat, study, train. He woke up and a minute later, it was noon.

There was something coming. Everyone knew it. But not everyone knew what it was.

Some days, he hardly saw Hermione, caught up in the thorny gridlock of studying and preparations. One evening, he found her in the common room, when the candles had burned low.

Her back was turned to the aisle, presenting him with the messy knot of brown hair pried up from her collar, her sleeves rucked up to the elbows, forearms dappled in inkstains. Her quill etched a looping, illegible scrawl in her journal, while her wand conducted several books in a revolving circuit, presenting themselves ritually to be consulted as she preferred.

He stepped behind her and waited, testing her. She raised her head and cocked it.

"Draco?"

He shifted to lean against the bookcases. "Proximity ward?"

“Among other things,” she said. She twisted around and leaned on the back of her chair, half-smiling at him. “You smell like smoke.”

“Tutorial with Longbottom and Finnigan.”

“He’s quite good at it,” she said, and she glanced over her shoulder. He identified the gesture as an assurance they were alone, and smirked, knowing what would come next: the double-take glance at his mouth, followed by the hooded, plaintive eyes that she made when she wanted something she didn’t want to ask for.

Draco braced his arm on the back of her chair.

Abruptly she shifted up like she was going to kiss him — he froze, because there were others in the common room, it was public, they would see and she didn’t want that, people seeing — but she kissed him on the cheek, her mouth hot against flushed skin.

Someone cleared his throat. Ron stood over her shoulder, pointedly looking at the floor.

Hermione discreetly shifted away from him.

“Ronald,” said Draco.

“Ron,” she said. “Hello. Did you need s—?”

“Word with Draco,” he said tautly. “Outside. Please.”

“About what?”

Ron looked at her, with a harsh, wry sort of look. Hermione reddened.

“If you have something to say to me, you should say it to *me,”* she said shortly. “I’m not an object. And if you’re going to talk about me like I’m not here—”

“I know,” said Ron pitifully. “There’s — I just —” He ground his jaw. “I can’t do this with both of you at once. It’s not about your thing. It’s about his thing and my thing.”

“What ‘things’? Ron, you’re not making any—”

“Alright,” said Draco, interrupting her. He nodded to the door. “A word. Granger, you get him next.”

Ron sighed in relief.

“Do you promise?” Hermione said sharply, eyeing Ron.

“Sure, yeah,” he said. “You can yell at me all you like.”

“Fine. Then I’m going to find Harry. Find me when you’re done,” she said, “and — I’m serious, Ron, I think the three of us really ought to talk at some point.”

“I agree,” said Ron, surprising her; Hermione never came prepared for anything but a fight. “We’ve got a battle plan to make, yeah? Let me do this bit first, though.”

Warily, she let them go, then turned back to find Harry. Ron wheeled open the portrait door. Draco stepped elegantly into the passageway, and Ron hauled it shut behind them.

There was an alcove ten or twenty stairs down from the Tower entrance, a flat shelf over which was cut a window facing the lake. Ron stepped into it and leaned against the wall, and Draco matched him, folding his arms. He waited for Ron to speak first, which he appeared to be attempting to; he opened his mouth and grimaced to himself several times.

The conversation that had been hovering over their heads for weeks fell all at once, like rain bursting from day-old swollen clouds, and brought with it a drench of silence.

“You were right,” said Draco, at length. “It was more than a friendship.”

Ron winced.

“We have a relationship. She and I. Don’t tell Potter.”

He swallowed. “Well,” he said. “That’s… not a surprise. Not Harry, really?”

“She wanted to keep it private.” It was inscrutably important to him that Ron understood that. “I wouldn’t have cared.”

Ron nodded, gnawing his cheek. “How long?”

“February.”

“Oh.” Ron paused. “Well, congrats. And everything.”

“I didn’t tell you to be cruel. If there were a way for this to avoid causing pain to you, I would. But I felt compelled to be clear.”

“I appreciate that,” he said. “I’m trying to be clear, too. But you get that there isn’t — there’s no world, right where that isn’t kind of painful, right, considering I fancy your girlfriend.”

Draco wanted to say, *And I regret that as much as you do,* but it seemed wrong.

Ron sighed and rubbed his temples, restless and agitated. “Fancied her for years,” he admitted. “I didn’t know it, but I did. And the two of you — I’m not stupid. I reckoned there was something going on. But I figured maybe if you two were just mates, like her and Harry… if I worked at it, and if I got to being a real bloke, with brains and everything… But I was kidding myself.”

The waters of the conversation were already rising around his neck.

“She would lie on a bed of nails for you, you know.”

“I know,” said Ron.

“She would give you an arm. A rib. Anything you asked for.”

“Yeah, and she could have mine,” he agreed. “We love each other. But it’s not me, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb,” he said, without malice. “She’s loved you since she was eleven years old. And even on my best day, I reckon I’m just fun to think about.”

His tongue felt thick in his mouth. “When she was eleven, she thought I was a coward,” he said. “And a bully. And a ponce.”

“She was correct,” said Ron mercilessly, “but she was still in love with you. And you’re still a ponce, but that hasn’t stopped her yet, so it probably won’t ever.”

Torches snapped. Wind hummed against the eaves.

“You were right, too. About ‘second place.’” Ron set his jaw. “That it shouldn’t matter. Usually. I know. But I — you know all this, but — sixth of seven, sixth son, and they stopped after the girl — forget that. Point is that I’m used to fighting for attention. Don’t,” he said warily, pointing at Draco, “think this is a pity thing. It’s not a pity thing. I don’t need you feeling sorry for Saint Ronald, who’s sad and poor and bad at quidditch. But you pissed me the fuck off with all that shit about not ‘getting it,’ the other day, like I’m always running to catch up with you. I can’t stand it. Because only one bloke ever really wanted me first pick of the litter, and it’s just my luck, the rest of the world’s trying to kill him.”

The overture hovered in the air, waiting for someone to complete it.

“You have an obsession with winning,” said Draco.

“I know. Hermione thinks it’s a problem.”

“I never said it was a problem,” he said. “In fact, I rather respect it.”

Ron smiled a bit. “Course you do. You’re the same. Used to think you’d rip someone’s head off to win a quidditch match, come to that.”

“That seems messy.”

“You *would* say that,” said Ron. “Anyway, you get why it matters. Being first choice.”

Of course he did.

But it was a part of himself he preferred not to voice. It was, among other things, the part that had wished ill for Viktor Krum about four minutes from his death, on the vile and arresting grounds that he’d received one of Hermione’s smiles.

“As first choices go,” he said, “you could have done worse than the Chosen One.”

“And you could have done a lot worse than Hermione Granger,” said Ron, with quiet resignation. Then he snickered to himself. “Guess that’s why all our luck ran out early.”

“Or none of us had any luck to begin with.”

“Hermione doesn’t need luck, she’s Hermione,” said Ron. It was wry and honeyed with the blind adoration of a first love.

He did love her. It would have been easier to resent him if he didn’t.

Ron said, “You know, there’s not enough time — there’s never enough time for shit like this. But definitely not now, and definitely not with your mates. Because — you know what’s coming. Haven’t got time to waste calling each other names, and fighting over this stuff. When I look back at these months, I want to think: ‘Yeah, that was how I want to remember it.’ Before the war.” He swallowed.

It was a bristling, even-shouldered dignity that Ron wrestled from disappointment's jaws, a nobler and fiercer dignity than anyone could possibly demand; it was a refusal to indulge in the humiliation of showing pain, and a commitment to drive on through it with one's head high, one's back straight, and one's wounds packed away where no one could see them.

It was something Narcissa would have admired, if she could find it in her to admire Ron for anything, which probably she could not.

"At the risk of stating the obvious," said Draco, "you are also a pureblood."

"At the risk of stating the obvious," said Ron, "it's not the same kettle of kelpies."

"No, it isn't. But it might occur to you one of these days, Ronald, that though the vast majority of you is Weasley, there remains a part of you descended from the House of Black."

Ron's tongue probed his cheek thoughtfully. Then he smirked.

"That goes both ways, though."

"Pardon."

"Bad news," he said. "Means somewhere in all that pureblood swill, there's a piffling little part of you that's Weasley."

Draco didn't know what his face did then, but Ron laughed.

When they came in again, Hermione and Harry were speaking in low voices by the fireplace. With their heads bent together, the light fell evenly on their robes, their ties, their rumpled crowns of dark hair, and flickered brightly in their eyes: Harry's electric green and Hermione's soft, fathomless dark ones.

"Don't like it when they talk like that," Ron muttered. "He'll do anything, and she can do everything. Oughtn't let them make plans

together.”

“Don’t remind me,” said Draco, painfully aware of sounding like a sop.

Harry, feeling their attention, raised his head and squinted, nudging his glasses straight with the back of an ink-stained hand. “Stop staring and come pull your bloody weight,” he said. “I know I’m gorgeous, but that’s no excuse.”

“Can’t expect us to resist you, man,” Ron said easily. He sauntered over and dropped to kneel at Harry’s side, scanning the notes. “What are you plotting at?”

“I’m ‘plotting’ the girls’ bathroom,” said Hermione, smirking at her own pun. Draco gave her a thin look. “Anyway, I have a new theory about Myrtle.”

“You’re still after Theodore Nott?”

“Of course I am. You don’t think he’s *not* up to something, do you? Anyway, I went looking for reports of Myrtle’s death, and I found out — one, the school archive from 1943 is a terrible mess, lots of pages are damaged or just missing altogether— but more importantly, she wasn’t the first one attacked. There had been a string of attacks happening at Hogwarts for weeks before. Petrifications. All the victims were muggle-borns.”

“Like in second year,” added Ron.

“Yes. Well, yes, but no,” Hermione agreed. A questing fire was in her eyes. “The attacks were similar, but no one died, and they would’ve likely continued indefinitely if Yaxley hadn’t been killed. But here’s the odd bit: After Myrtle died, the attacks just… stopped.”

“Like she was … responsible for them, somehow?” said Harry.

“No. The opposite. I think someone was practicing,” she said. “And with Myrtle, they finally managed the real thing.”

The wind scraped against the castle windows. Draco cleared his throat.

“What are you using the Map for, then?” he said.

“Someone had to get in and out of the bathroom in order to kill her,” she said. “Myrtle’s body was found in the bathroom by a girl named Olive Hornby — whom Myrtle haunted, by the way, quite viciously, until Olive got a Ministry injunction — poor thing must have been demented, have you any idea how hard it is to sue a ghost? — but she found her in the bathroom where she died. That means either the killer went in after her, killed her, and walked out — somehow avoiding the notice of any number of students, prefects, teachers, ghosts, et cetera, all of whom would’ve been on high alert for suspicious activity at the time—”

“Or there’s a secret passage into the bathroom,” supplied Ron.

“Which you think Nott’s looking for,” said Draco neutrally. “Do you think he’s planning a murder?”

“No. There’s no one here it would serve him to kill,” she said calmly, sitting back on her haunches. “There are easier ways out of the school, if he’s trying to escape. But the easy ones are all fairly well-known. My current theory is that he’s looking for a passageway Cassius doesn’t know about.”

“Still begs the question of why,” pointed out Ron.

She hesitated, glancing at Draco. “Well,” she said, “I will say — if you must know — I happen to think he’s trying to find a way to get Daphne out of the school.”

Ron startled. “What? Why her?”

Hermione cringed and looked at Draco with a pointed, uncomfortable stare; Draco sighed, and rescued her. “Nott has an inexplicably enduring interest in Greengrass,” he said. “So’s Parkinson. I’m given to understand they have a safehouse of some kind. They gave her a letter at Christmas with some kind of code to access it; she claimed not to understand what it said, though I suspect she lied.”

“You don’t seriously think she’d join them,” Ron said in disgust. “After they’ve been shits to her for months. Years, basically. She — she’s closer to Lavender than she is to Pansy, nowadays. And she *chose* our side. She chose it good and loud, last year.”

Draco shrugged. “I happen to agree with you,” he said. “But it wouldn’t be the first time Nott was a poor judge of character. He thinks people are more loyal to him than they are.”

“Or more self-interested,” Hermione said idly. He looked at her. She raised her hands. “I’m just saying. There are … reasons it could be in Daphne’s best interest to be sequestered somewhere away from the fighting. It isn’t … an entirely bad idea, in terms of what’s best for her.”

“To run off with a pack of bigoted twats?” Ron exclaimed. “Blimey, you don’t have to like her, but you can say better of her than that—”

“I *do* like her, actually, she’s quite sweet when she’s not being condescending — but you know she has family troubles, and her parents are either in denial about her condition, or they simply don’t care.”

“Not her blood condition,” argued Ron. “They’ve had her in treatments for years. They coddled her for it.”

Hermione flushed. “I meant — being bitten,” she said. “Being ‘impure.’ From their perspective.”

“That’s not a condition. There’s nothing wrong with her. She’s safe, she’s got friends, she’s got hobbies. More importantly, she’s her own

damn person, and she didn't ask Nott *or* Parkinson to take her anywhere! She doesn't need to be put up on a shelf, you know," he said indignantly, "like a doll they're sick of playing with—"

"I'm not saying she should, I'm saying what I think Theodore Nott would try to do," she said patiently. "If he cared for her. Which, unfortunately, I think he does."

"He doesn't care for her," Ron scoffed. "Hasn't said three words to her in a year. That's not what caring looks like."

"I wouldn't be certain," said Draco. Ron scoffed again — but Draco was thinking of Severus Snape, and Narcissa, and of the way Narcissa looked when she heard Andromeda's name, and he was reflecting on how much one could care without saying anything at all.

On the first day of exams, he didn't sleep. He drifted out of a nauseous semi-conscious fog to the late-morning scramble of boys throwing on their robes, fighting for showers, pitching deodorant and spare socks around. He sat up with a wince and a flex of his knee, the one Goyle had broken almost a full year ago: it had healed, but sometimes the old tendons still twinged, to remind him of the cost he had paid.

He brushed his teeth and combed his hair, used a spell to iron his robes, and drew his tie snugly under the pressed flap of his collar. In a surreal haze, he slipped his wand into its sheath and his ring into place on his finger. For the first time in months, he did not take his books with him as he descended the staircase. Dean carried a seam-splitting load of notebooks — hoping purposively to cram some last-minute studying into the breaks and meals — but Draco, for whom the exams had once been a source of strain, now viewed them as a dull disposal of time. After the Astronomy practical, none of it would matter.

It was difficult, therefore, to tap into the trembling thread of anxiety that ran across the hallways, charging the murmuring crowds like

electric current. He moved through the crowds with the tired ease of someone tall enough and sure enough to make them part when he wanted. At one point, he was sure, he would have swaggered, but this morning brought none of the requisite joy.

This had the unusual silver lining of making him extremely calm as he approached the testing hall, and consequently the subject of some resentment by his peers. He took some tea from the tea station and drank it casually, while a few people gave him resentful stares over the backs of their overcrammed notebooks. Ernie Macmillan mouthed his notes frantically from a six-inch notecard, which at an invigilator's glare he stuffed into his pocket. Neville, clutching his stomach, abruptly whirled and shoved Dean aside in a dash for the bathroom.

Professor McGonagall gave the pre-exam briefing.

"O.W.L.s are spread over two successive weeks. You will sit the theory exams in the mornings and the practicals in the afternoons. Your practical Astronomy examination will, of course, take place at night. You may find the schedule posted on the notice board. When your scores are released, your names will be posted in sequence on the board, along with your results. Please hold questions until I am finished, Mr. Macmillan. You can expect your scores by the end of the term in early June. Participants who exceed the recommended length on their essays can expect additional delays — once I am *finished,* Ms. Patil — and participants found guilty of cheating or plagiarism will be disqualified. You may now ask—"

A copse of hands sprouted. McGonagall sighed, and pointed.

Draco threw back the rest of his tea and set it down. He ought to have eaten something. The caffeine made his stomach turn.

Hermione found him calmly waiting at the back of the room, twirling his wand through his fingers. She had three pens tucked in her breast pocket, plus a spare behind her ear, and she had braided her hair tightly out of her face. It had been slicked back with some sort of

gel, or possibly sweat. From her apprehensive expression he half-expected an eager: *aren't you excited? Taking exams?* or an impatient: *give me a hard question, quick!,* but he got neither.

"Ready for the easy part?" she said bravely.

"Desperately," he said. "I could use a bit of fun."

"Good. Take a pen. I've given them to Harry and Ron and Neville, and I double-checked with McGonagall that you can use them. There's nothing in the rules that says you have to use a quill, merely tradition, and a pen writes twice as fast, so you can get more down on the essay questions. I have biscuits if you're hungry. Are you hungry? I'm not."

"Are you nervous?" he said, incredulous. "Over *exams?* Now?"

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"I don't know. Haven't your nerves reached quota?"

"I can be nervous about many things," she said indignantly. He snorted and refrained from quipping that it was the first principle of her personality. "There's no law about how many things I can worry about at once."

"Thank Merlin. You couldn't afford the lawyers' fees."

"I'd bill you for most of them," she retorted, scanning the hallway. "Only fair, since — hang on, is that Percy?"

Draco craned his neck. The examiners had lined by the door, and among them stood a tall, gangly redhead in a purple robe, his hideous glasses perched in a less-than-judicious position on his nose.

"Unfortunately," he muttered. "Where's Ronald?"

“Is he an examiner? I suppose he got twelve N.E.W.T.s. But he’s too young! The rules say examiners for the practical have to be seven years out at least, otherwise the adjudication isn’t impartial, and if a student’s even *met* an examiner before they can invoke a Section E appeal—”

“Granger. Big picture.”

She blinked, and her eyes sharpened. “He’s here to provoke Ron,” she said. “The whole Ministry has to know there’s bad blood. They brawled in the Atrium! If Ron assaults a Ministry official on school grounds—”

“Give him credit. If he sees Percy, he’ll realize all that, and even if he doesn’t, he won’t act out in front of Umbridge. He’s smarter than that.”

“Ginny isn’t,” Hermione hissed.

“Fuck. Good point.”

He shoved between a pair of fifth years and stalked through the crowd.

Ron had seen Percy before they had, and intercepted him before Draco could. Harry was close behind him, bristling, his hand a hairsbreadth from his wand — Draco caught it by the wrist, the motion hidden by the crowd, and though Harry glared at him, he reluctantly let his robes fall over his wandsheath.

The brothers collided within spitting distance of the door, though to Draco’s surprise, it was Percy who seized Ron, not the other way around.

“Uniform citation,” Percy said loudly. “Improper tie knot. What *are* the prefects getting up to these days? Step out, young man, and fix it at once.”

“Don’t touch me,” Ron said, outraged. “Keep your hands off me, you snivelling bastard—”

Percy ignored him and hustled him — impressively, considering Ron dwarfed him in height and doubled him in breadth — into a side corridor. Draco trotted after him, hand gliding to his wand, alarm prickling vaguely.

In the corridor, Percy craned his neck fearfully for onlookers, and then shoved Ron against the wall.

“Let *go* of me—”

“Is Father alive?”

Ron spluttered. “Yeah — I *think,* we don’t get owls here — why? What happened?”

“What *happened?* He was in *St. Mungo’s!* Did Mother drop you on your head again?”

“Yeah, like, five months ago,” Ron sneered. His fists clenched at his sides, but his expression was steady and cool. “He’s been out since February. Have you seriously not seen him?”

“No! I haven’t seen him since — since the last time I saw you.”

Ron curled his lip. “Couldn’t even be arsed with an owl,” he marvelled. He shrugged Percy off and tugged his robes straight. “Merlin. Why even pretend to care, if you’re so embarrassed of him?”

“I’m not *embarrassed,”* Percy hissed. He glanced over his shoulder. “He’s my father. They won’t let me contact him.”

“They? Who’s ‘they’?” Hermione said sharply. “The Ministry?”

“I — hello, Miss Granger,” said Percy stiffly. “This is a private family conversation—”

“She’s more my family than you are,” Ron snapped. “Answer her question.”

Percy flinched. “Well. I — well. Yes. The Ministry. Who else? You’re on a registry. All the Weasleys. Disreputable individuals, known connections to terrorism — I’m not allowed to see Father. Or Bill. Or Charlie.”

“Yeah? What happens to you if you talk to him?”

“Isn’t it obvious? ‘What happens’ is I lose my job!”

“Oh, your precious job! When did you pick your conscience out of the rubbish? You didn’t care when the Ministry put Harry on trial, and you didn’t care when they were carving up your brothers and sister—”

“Carving up — what? What are you talking about?”

“—didn’t care about us before, when you could watch us suffer from a distance, so don’t come crying now—”

“I don’t know what you’re saying to me! You’re mad! Ron, are you really involved with a rebellion at Hogwarts?” Percy whispered, pale and aghast. “The things they’re saying about you — about everyone — you don’t know how bad this could be for us. Bill’s being followed. Father has a *file.* Platinum clearance, they won’t even let me read it. And they have your names — yours and Ginny’s — on a list. Do you understand? I’m trying to warn you. You’ve no idea the risks I’m taking just to be here.”

“Yeah?” said Ron coolly. “What’d you do?”

“I lied to Lord Selwyn. Madam Umbridge thinks I have his permission to be here. I had to forge a document—”

Ron stared at him, stunned with contempt.

“You fucking idiot,” he said. “I don’t know how bad this could be? *I* don’t? You’ve had a desk job for two years, and *I* don’t— never mind.

You know it’ll be you next, right?”

Percy choked. Ron straightened his tie, and then said curtly: “These people don’t believe in anything but blood. Once we’re gone, they’ll come for you. And when they do, remember that you sold out the only people who would’ve stood by you.”

He swept out.

The bell rang. The doors to the Great Hall parted, and the crowd tightened in a sudden suction through its arch.

“Ron!” Hermione caught him by the shoulder, and Ron flinched. “That was well done,” she said breathlessly. “Really well done, keeping your cool. Are you—”

“Are you seriously asking me if I’m alright?”

Ron glared at her, and it became clear she could not have asked a worse question if she tried. He looked as if he had found his own death warrant crumpled up at the bottom of a bin, covered in grease, and it put a fire under him. It was an expression that could have worn a black eye without any loss of dignity. Ron, Draco had discovered, would rather suffer a great deal than lose his dignity.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” Ron said. “Nobody’s alright. Fucking nobody. Not one single person in this place, and nobody anywhere else. Ever.”

“Beside the point,” said Draco, stepping out of the crowd behind her. Students shuffled warily aside to make space for them, especially after Ron’s outburst. “Do you need a moment?”

“I’m fine.”

“The exam—”

“Draco, I’m not taking it. See you after.”

“They’ll suspect something if you’re not there.”

“My name,” said Ron calmly, “is on a list. That kneazle is out of the bag. Will you bugger off, please? I’m going to hit something, and right now I’m not really fussed if it’s you.”

The tremor in his voice made Draco release him. He brushed him off and cut through the hall. Everyone moved around him, giving him space, some with more grace than others. Across the hall, in the Slytherin line, Daphne followed him with her eyes, and sent Draco a worried, probing glance.

Percy skulked over to join the examiners. Someone from Hufflepuff leaned over and gave a distinct retch, which set off a chain reaction of retching in several other locations about the hall. A few Ravenclaws kept quizzing each other. Umbridge stood at the base of the staircase and watched Ron leave with a small smug smile.

The gong sounded, and the doors breached. The examiners filed into the Great Hall, and Draco found himself caught between the flurry of movement and the doors and, in the opposite direction, the sweep of Ron’s hem as he climbed the stairs. He found himself wondering, in a blear of uncertainty and anxiety, if Ron didn’t have the right of it; if it weren’t foolish to sit here and scribble down answers on paper, as if nothing were wrong, as if they were going to have normal grades and normal careers and normal lives; but what else was there to do? What was there except to plod on in the direction of the current, if for no other reason than that it was better than doing nothing at all?

Then the crowd drove forward like a long black river, the currents catching and dragging and eddying in small exclamations of panic and despair. They were all drowning, but only a dozen people seemed to know it.

Draco did not remember his O.W.L.s individually, but sequentially, as a blur of parchment and torchlight and Hermione’s ballpoint pens.

His hand cramped around the third day, and by the sixth it had subsided to a dull, constant ache. He wished that he had thought to develop wand-dexterity in a different hand he wrote in, since it made a proper grip in the practicals difficult, though luckily, the practicals were by and large a bore. In Defense, he did not draw his wand until the fifth challenge — to subdue a caged gnome, and cast a Patronus for the bonus point.

He could not help it: despite knowing it would not matter, he wanted to do well. In the Potions exam, he cut a blazing swath through six essay questions and doubled back in a rare moment of self-doubt to rewrite the first, scribbling out more notes in the margins. With three minutes left in the test he recalled a better counter-stirring method than the textbook recommended, and scrawled a postscript on the back of his essay detailing the relevant chemical proofs. In all exams, Potions especially, the nearby sweating and whimpering of other fifth years distracted him, and he nearly lost focus in his Charms essay on Disillusionment theory when Dean escaped to his fourth bathroom break of the hour. Electives were smaller, though the diminutive size of the Runes O.W.L. cohort — a piffling thirty-four, as compared to the full cohort for the core classes — only increased the tension when one student stood up to turn in their paper ludicrously early, or flipped their page obnoxiously fast. In this, he practiced minor incidents of Occlumency, flattening his thoughts to the safe plane of black glass; it could not close out the sound of quill-nibs scribbling, but it flattened his thoughts to a dark pinprick, from which he could then expand back to the rectangle of the page. There, the only enemy was the empty space beneath the question, the distance between his penpoint and the last line.

Potions, Transfiguration, and Defense came first in the week, and they took their price in morale: students wandered out of them dazed, quiet, as if they had been strapped down and flogged. The later exams of Charms, History of Magic, and Herbology brought spirits back up again. A few cheaters were dragged out of the hall with Korrecktall Kwills or transfigured cheat sheets; Umbridge sent

them back to their common rooms with ‘T’ stamped on their exam cards.

Harry and Ron said little to each other and less to anyone else; in Gryffindor, the atmosphere formed shallow, fast-moving eddies of anxiety. Hermione became sleepless. Her hands were caked in ink, and she haunted the common room well into the dark hours of the morning, scanning the Marauder’s Map for something perhaps even she did not know the name of.

At the end of the second week, the Astronomy exam came. He spent three hours, i.e. several months, trudging blindly through a spate of questions about constellations and trines, after which they emerged into a fruitless and indolent and intolerable afternoon, offered as a break in preparation of the practical.

Atop the Astronomy Tower, a row of telescopes stared like cannons over a dark vista, stars spread thick like scattered salt over moon-glazed hills. The moon, one sliver removed, sat high at the heart of the sky, and the light was like bathing in milk. Daphne came over from the Slytherin line at once and knelt at a telescope by Lavender and Parvati, who leaned in and started whispering; at the examiner’s call, they broke off, furtive.

Harry leaned on the rail. The examiner, a witch with curly white hair named Griselda Marchbanks, told them to open their pamphlets and begin, but Harry didn’t move for several moments. His glasses caught the moonlight like round stars. Ron clapped his shoulder warily, and he turned to find a telescope.

It took at least a month to finish the exam, which might have elapsed in ten minutes. Marchbanks’s voice broke him out of a daze, and he drew his pen slowly from the parchment, rubbing his hand. Astronomical symbols he had little memory of drawing littered the parchment. Draco rolled it up and dropped it into a box at the door to the tower, then descended with the crowd of other fifth-years to the bottom of the staircase.

Hermione found him as they left, giving a bracing breath. “It’s over with,” she said. “It feels like it just started. Did you find the trick question?”

“Yes, both of them.”

“Both of — no, there weren’t two — were there? No. You’re joking. You *are* joking? Draco—”

“Completely. Yes, I found it.”

“Oh, you’re such a prat.”

“I might worry if I thought you minded.”

“I *do* mind,” she muttered, but her blush revealed her for a liar. He laughed.

Their relief was short-lived. At the bottom of the stairs to the Astronomy Tower there was a commotion: through the gloom and sea of dark robes, Harry and Ron pushed through and stood apart from the others.

Cassius stood at the foot of the stairs, his smile split in thirds by the wrought-iron bars. His wand was sheathed; his arms were folded, and he balanced his weight on one hip. When Draco rounded the corner, his eyebrow twitched, but he did not reach for his wand.

Around him stood four aurors, their greatcoats gleaming, brass buttons bright as gold. On the far side of them stood Cho. She hadn’t taken the Astronomy exam; the last Draco had seen of her was at the Defense practical, where she had produced a watery patronus. Now she was haggard and distracted, her tie askew, and tears made her face a terrible motley of grief and salt.

“Potter,” said Cassius.

“Cho,” said Harry, as if he were not sure that she was really there. He moved towards her, but Cassius held out his arm and stopped it.

“What’s going on?”

Cho shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said. “Harry, what’s going on? I don’t remember how I got here.”

“You talked to them,” said Hermione tonelessly. Her face was a rictus of absolutely nothing: no feeling, no emotion, only the flicker of her eyes darting between the aurors and Cassius. Her fist curled close to the hilt of her wand. “Didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t,” she cried. “Talked to who? I don’t know what’s going on!”

“Her memory’s been tampered with,” said Cassius. “She doesn’t remember most things before October of 1995. I don’t suppose you know why that might be?”

Hermione said nothing. In the lamplight, her eyes shone furious, as dark as pitch. Harry made a sound that the drumbeat in Draco’s ears blotted out.

“Excellent charmwork, Malfoy,” Cassius admitted. “Really exceptional. I don’t know how you managed it. It’ll be a shame when they snap your wand.”

A thought skittered wildly across the dull film of Draco’s brain: *We could run.* He could take Hermione and run. They would let them go, if Harry stayed, and he would — staring at Cho, he was rooted to the spot. They could run to Hogsmeade and Floo back to King’s Cross, and she would keep her wand and Cassius Warrington would never look at her again, would never see her, or Draco would carve his wand-arm off at the elbow. He thought desperately that Harry would even bless the plan, if they had asked him, would clasp their hands and tell them *Go,* with a sad smile of parting, and the innocent, trusting warmth of a cow plodding into the slaughterhouse— but there ended the thought. The sea would rise before Hermione would turn her back on that face, and even Draco was not sure how far

they could have made it before he looked back, either. They had already passed under the slaughterhouse gates.

Adrenaline and fear had obscured the other faces in Cassius's party, but there were several. Dawlish, Robards, Cortwaite, aurors all, had drawn their wands and stood poised to move swiftly, though they would not need to; at this distance, aurors could not miss.

"Draco," said Cassius, "will you come over here?"

Hermione stepped in front of him. Draco shouldered her out of the way, awash in regret and fear and loathing. He drew his wand and held his arm across her, although it would make no difference, with three aurors. He might have taken Cassius, by himself; the rest of the party, he had not a chance.

"Oh, I won't harm you," said Cassius. "I'm merely curious what on earth moved you to do this. You understand, old boy, you're going to be expelled for this. Your name can't protect you from everything."

"Your mistake is thinking your name will protect you from anything," said Draco, because it did not matter, anyway, they were going to be taken and expelled and his wand would be snapped and it did not matter, it wouldn't matter, he was watching the aurors and he was holding Hermione back with one hand and sometimes the world simply had to come a few seconds at a time.

Cho was still crying. He didn't care. He would find rage for her later. There would be plenty of it to go around.

"I don't need my name to protect me," said Cassius. He tapped his wand idly against his palm. "Names don't protect anyone, you unlucky fool, and neither does blood. Names and blood are the only things worth protecting. You're supposed to die for them, you're not supposed to let them die with you. I don't suppose it'll be any use to you, knowing that now, but it falls within my purview to occasionally engage in pedagogy." He smiled. It stiffened the scars on his face where Draco had once cursed him. "And discipline."

“What would you ever know about it?”

That was Hermione, with her empty hands and her mouth full of fire. Righteous, defiant Hermione, the voice in the back of his head. The echo on every selfish thought. The glowing jewel at the center of his greatest selfishness. She looked like a hurricane in a necktie, a hotheaded backtalking incorrigible walking site of chaos. She was not chaotic now. She was calm and even and perfectly, terrifically angry. It filled him with a strange and shameful pride to be standing next to her, to have been chosen to stand next to her, with his mind full of cowardice and his veins full of ice.

“What would you know about sacrifice?” she said. “When’s the last time you ever did something you didn’t stand to benefit from? What have you ever given up for the House of Warrington?”

He expected Cassius would give her the acknowledgement of a reprimand or nothing. Instead, Cassius looked on at Draco and said, lightly, almost smiling: “A girl.”

A cry interrupted them. Cho had tried to break away from the aurors and make a run for the gates, towards Harry; Harry surged forward to meet her, but she was caught by Dawlish, and Harry was hauled back by Ron.

“Let me go!” she screamed. “Let me go, let me go, I didn’t do anything— please!”

“What did you do to her?” Harry shouted, his voice shredded by grief. Ron grappled him back, with difficulty, as Harry fought him with real kicks and punches that drew grunts of pain. “What did you make her do?”

“You know, I do resent your tone,” said Cassius, glancing at last away from Draco. “I didn’t waterboard the girl. She came to me of her own free will. I’d say ‘ask her,’ but… well.”

“What did you tell her?” said Hermione. Through Harry’s shouting, her voice was flat and sharp. “Did she think you were going to spare us?”

“She made certain assurances. Which I plan to keep, by the way. I’m a man of my word.”

“What assurances?” said Ron roughly, heaving for breath. Harry had gone still at the word *assurances.* Cho was staring at Cassius, and between her and Harry it was hard to say who was more stricken.

“That she wouldn’t be expelled for sedition,” said Cassius, “and neither would Harry Potter. You know, Weasley, I’d be flattered; she tried to make a deal for all of you. Unsuccessfully, of course, but she did try.”

“No,” said Cho hoarsely. “No, I wouldn’t do that. I would never do that to Harry.” She turned to Harry wildly. “You believe me, don’t you? I wouldn’t do that, they’re lying, they — they must have tricked me, I don’t remember—”

“I believe you,” said Harry. Hermione made a sharp sound in her throat. Draco looked at her, and she was staring at Cho with cold eyes.

“So you’re arresting us,” said Ron.

“Well, not *you,”* said Cassius. “What use would that be? Some nobody son of a nobody's son. It’s Potter they want. Poor Miss Chang, she wasn’t terribly bright, even before you lopped off a year of her mind, Malfoy; I doubt she realized that Potter was never going to be expelled in the first place. Only a fool who lets his enemy out of a cage. No, he’s going to stay right here, and we’re going to expel the rest of you. As a lesson. And once he’s no longer furnished with a coterie of enablers, I think Mr. Potter is going to be much more cooperative with the Ministry.” He twirled his wand and slotted it into the overhand grip, casually flexing his wrist. “As a gesture of

gratitude to Miss Chang, we've agreed to let him keep his wand; the rest of you, I suppose she thought she couldn't save."

"Cho," said Harry.

Cho jerked.

"I forgive you," he said. "You don't know what for, I guess, but I do. And I'm sorry it came to this. I don't blame you for protecting your mum. I hope I would've done the same."

Cho clapped her hands over her mouth, and gave a sob.

Harry let them take his arm without protest. One of them, Robard, touched Hermione's shoulder, and she wrenched it away. She stepped closer to Draco, who put his hand on his wand and sneered at Robard as coldly as he was able. The auror was clearly not intimidated, but he raised his hand and looked to Cassius for direction.

"Don't touch me," said Hermione, sharp. "I don't want you touching me."

Robard reached for her anyway. Draco caught his wrist. Robard jerked his hand free.

"She said not to touch her."

"Draco," she hissed. But Draco and Robard were both looking at Cassius.

"We're coming quietly," said Draco. "Touch her and I won't be."

Hermione breathed deeply, rubbing her shoulder, and shifted a half-step behind him. There was something pleasant about the way Robard appraised him, half-irate but half-unsure, as if he mightn't be a little dangerous. He was a little dangerous. If they touched her, he could be more than a little dangerous.

“Warrington?” said Robard. “I don’t want a mess.”

“Then don’t leave one,” said Cassius mildly. “It’s Potter we need.”

“They’re children. And he’s the next Lord Malfoy.”

Cassius twitched in irritation. “Not to mention a blood traitor.”

Dawlish said, “The laws don’t make him less a lord for that.”

“Merlin. What’s he going to do to you? He’s fifteen. He won’t even have his *wand* in a day’s time.”

But now the aurors were restless.

“I met Lucius Malfoy, once,” said Cortwaite quietly. “He didn’t need a wand.”

A chill draft whistled underfoot. Leaves whispered fretfully in the dark woods at the aurors’ back. The hilt of Draco’s wand pressed into his palm, and he lifted his chin. He could feel the man they were remembering as they stared at him, like a double-image sitting over his own face. Like a mask. For once, he did not mind it. For once, he could feel his father’s ghost standing at his back, and the chill did not frighten him. It felt like strength.

He peeled his lips back in a sneer, and let history infuse it with a menace he could not.

For once, his father’s ghost did what he needed it to.

Cassius wet his lips. “Fine,” he said shortly. “Walk them. If they run, it’s on your head.”

Hermione exhaled and slipped her hand into Draco’s, her fingers clutching his tightly. He clasped it back and drew her close to him as they walked, keeping one eye on Robards, one hand on his wand.

They were walked down through the castle. Torches guttered low in the halls. Up the stairs, shadows thickened in the halls, and Cassius lit his wand to lead them along the winding stone passages to the headmaster’s office. The griffin revolved, turning the stone staircase into view, and they climbed in single file up the steps.

The silver instruments were gone. Umbridge had cleared the headmaster’s office of any touch of Dumbledore; the portraits of old headmasters had been removed, as well, replaced by oil paintings of what appeared to be scenes from history. In one, a wizard with a silver beard stood with a goblin’s severed head under his foot; in another, a witch stood high atop a rock amid surf, her wand outstretched and gleaming red over a fleet of howling mermaids. The books had been removed. Wall-height shelves of oak and stone stood bare save the rare decorative plates or flower vases, whose presence merely served to emphasize the empty spaces. All had been removed from the antique desk but a stationery pad, a quill and ink, and a portrait of the Minister of Magic.

The room did not look like it had been re-occupied; it looked like it had been scoured, a field razed and salted.

Umbridge stood behind the desk, her lacquered nails braced lightly on a piece of parchment. By the fireplace knelt three red heads and a pale one: Ginny, George, Lee, and Luna were on their knees. Purple bruising mottled George and Lee’s faces, and a lace fringe of blood flowed down Ginny’s face from her temple, while the same caked under Luna’s nose. Severus Snape leaned against the wall behind them, turning his wand delicately over in his hands. When Draco came in, his wand stilled, and his expression took on a cool, acid stiffness.

“You’re a traitor,” she said, faintly wondrous, her rage so soft it verged on grief.

The word passed cleanly through him, a bolt of clearest diamond, and left his body clean. It almost surprised him. It took no blood; it

left no bruising. It was a combination of syllables that had ceased to mean anything he couldn't look in the eye.

He said nothing. Hermione shouldered in front of him. Umbridge's eyes slipped at her and tightened.

Ron lurched towards his siblings, but Dawlish caught and shoved him back. Ginny's head snapped up when they came in, and the air went out of her with a sound like something puncturing.

"Where's Fred?" Hermione said sharply.

"Hospital Wing," George croaked. "It was an ambush — they grabbed us from the dorms—"

"—used a firework and tried to divert them—"

"—Fred was too close — his arm—"

"Severus," said Umbridge. Snape rolled his eyes and flicked his wand. Three voices vanished at once, cut by a nonverbal *Silencio.*

"Longbottom's been apprehended, as well," said Cassius, tossing his cloak to the sofa. "Alquist had to Stun him, and took Reiner to find the others."

Umbridge closed her eyes and delicately rubbed them. "How large was the conspiracy?"

"It's hard to say. We would have got it out of Miss Chang, but—"

"I *wouldn't,"* Cho cried. "You're lying—"

"—the information appears to be lost to her."

"He's not," Hermione said curtly.

Ginny gave a cry of rage, and sprang up on one knee. George surged after her, but a twitch of Snape's wand bent them both back

to the floor.

“The brat’s lying, I expect,” said Umbridge impatiently. “Veritaserum will change her tune.”

“If you’d given me Veritaserum to begin with, we wouldn’t be here,” Cassius retorted. “Dumbledore left weeks ago. I told you to dose Potter the night he left—”

“If only someone had not spent their stock questioning the student body,” drawled Snape. “Worth it, though, I am sure, to discover that most students already believed Harry Potter to be what he is: a fool and a liar.”

She jabbed a finger at him. *“You* will be quiet. You have twice failed to brew it for me. This disaster is on *your* head.”

“Veritaserum is a temperamental brew. It mislikes the presence of aurors in close proximity.”

“I thought I had warned you often enough of the costs of disobedience.”

“Your unhappiness is not a cost to me.”

“If my threats have been insufficiently specific—”

Dawlish cleared his throat. “Dolores,” he said, “please manage your staff on your own time. I must report to the Minister before daybreak.”

Her chest heaved with frustration. “Fine,” she said. “The report. Yes. You may tell him that seven — no, eight — students have been expelled tonight. And Harry Potter will be enrolled in a Ministry protectorate. That will make him happy. Yes.”

“What of the conspiracy?”

“Tell him we are in the process of rooting it out. We have made progress on it — we have acquired an artifact, which we believe the conspiracy has used to send coded messages to each other. *Accio map.”*

With a flutter, the Marauder’s Map tore itself from Hermione’s bag and flew to her hand. Harry choked. Umbridge unfolded it with an expression of great satisfaction.

“‘Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs,’” she read out clearly, then lowered her glasses and peered over the parchment in amusement. “Those are code names, I believe, yes? Four names… four ringleaders. Which one were you, I wonder?”

Ginny spat at her. “Bitch,” she said. “Fight without an auror at your fucking back, see what happens, rat-faced fucking cunt—”

“Severus,” Umbridge said sharply. Snape flicked another *Silencio* at her, and Ginny’s next string of profanity was nonverbal.

“Stop it,” said Harry. His voice quivered with anger. “Stop cursing her. You’re an adult. And she — she’s bleeding. Let — let us take her to the Hospital Wing, at least—”

“Tell me how to open it,” said Umbridge, lifting the Map, “and I will.”

Ginny gave a muffled cry of denial. She shook her head doggedly at Harry, grappling against the bindings on her wrists.

Hermione’s hand was hot and damp in Draco’s. She clutched his fingers, slick with panic. Her pulse thundered under his touch, keeping pace with his. “Fine,” she said steadily. “It’s — not a communication device. It’s a map of the castle. But you can’t open it, because it’s a decoy. I have the real one. If you let me, I can go get it.”

But it was too late. They were too far behind the quaffle, and Umbridge knew it.

Umbridge smiled indulgently. “Perhaps,” she agreed. “Miss Chang, come here.”

Cho shrank into the door. Cassius caught her elbow and dragged her forward.

“Mr. Potter,” said Umbridge, drawing her wand, “you are going to tell me how to open this… map. Each time you fail to answer me, Miss Chang is going to experience quite a bit of pain. Cassius, her sleeve, please.”

“No!”

“No, please,” Cho screamed. Warrington grappled her in front of Umbridge’s desk, and wrenched out her arm. “Please, no. No, no, no, nononono, pleasepleaseplease — *please* , professor!”

“Take me!” Harry roared. “Take me, don’t touch her, *she doesn’t even remember!”*

“No,” said Umbridge sweetly, “but you do, don’t you?”

Cho wailed. Draco felt his mouth fall open, and despite himself, he jerked his head to stare at Snape.

The Potions Master was a professor. A member of the Order of the Phoenix. Dumbledore had trusted him. And he was avoiding Draco’s gaze, rolling his wand as as if he intended to watch the torture of a student without lifting an eyebrow. In his eyes lived a flat black nothingness, devoid of warmth, devoid of empathy, devoid even of interest in what was happening. An icy crust of desperation sealed over Draco’s sternum.

He tried to imagine what his mother would do. Narcissa would have known how to make Snape do what she wanted. She would have known what to do now; probably she could even have made Umbridge stop, if she were here.

Then it came to him — not what she would do, but one thing she could.

Discreetly, under the cover of his robe, he drew his wand. Amidst Cho's screaming and Harry's ragged protests, few noticed him rolling his wrist to angle his wand at Snape, inside his cloak, nor the whisper that slipped through gritted teeth.

It was desperation that moved his hand and his tongue; he had no idea if it would work, but he had watched his mother do it perhaps half a thousand times. He had felt her do it, as well. He could at least guess at what the spell entailed, what it required of the caster.

The spell was an act of violation, his mother had said. It was an act of violence against the mind of another being. So he brought his will to bear on it, drew up all the fear and frustration of watching the betrayal of Dumbledore, the disgust and repulsion of watching the torture a fifteen-year-old girl, the withering hatred that accrued from a year spent in suffocating fear of pain, and imagined himself driving a blade between his godfather's eyes.

Legilimens.

His mind became a pane of flat black glass. The room blurred and slipped away. He plunged into the lightless space of the mind, falling in it. He took the thing that was his consciousness, the space it occupied in the realm of Occlusion, and for the first time, he cast it probingly outside of his Occlumency shield.

The pane of black glass became a knife, and it flew. The rush of airless space dizzied him.

His mind slammed against something so hard and cold his body convulsed in physical space. It was more than a mental shield. Touching Snape's mind was like driving at full speed on a Firebolt into a castle wall. It left him starry and pulsing with pain.

The world slotted back into place. He staggered and nearly collapsed into Dawlish. Hermione caught him and dragged him away from the auror.

“Are you alright?” Her fingers winding tightly in his shirt. He nodded shortly.

Snape made a guttural noise. He was braced on the wall, one hand lifted, as if to block a blow to his eyes; he stared at Draco, mouth parted in an uncharacteristic posture of surprise, as if Draco had neatly gored him.

“Draco,” Hermione pressed. He curled his hand around her waist and braced himself on her, cold sweat dampening his temples.

“I’m fine.”

“Obviously not—”

“Later,” he muttered, though he did not know what or when *later* would be. From her distraught stare, neither did she.

Cho had dissolved from screaming into babbling sobs, braced on her knees in front of Umbridge.

“Dolores,” murmured Cassius, “the girl’s mother works at the *Prophet.”*

“Are you questioning my order?”

Cassius shrugged and tipped his head towards Ginny, saying nothing. Umbridge blinked, and then she smiled.

“How apt,” she said. “Thank you for your counsel, Cassius. Bring me the other.”

He tossed Cho aside. She stumbled and collapsed to the floor, catching herself hard on her elbows. Ginny was hauled forward, her

heels skidding against the floor, thrashing and snapping at him with her teeth.

The replacement changed Harry; instead of shouting, he dropped to his knees and fell completely, terribly still, staring at Ginny as if she were the only living thing in the room. His stare was transfixed.

“Please,” he said, with a low broken voice, like prayer. He was not even really talking to Umbridge anymore.

Ginny was wrestled to the floor, her arm wrenched out. She panted, staring doggedly at Umbridge through the red and bloodied curtain of her hair.

“To demonstrate,” said Umbridge. “Mr. Potter, tell me how to open this map.”

“Please,” said Harry, incoherent with grief.

“No,” she said sadly. “That’s not an answer. *Diffindo.”*

Ginny screamed. Red slit her forearm. Blood welled and wept from the cut.

“Episkey,” said Umbridge, after a moment. The cut sealed over neatly, though the blood still dripped from Ginny’s arm. She turned to Harry and inclined her head knowingly. “Do you see?” she said. “Do you see what happens to them?”

“Please,” said Harry, distantly. His eyes were swollen. Tears dripped from his face, new rivulets spilling every time he blinked. “Professor. Please take me instead.”

“You can’t do that.”

Umbridge twitched. Hermione had spoken, and when Umbridge paused, she spoke again.

“You shouldn’t,” she repeated. It was flat and cold and clear and hopeless. “It’s against the law.”

Hermione did not touch her wand. She stood before the headmistress, weaponless, with the long stare of a girl with a prefect’s badge who knew she was right, and also knew that it did not matter. That she was standing on the hill of a dead cause, and she, too, meant to die there.

Nausea gripped him. He wanted to haul her out of the way, out of sight, but it wouldn’t do any good. No matter where he took her, she would fight her way back to that spot. Through anyone. Through him, if she had to.

“Not that it matters to you.” Hermione clenched two fists full of nothing but air, small and bold and clever and terrible. “You don’t care what the laws are, so it doesn’t matter. You’ll do what you want anyway, because you can, and you think that’s a good enough reason—”

“Severus,” Dolores said, but Snape did not respond.

“—to hurt people who don’t do what you want — nobody respects you, they’re just afraid you’ll hurt them. Only it was a poor strategy,” she said, “because you forgot something about children. You don’t really understand children, professor, I suppose it’s because you don’t like them very much. But they learn by copying, you see. They follow the example of their teachers.”

“Silence, Miss Granger!”

“I cursed Cho,” Hermione spat, bitter with a razored edge of pride. She did not look at Harry. She held her head high like the queen of a burning Carthage, for all she cared what anyone thought of her. “It wasn’t Draco, it was me. At the beginning of the year, I cursed everyone in the Army to forget everything that would incriminate Harry if they ever betrayed him, and when she came to you, she triggered the curse. A mudblood cost you your conspiracy, put that in

your report to the Minister. Want to know where I got the idea, professor? From Veritaserum. You can't force someone to say something they can't remember. I can't say the Ministry never taught me anything. I can't say you didn't, either. You taught me what fear is. You taught a lot of people what fear is.

"You made children bleed for telling you the truth," she said coldly. "You made them hate you. And then you taught them how to handle pain. What do you think people do when they're not scared of bleeding anymore?"

"Right," said Umbridge furiously. "Right. Cassius, I think Miss Weasley has had enough. Bring me Miss Granger."

Bellows of objection came from Harry and Ron. But Draco was moving already, without thinking, without deliberating, a completely instinctive movement for his wand. He drew it and had the curse on his tongue, a bitter word he had read written in a book, a word to cause pain — regardless of the aurors, who in the blank rage-hot panic of that moment he really did think he might be able to kill, if they tried to stop him — and Snape clutched his arm.

Green flames erupted from the fireplace. Silhouettes bloomed from the smoke, an auror's greatcoat, first one, then another, then a third. A man stepped out of the hearth: broad, but slender, with a mane of sabled tawny hair and ragged brows that framed a pair of shrewd, yellowish eyes, the pale green of algae on a scummy lake. He stood with a hunch, hands behind his back, as if the shape of his spine was wrought for the purpose of looming. He swept out, red ashes crunching under his boots.

He paused when he saw Ginny on the floor, blood drying on her arm, and Harry on his knees. But with a glimmer of something in his expression, he visibly set it aside, and focused on Umbridge.

"Auror Scrimgeour," cried Umbridge. "You — what are you doing here? Dawlish was soon coming in to make his report—"

“This is an emergency.” Scrimgeour’s voice was hoarse and deep like a chain-smoking giant. He gestured to the aurors, and they moved at once to his side, abandoning their posts by Warrington. Umbridge’s eyes darted to follow the movement, and she moved further behind the desk. “I came because an owl would arrive too late. You must secure the school.”

“The school is secure,” she said irritably, gesturing at Harry. “We have apprehended the rebel, and we will soon have his conspirators, so there’s really no need for you—”

“Forget the boy, what does he matter?” Scrimgeour snapped. His voice was an icy lash to the throat. Harry lifted his head, staring blearily at Scrimgeour in confusion. “You have greater concerns than student discipline. I come to tell you that you must raise the castle wards. I’m putting a detail of dementors at the gates.”

Umbridge paled. “What happened?”

“There was a break-in at the Ministry. The Department of Mysteries has been sacked.”

“Dumbledore,” she gasped. “It was Albus Dumbledore, he came to —”

“No,” Scrimgeour snapped. “Not Dumbledore. A contingent of Unspeakables allowed a party of unidentified wizards to pass unnoticed into the Ministry and remove a vast quantity of Dark artifacts without being identified. All of the Department’s security features were disabled. None of the recording devices have captured anything from the period of the invasion. No fewer than sixty-three Ministry employees have failed to report to auror summons for questioning. Whoever did this has fingers deep inside the administration. The operation required the cooperation of dozens of employees, if not hundreds—”

“The Order,” she cried, “the Order must have done it, at Dumbledore’s behest—”

“Dumbledore did not have platinum clearance! This was a conspiracy, Dolores, and it came from within the Ministry! Either the Order has done it, and the Order has infiltrated the Ministry so thoroughly we may as well surrender to it—”

“That is not possible!” Umbridge screamed at him. “That cannot happen! You are mistaken!”

“—or we are facing another terrorist cell,” said Scrimgeour, ragged. “One much larger than the Order. One that has lain deep in the shadows for a great deal of time.”

“It’s Voldemort,” said Harry. He did not raise his voice. His eyes were shut. “I told you. I told you a year ago.”

The door creaked. Draco turned his head and caught Snape slipping out of the room, his cloak flickering behind him. No one else appeared to notice; Umbridge and Scrimgeour were caught in a fierce battle of inexorable truth against immovable will.

“Check how many of the missing employees are purebloods,” Harry added dully. “Actually, don’t bother. I can tell you.”

“What does Albert say?” Umbridge croaked. “What does he think? What — what does he want me to do?”

There was a long pause. Scrimgeour’s expression mingled pity with contempt.

“No successful attempt has been made to contact the Minister,” he said.

Umbridge gave a cry, clutching the desk for strength. Harry barked a laugh.

“You would never suggest—”

“He was not at his residence when aurors arrived. There are no apparation trails. He is gone.”

“Then they have kidnapped him,” she gasped. “They have — have taken him, this sect, or else— or else he is dead, then—”

“Dolores, take hold of yourself.” Scrimgeour raised his voice. “We have no Minister now. That is all that matters. We must protect the school. We must raise our defenses—”

“Albert *would not betray us—”*

“—elect a new Minister, if Runcorn cannot be found—”

The door was still ajar. Draco thought again of running, wildly, of dragging Hermione with him by force, but his dream shattered against the knowledge that there was nowhere to go.

“Keep everyone inside the castle,” he said. “No one comes in. No one leaves it.”

“You cannot command me,” Umbridge retorted, moving furtively back from the desk. “I serve at the Minister’s discretion—”

“Let him come to reprimand me,” snapped Scrimgeour. With the firelight at his back, he approached her, and his shadow bloomed over her pinched face. She stumbled away from the desk, and he stepped around it, edging her out of the headmaster’s seat.

“This is against the law,” she shrieked. “This — this is a coup! I am the rightful headmistress — the school is mine! The auror office cannot just *take* it from me! You cannot do this, Rufus!”

“We are facing a reckoning,” he replied. “I regret that the law does not abet this. But these are not lawful times. Dolores Umbridge, in my capacity as Head of the Auror Office, I direct you to surrender control of the castle, or else it will be taken from you.”

It escaped no one’s notice that there were now no less than six aurors in the room — six aurors, eight students, and Cassius

Warrington, whose expression remained impassive, lightless, and cold.

“Do as the aurors suggest, madam,” he said. It was the first time he had not called her *professor.* “For both of us.”

“You,” she cried in outrage. “After what I did for you— after all I gave you—”

“You will be permitted to retain your post as headmistress,” said Scrimgeour. “This is a security measure. If you comply with my orders, you have no cause for concern.”

“It is *my school!”* she screeched. Her face was a red crumple of unhappiness. “Mine! It isn’t fair!”

“What is fair will yield to what is necessary.” Scrimgeour turned his back on her, and addressed the aurors. “Take the injured to the Hospital Wing,” he ordered. “Shutter the Floos. Lock the Owlery. Inform the faculty. No one can leave Hogwarts until more is known about the nature of the crisis.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sir.”

“Sir.”

Underneath the clamor, Harry had crawled across the floor to Ginny, and held her face between his hands. He spoke to her in low, hasty murmurs; her eyes, dazed and starry from pain, fixed on him as if he were the sole lighted object in the room. When he used his sleeve to scrub some dried blood from her temple, she gave him a brave, weak little smile.

Cho pushed herself to her feet, swaying some. “Hermione,” she said quietly, “can you— can you undo the charm on me? I’d like to — remember, please.”

Hermione took a deep breath.

“I don’t know,” she said coldly. “You should see someone about it.”

Cho flinched. “You — but — sorry, what do you mean? You do know how to undo it.”

“I mean what I said. I don’t know a countercharm for *Obliviate.* Do you?”

“No, but you must!”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Hermione!”

“What?” she snapped, whipping her head around. “What is it? What? Did you hear anything Scrimgeour said? There are more important things to think about—”

“Not to me! You stole a year of my life!” Cho was furious, but her voice had the shrill cadence of a plea. “You can’t just do that to a person! I didn’t betray Harry! Even if you think I did, I don’t — I can’t remember that, it isn’t fair!”

Hermione drew her head back. Her eyes were dark pits with coal guttering at the base.

“Consider this a chance to start over,” she said.

Something in her tone snagged at Draco’s ear. It came to him belatedly, as Cho crumpled under the unabating sear of Hermione’s glower: he recognized Hermione’s tone because it sounded very much like himself.

Consider this a chance to start over. He wore her signature so deeply and so clearly on his soul that it had never occurred to him to check hers for his fingerprints.

Scrimgeour and Umbridge were conferring in deep tones. George had joined Harry and Ron at Ginny’s side, and Luna was holding herself, rocking back and forth, mumbling. Hermione reached for Draco blindly, and his hand was there where hers sought it, winding around hers like two vines that grew together on a castle wall.

She turned to him, and a wild light guttered in her eyes, fierce and frantic. He had never seen her so except when she was about to curse something or weep. Rage or grief. The coin was in the air. There remained but a moment, a slender one, when it could be pushed.

He drew her hand up and pressed his mouth to the back of her knuckles. His lips touched the fingers that had cursed the girl who betrayed them, and they loosened at his kiss.

Hermione’s shoulders sank. Relief broke up the rigid lines of her face, softened them, but let the fear come, too. She tightened her grip on his hand. The fire carved the silhouette of two creatures limned in darkness. The coin fell.

Well, this has been a real "martha i'm back in the fucking building" kind of year for me so far, but the good news is, I'm not dead, and neither are you. I can't say much of anything except that on God, I will finish the story I started, no matter how long that takes me. I'm committed. I am also, however, a frail human being who gets swatted around like a horsefly by my schedule + health sometimes, so my promise to update is not immediately time-limited. Also, Book 5 in general has been fighting me in the edit, but I've finally wrestled this chapter into something publishable, and I shipped it to you as fast as I could.

I love you guys. Stay safe out there. Next chapter: "I Will Not Tell Lies."

I Will Not Tell Lies

Chapter 77: I Will Not Tell Lies

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The first week after Scrimgeour’s arrival, Draco did not hear Harry speak.

Scrimgeour himself moved between Hogwarts and London often, sometimes several times a day. He was the only one in and out. With the Owlery locked, letters and news alike ceased, draping the world beyond the castle under a bleak veil. Six aurors were stationed in the Entrance Hall, along with an influx of so many patrolmen one would think they were forecasting invasion.

Just one, of thousands, had escaped the castle before the wall came down. Severus Snape was nowhere to be found in the castle. A full-fledged search of the dungeons by a dozen patrolmen failed to unearth his person, and with regret, it was concluded that Snape had fled the premises. To what end, and to serve what master — if any — no one knew, and not even Draco could guess.

Patience ran short. Each hour was a losing game of waiting. Through the windows, arrowed sunlight turned the common room stifling and hot, and the rich blue sky practically tasted of fresh air, but the only way to sample it was to open a window. No one could leave the castle. Nor did even lessons puncture the fabric of boredom: the faculty had been enlisted in the school’s defense. McGonagall and Flitwick stood as often as any auror at the school gates, their silhouettes thin and shallow on the lawns.

Without classes, students had their run of the castle, but with aurors at the doors, it was a shallow freedom. Prefects no longer ran patrols. Draco found himself restless and sleepless, sitting up reading old books of spells, or else practicing curses in bed with the

drapes drawn. He fell asleep with his wand in his hand, lying shirtless on the coverlet, and woke up more exhausted than he had been before he slept. He went to the library and walked listlessly through the empty aisles, watching dust spin in the glare under grated windows. He went to the Room of Requirement and paced the dueling piste, rehearsing footwork until it was flawless, until the steps themselves seemed to move his limbs, like dancing. He went to the Great Hall, and the empty chamber sat still and peaceful, like a magnificent, sun-lit catacomb. He went to the fenced-off part of the seventh floor, where Seamus's bomb had carved out a vast chunk of the wall and damaged the bridge to the Owlery; sparrows were roosting in the rough-hewn rock that used to be a spare classroom. He walked past the aurors on his way back to Gryffindor. Others they stopped and made to empty their bags, checking for contraband, but not him.

The Damocles sword of expulsion hung low over his neck. His best reassurance was that the administration seemed too occupied to fix on what happened the night of the Astronomy practical. This was not, as Hermione pointed out, an enduring fix, but with each day it seemed more and more likely that Umbridge's plans for discipline had been overridden by some higher source intent on keeping all students inside the castle. The plans of Dolores Umbridge had been, at the least, shifted to the back cauldron, while the security of the wizarding world hung in question. It was an unpleasant irony that what had rescued them had been nothing less than the potential collapse of the Ministry itself.

The temper of the castle boiled low. Trapped, with nowhere to go and nothing to quench their stoppered aggravation, the students began to gnaw at the walls. Fights broke out in hallways. Draco lost count of the number of children he pried apart, split with a Stinging Jinx or restrained with rope, to prevent them from bloodying each other. House did not matter. Slytherin first years struck and tripped each other for the crime of laughing too loudly; they warred with Hufflepuffs over taking too long in the stall.

There was no order. How could there be? The adults disagreed openly with each other in the hallways. McGonagall had a shouting match with Dawlish over his effort to confiscate a second-year's medication for boils. Umbridge and Scrimgeour never sat down to dine at the faculty table except in bad spirits with each other. There were no newspapers allowed in the castle. The Ministry might well have fallen altogether, for all the students were permitted to know.

Meanwhile, Draco thought of his mother.

He laid awake with a knot in his heart and thought of where she was; had she heard about the Ministry? Was Snape with her? Did she know of Snape's betrayal, and had she arranged it? Fear commingled with fury at having once again been left out of their plans: if they had *told* him anything, he would have known now what to do.

But none of them knew what was happening outside; they were stuck. Children, infants. Gossiping and scheming at their little plots, pretending at games of war and politics, sheltered and caged by their ignorance. Some nights the possibilities left him sleepless; other nights he woke up choking on the start of a scream.

The day after the Astronomy exam was spent by most of the Weasley family in the Hospital Wing. Ginny and Fred returned forthwith. Pomfrey sent Ginny back to Gryffindor with a sling; a tendon had been severed in her throwing-arm. Fred stayed two nights. Angelina and Lee had suffered minor injuries from detonating Seamus's bomb. Katie sprained her ankle, and Dean had his nose broken by a patrolman's curse. Seamus sat with them in the common room with his jaw set in a rictus of sorrow and guilt, soothing Katie's sprained ankle with a freezing charm.

The failure of Potter's Army, such as it was, laid a silent film of desolation over the common room. Morale sapped, Katie and Lee halfheartedly tried to rally plans for another attempt at escaping, but with Ministry officials at every gate, they found few audiences. With

Harry near-catatonic and Hermione in a bitter well of self-blame, there was nothing around which to organize.

Neville tried to apologize to Harry, but Harry was still not speaking, so Ron reassured on his behalf.

“You did your best, Nev. No one expected you to take down an auror.”

“About that. You don’t have to tell me, uh, everything, exactly, b-but — what h-happened?” said Neville. “Did Cho — was she informing on us the whole…?”

“Cho reported us,” said Hermione. She turned a page in her book and did not lift her head. “I expect she went to Cassius, who raised the alarm with Umbridge. She might have told them about the escape attempt, or she might have told them a good bit more — as much as she could have done, anyway, before the curse kicked in. I imagine they offered her what she thought were good terms.”

Harry exhaled. She lifted her head inquiringly. “Anything to add?”

Harry shook his head. Ron frowned at her, and went to sit with Harry in the window.

He was still the only one Harry would speak to. Draco had caught them several times in the evenings, in some shadowed corner of the common room, Harry muttering while Ron listened and nodded with intent.

It was known, for the same reasons that all things known by more than two people eventually became known, that Cho had betrayed them. It was less known what had happened to her because of it; Hermione did not speak of it, and Harry did not speak of all, and Ron and Draco independently arrived at the same conclusion, which was that it suited no one to know. Rumors of facial disfigurement percolated for some time, with particular enthusiasm by Victoria and the other first years, while Romilda assured anyone who would listen

that Cho was gravely maimed. Regard for Hermione grew deep, but chilly like the pelagic; fewer came to bother her with questions about her homework in the evenings, and when she snapped at someone, students moved hastily to obey.

Hermione criticized, even by implication, was Hermione at her worst. In those long dog days of May, she became brittle and short-tempered. Speaking to her was a short-lived game of Exploding Snap, with no winning hands.

Sometimes she burst into the boys' dorms, spitting furious at some minor sleight from Lee or Seamus, while he was reading there; from there she would proceed to wear a hole in the floor, stray flickers of magic snapping her robes, until the subject had been verbally beaten to death, resurrected, and beaten to death again. He watched her desolate an array of hypothetical criticism with vigor and precision, but he did not once watch anyone brave the risk of voicing it to her, and so instead he watched her bottled-up defenses sour under the rotting suspicion that perhaps no one was interested in them.

Once, and once only, she admitted: "I didn't think it would do that much."

It was evening, and the sounds of the common room burbled through the walls. *Muffliato* and *Colloportus* infused the boys' dorm with what scant privacy was possible, in a shared space.

She was leaning against his bedpost, recovering from a few miles of pacing his floor, while he reclined against the headboard. Draco inclined his head, patient.

"I thought it would — I thought it would just take the memories of Defense Club." Her voice was small. "The Army, I mean. I didn't think it would take the whole year."

Cho Chang had betrayed people she did not understand and was not really friends with for a boy she adored — though she also, perhaps, did not understand him — and a mother she loved. She

had also come very near to getting Draco's wand snapped, and Hermione's along with it. For his own sake, he resented her, and found little to regret in the fact she had been punished for it; at the same time, he did not find her choices difficult to understand. She was the unfortunate victim of luck: she had chosen the wrong people to invest with what she held dear. It was a hard call. Sometimes he doubted his own ability to make it, himself.

Nevertheless, his sympathy did not obligate him to forgive her.

"The spell was extremely difficult."

"I'm aware of that."

"A Memory Curse is fiendish on its own. Setting a runic trap on the parchment to hold the spell indefinitely is another level of complication — based on the act of revealing certain information, which means you reverse-engineered half of a Fidelius Charm. And you managed not to trigger a memory cascade upon casting. The fact that her mind is intact is a marvel."

"I'm perfectly aware how hard it was, thank you, I'm the one who did it."

Her cruelty wasn't aimed at him, nor was the fury, nor the disgust. Hermione practiced cruelty to herself in the hopes it would inoculate herself to it from others. It did not, and had never, but the habit was old, and enduring.

"She still remembers most of her life," he said, electing to stick with the line of the obvious. "You ringfenced the spell, which is by far the most pernicious effect of a botched Memory Charm."

"I took a year of her life."

"Not a very good one."

"Draco," she snapped.

“Well, she spent half of it weeping.”

“Draco!”

“I’m not going to condemn you.”

She scowled.

“Do you want me to do that? I can,” he said, “but I won’t.”

“Why not? Do you not think it’s awful? Or are all these muggle-born scruples just pearl-clutching to you, because you’re so above it all, these *silly* little moral conundrums?”

He raised his eyebrows. Hermione pressed the back of her hand to her mouth.

“Sorry.”

“Fine.”

“No. I am — sorry. Awful. Awful thing to say, I’m sorry.”

“It is fine.”

“I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have said that to you. I shouldn’t — I don’t want to take this out on you, like I’m—”

Hermione swallowed. Abruptly, she sat down, and said in a tight voice: “Can you please— please just come and — and hold me, please. You don’t have to — but — please.”

He unfolded himself immediately and slid across the bed to take her by the waist, drawing her into the cradle of his lap. She folded herself tightly into him, clutching his arms where they wound around her waist, and bent her face to hide in her knees. She was shaking.

Hermione’s back arched into his chest. She was burning warm, furnace-bright, a line of fire down the half of his body. He bent his

face into the nape of her neck, where citrus bloomed evergreen. She was so fierce, such a large person in everything but size, and he could fit her all inside his arms. She was frail and strong and defensive and regretful all at once. It was a marvel she even fit inside her own body.

He supposed that sometimes she didn't, and that was where her panic came from. Sometimes there was too much of her, just like there was too much of him, to make sense of. Somewhere between the Golden Girl and the Chosen One's pet cutthroat lived a very clever, very frightened girl named Hermione Granger, splitting her life among two worlds that each had no place for her.

She kissed Draco's shoulder. The whole surface of his chest seemed to twinge with it.

"You thought, if we were betrayed, it would be a stranger," he said. "You didn't think it would be someone close."

She did not reply at first.

Then she said: "A stranger wouldn't have much to forget. It wouldn't have hurt them — forgetting us."

"You can be forgiven for overestimating the loyalty of your friends."

"You would never make that mistake," she said quietly.

No, he wouldn't have; but then, he would not have done many things, if he had not been permitted to ride side-along on the bravery of others, freed by their courage to pretend that he was not really making a choice.

"You and I have different virtues," he said, at length. "And different vices. Don't wish for mine. I wouldn't wish them on you."

Hermione tilted her head away. The setting sun's light struck her eye obliquely, slitting it with veins of gold. "And what," she said evenly, "if

we need yours more than we need mine?”

Her pupil shifted, and he found himself looking her in the eye.

“He has one of me already,” he said. “He doesn’t need two.”

It flitted back to the window. “What if I want yours?” she said unhappily.

He drew her hair over her shoulder. Her lid shuttered over the liquid gold of her iris. “Then you have me,” he said. It was easy to say, shockingly easy; it surprised him that it had ever been difficult. “Vices and virtues, and whatever’s left.”

“Do you think your father will be alright? Seeing as he was undercover at the Ministry.”

He and Ron were walking along one of the upper balustrades on the Tower, an open-air bridge between parts of the castle that offered a rare taste of fresh air. Below, the hills glittered in a sun-glazed quilt of moss and heather. They had shucked their ties in the heat; without prefect patrols, and with teachers otherwise occupied, uniform standards had slid to join other routines, by the wayside. In another time, Draco might have found some morsel of himself that cared.

Ron cleared his throat. “Sure, yeah. We had contingency plans,” he said. “What to do if the Ministry fell, if Hogwarts fell, if Dumbledore died. We’re s’posed to split up and head to different safehouses. Bill and Charlie with Ginny, Dad with the twins, Mum with Harry and me. If things got really bad, and we can’t get to the safehouse, we’re s’posed to rendezvous somewhere out of the country. So if the Ministry’s fallen, that means Mum and Dad are out there, somewhere, trying to find a way to get us out.”

“Prudent,” said Draco, a sincere compliment.

“Thanks.” He glanced at Draco. “You, then?”

“Do I have a plan, do you mean?”

“Yeah. You and your mum.” Ron paused. “You can always come with us, if you don’t. Or if you can’t … I mean, Mum wouldn’t… wouldn’t want you to be on your own.”

“Thank you,” he said, stilted. “I appreciate the gravity of your offer — deeply. I would be — more grateful — if you extended it to Hermione.”

“Course I did,” said Ron, offended by the presumption otherwise. “But she said she had other plans. I assumed they were with you — aren’t they? With the magical castle, and whatnot—”

“‘Plan’ is an ambitious noun.”

“You’re saying she doesn’t have one?”

“Such as it is,” he said, with over-articulated disgust, “it’s to return to her parents. In London.” He curled his fists on the balustrade. “Mind you, she’ll have the Trace on her until September.”

Ron snorted. “Bet she had a ball telling you that.”

“We have a difference of opinion, which we have litigated as far as is productive.”

“She’s aware that London’s not right safe, just now?”

“The point has been made to her,” said Draco, “in full force.”

Ron did laugh, then, though the sound was bleak.

“On the bright side,” he said, “I guess there’s your chance to meet the parents.”

The joke was too forced; it was too light; his heart was not really in it, but Ron was trying. He was trying to say, with whatever words he had, *This is normal,* and *I will be normal about this.*

“Good shout,” Draco drawled. “What charming circumstances. ‘Pleasure to meet you, Doctors, shame about the terrorists. My father used to lead them, but don’t worry, my aunt murdered him. By the way, I’m courting your daughter. Hope you don’t mind.’”

“Eugh,” Ron muttered. “Why can’t you just say ‘dating’ like everyone else? You sound like my Aunt Muriel.”

“Strictly, it’s inaccurate. Dating is a public form of courtship, which ours is not.”

“Strictly, you’re a priss for even knowing that. And her parents won’t care about your dad,” he added. “They don’t know the history there. As far as they’re concerned, you’re the scary wizard prince who keeps mauling people that bully her. And you know which fork to use at fancy dinners. They’ll go nuts. I’ve met them, I’d know.”

“I suppose you have.”

Ron glanced at him wearily from his periphery. “It doesn’t matter,” he said, with a twinge of pain. “You know that, right? She spent that whole summer talking about you.”

Though it had mattered, and did. It mattered that Ron’s family knew Hermione’s family, and that the Grangers had met Ron’s parents, eaten at their table. It mattered what Ron’s family was, and what it meant to her.

“It doesn’t matter,” he repeated. Then he shrugged. “Moot point, if we never get out of here.”

Ron laughed hollowly. An owl dipped out of the clouds overhead, skimming high among the turrets, but it made a wide circle around the wards and departed with the letter still clutched in its grasp.

“What do you and Potter talk about?”

“The weather,” Ron said evenly.

Draco raised his eyebrow. “He won’t let you tell me? Really.”

“You do not get to give me shit about keeping secrets.”

“Perfectly fair. Is it a secret, then, why he’s stopping talking to us?”

“Who’s ‘us’?”

“Don’t play the fool.”

Ron grimaced and made a little prevaricating gesture with his chin: yes-and-no. “Well, you know why he’s not talking to Hermione.”

“And I suppose you think he’s justified in it?”

Ron cut him a flat look. “So what? In his position, you wouldn’t have cared?”

“I would have been open to reason.”

“Like fuck you would’ve,” Ron exclaimed. “You realize it’s Hermione herself we’re talking about, in that analogy.”

Draco twitched, then waved his hand irritably, conceding the point. “Hermione would never have done what Chang did. One acted out of loyalty; the other, not. He’s punishing one for the sins of the other.”

“And who’s he supposed to punish? Cho? Who thinks it’s 1995? The girl who betrayed him doesn’t exist anymore. Hermione — kind of — killed her.”

Ron’s voice trailed off uncomfortably. Draco rolled his shoulders, feeling the heavy fabric of his shirt cling dense and damp to his skin in the heat.

“Don’t be hysterical,” he said flatly. “Cho’s not dead. She was relieved, if anything, of one spectacularly unpleasant year of her life.”

“Still her life,” said Ron.

Draco said nothing, and leaned forward against the post. A summer breeze ruffled the hair on the back of his neck. It was longer now than it had ever been; long enough to require binding back for unruliness.

“Will you advocate for her, at least? With Potter.”

Ron braced his elbows on the balustrade and leaned over. “Yeah. I mean, no. I tell him the curse backfired, that it wasn’t Hermione’s fault, that she didn’t mean it, but… I mean, Draco, she kind of did mean it.”

“Chang tried to expel us,” he snapped. “She meant it, as well.”

“Because she was piss-frightened they’d sack her mum.”

“From the paper that spent the year libelling her boyfriend. Where’s this outpouring of warmth coming from? I thought you were fed up with her.”

Ron threw up his hands. “I was. I am! I don’t think she’s this great person. I think she’s normal. I think that’s why Harry liked her, right, she’s pretty and normal and good at quidditch. Bloke doesn’t have a lot of normal people in his life, no offense.”

“If this is how they treat him, I can see why.”

“Okay, but like — I’ve been thinking on this, mate — are we sure if she even ratted us out?” Ron glanced over his shoulder, though they were alone on the balustrades, and the stakes of being overheard were, for once, null. “They could have tortured it out of her. They’re not above it. Remember the quills—?”

“Highly unlikely.”

“Why?”

“In the office, Warrington stopped Umbridge from hurting her. Her mother’s compliance still has value to them. At any rate, it would be

unnecessary. They only needed Snape to replenish their veritaserum, which he didn't."

"Yeah, too busy spilling Order secrets to bother with ours."

"I think it worth noting that no one from the Order has actually been caught, remember, as a consequence of that—"

"How would you know? Are you somehow getting owls we're not?"

"You think Percival would have been able to refrain from mentioning if they raided your family?"

Ron smiled a slow, tired smile. "Right," he said. "He would've thrown it in my face."

"Never attribute to force what can be attributed to personal interest," said Draco. "A principle that applies to Percival and Cho Chang alike."

The smile vanished. "Yeah. I dunno if I'd obliviate Percy, either."

"Would you give up Harry to avoid it?"

Ron rubbed his knuckles in his eyes. "Merlin. Kind of question — I'd let someone torture me before I gave up Harry, right? I'd let them torture me dead. And Hermione doesn't — I don't judge her for what she does to protect him. I don't judge her for anything. She's a damn sight smarter and braver than I'll ever be, and I love her. Like, *really* love her. I'd let them torture me for her, too."

The usual antipathy twinged in Draco's breast, but it cooled swiftly. Ron said it without hostility and without possessiveness. It was a simple statement of fact: he loved her.

"And?"

"And sometimes she scares the shit out of me," said Ron plainly. "I don't know what to do with that. I've been angry at her, I've been

intimidated by her, but I've never been scared of her."

He was about to object, stridently, that of all the people in the world, Ron was among the last with anything to fear from her. But the oddity of it struck Draco at once — that the things he had once found frightening about Hermione, such as they were, had flowed only from the fact that Hermione was likely to ask things of him greater than what anyone else would, and he was likely to do them. Perhaps for Ron, it was the same feeling, merely pointed in a different moral direction.

The next time Harry spoke to him, it had been two weeks since the Astronomy exam.

By and by, the boy had stopped sleeping as well as talking. Instead, he spent nights perched in the window with his snowy owl, feeding her treats and stroking her feathers, staring expressionlessly across the moonlit landscape under the tower window.

After a certain amount of time, it became ridiculous for both of them to lie awake in silence. Draco drew back the hangings of his bed and lit his wand. Approaching the window, he stepped deliberately on the floorboards instead of their seams, so they creaked and announced his presence well in advance.

Harry turned to him. His glasses sieved moonlight into rainbows on the floor.

Draco settled himself on the window seat, extinguished his wandlight, and twirled his wand between his fingers. Harry followed the movement with his eyes for a moment, then returned to stroking the bird's cowl.

"It wasn't your fault," said Draco.

Harry's fingers stilled.

“You must know that. They all chose to fight.”

The moon washed Harry’s eyes so pale they were nearly blue. He lifted them over his glasses and nodded. The movement parted his hair over the snaking tendrils of his scar.

“There was no world where Umbridge allowed you to save them,” said Draco. “You could have turned yourself in. You could have turned Dumbledore in. You could have flayed yourself for her entertainment. It would have changed nothing. There is no middle ground in matters like these. Take it from someone who has learned it painfully.”

Harry shook his head.

“Do you think that’s what I dream about?” he said, hoarse and calm. “Umbridge? And turning myself in?”

It was too much of a relief — far too much to be admitted — to hear Harry talk again.

He indicated the window and their empty beds. “To the extent that you dream at all, I considered it.”

Harry smiled thinly and shook his head again.

“I see a castle,” he rasped. “The same castle, every night. And there’s a man with my voice, and he sounds like me, and he’s torturing people. It’s always the same man. It’s not always the same people.”

Draco’s heartbeat skipped. *Not always the same people.* Not *always* the same people?

“Who is it?”

“Pettigrew,” said Harry dully, “and Goyle. Travers, sometimes. There’s a lot of people — they’ve all come back to him, you see, and he’s angry at them. He’s angry that they betrayed him.”

He twitched with irritated urgency, verging to say: *I don't give a shit about Pettigrew or Travers. Is Snape there?*

Is my mother?

Harry knew Narcissa. Certainly he knew Snape. He would tell Draco. That was a certainty.

Though he was not certain enough to stop thinking about it. Then again, not brave enough to ask. Never brave enough, Draco Malfoy.

"Occlumency will help."

"I can't do Occlumency."

"Potter—"

"I can't do Occlumency," he said doggedly. "Give it up. That's what your mum did."

"My mother stopped lessons because she was called away. She didn't give up. She would never."

"Okay. Doesn't really change things, does it?" Harry unfolded his legs and stood up, catching his owl on his arm.

Draco wanted to say something more about his mother — defend her, instinctively, although he really couldn't think how, and did not even understand why it mattered to him so much that Harry believed him — but Harry interrupted his thoughts.

"Do you want to know the worst part?"

He didn't give an answer; it didn't require one. Harry helped the owl into her cage and snapped the latch. "I understood it," he said. "How it feels to want to hurt someone. How it feels to want someone dead. That's the worst thing Umbridge ever did to me. I wasn't angry about the torture. I was angry because I wanted it to be *someone else."*

“They’re the Dark Lord’s feelings. They don’t belong to you.”

“No. See, that’s the worst part,” he said. “I can tell the difference.”

With that, he drew the hangings.

Draco went back to his own bed, but the hours until dawn were spent thinking of castles and torture and resenting his miserable, starveling gratitude that Harry hadn’t seen Narcissa through the Dark Lord’s eyes.

Morning dawned the color of dust. Distant rains trawling over the moors like the drifting cloaks of faraway dementors. It was almost June, and the nineteenth day of not knowing what was going to happen to them.

Harry was gone for most of the day. Umbridge still had the Map, so no one knew where he went until late in the afternoon, when Harry dropped through the portrait door, swept off his Invisibility Cloak, and said: “Cho’s getting transferred to St. Mungo’s.”

The room stirred. Draco raised his head from annotating the sixth-year potions textbook. Hermione watched Harry from her armchair, head tilted, bitterness writ deep across her face. Her hair spilled down her shoulders, held uselessly by a clasp, framing her face; she had ink on her nose and a raw-bitten mouth and the haggard scowl of a sleepless week, and she was still so lovely it stilled him for a moment.

“They have a ward for magical neurology,” said Harry. “They’re going to see if they can do something for her.”

“Fine,” said Hermione tautly. “Maybe she can send word if the Ministry’s still standing. The rest of us wouldn’t know.”

Harry exhaled through his teeth. Ron snapped his head up and shot a sharp look at Draco, which Draco returned with a helpless glare.

“I see you’re talking to me again,” Hermione added. “Good of you.”

“I thought you’d want to know,” said Harry. “Since it was your spell.”

“Right you are, it was my spell,” she said. “My spell that protected the rest of Potter’s Army from being *caught,* by the way, if she’d gone on to list *names—”*

“Don’t call it that.”

“I’ll call it whatever I want, Harry. I don’t take orders from you.”

“I never SAID you did!”

A contingent of first years by the fireplace leapt up and fled to the staircase. Ron tipped his king against Dean and hastily rose from his chair. Harry raked his hands through his hair, and his voice rose louder and louder: “I never asked you to do any of this! *You* decided we were going to form a club, Hermione, and then *you* decided to jinx the roster, and *you* planned all the meetings—”

“Don’t you dare put this on me.” Hermione slammed her book down. Her eyes shone like slick oil under ice. “You could have said ‘no’ whenever you wanted . You could have stopped at any time. You didn’t. Don’t you *dare* turn around and claim it was all my doing — nobody would have joined that club without you. I couldn’t have done it by myself, and I didn’t.”

“You didn’t *ask me* before you used a Memory Charm!”

“Like you’d have cared if it weren’t Cho!” she shouted. “If Zachariah Smith forgot a few afternoons, you wouldn’t be shouting at me, you’d have been thanking Merlin for me like *bloody* usual—”

“Whoa,” said Ron nervously, jumping the couch. “Whoa, whoa—”

“Fuck off,” said Harry furiously. “Yes, I would. I’ve have cared that you were messing with someone’s mind, which you must have known, since *you didn’t tell me—”*

“Let’s everybody take a minute—”

“I didn’t *tell* you so you wouldn’t be at fault if someone *caught us,* Harry!” Hermione screamed. “Not to mention so that nobody would find out — and by the way, you knew full well the jinx was harmful, you never had a problem before it was Cho—”

“Mione, c’mon,” said Ron exasperatedly, “that’s not fair—”

“But it’s fair to hold her to the Queensberry Rules after the fact?” said Draco coolly.

“—see her side of things, and — okay, hang on, Draco. ‘Don’t do Dark magic’ isn’t, like, a new stance of ours—”

“Memory Charms aren’t Dark,” said Hermione.

“And Polyjuice Potions *are,”* said Draco irritatedly. “That was third year. Neither of you minded it then.”

Harry said, “There’s a world of difference between Polyjuice and obliviating.”

“Is it? You don’t see a problem, potentially, with impersonating someone?” Hermione shrilled. “You don’t see any moral issues there? Because it feels like the difference is *actually* between which victims you care about. Or maybe it’s the difference between saving me and saving Padfoot—”

Harry staggered back, blinking, but swiftly retorted: “That’s not fair — the difference is you snuck around behind my back—”

“Some sneaking,” Draco retorted, “she told everyone she’d cursed the thing—”

“Exactly! Exactly, thank you — you’re not deaf, Harry! And neither is she! Did I make it *sound* like it was anodyne? Did she think it was a Tickling Charm? Did *you?”*

“I thought it was a STINGING JINX!” Harry roared. “I thought it’d make them sick! Or raise an alarm, or something! Forgive me for not guessing my best friend was going around *breaking things* in people’s *heads—”*

“Oh, grow *up,”* Hermione breathed, scathingly. “A Stinging Jinx? You cannot be serious.”

She tore back her sleeve and stripped the bandage from her hand. The white sheaves parted and revealed the flushed ridge of scarring on the back of her hand: I WILL NOT TELL LIES. She held it up.

“You wanted me to fight this,” she said, “with Stinging Jinxes? Is that what you want? Because the people who want to kill me—”

“I want to trust my friends! I want to be kind to them—”

“—are not using *Expelliarmus* and *Stupefy.* They’re using Killing Curses, and Dark magic, and yes, sorry, Memory Charms—”

“—I don’t want the people who follow me to do it from *fear—”*

“—and you want to arm soldiers with what? Moral fiber?”

“ —of what I’m going to do to them — they’re NOT SOLDIERS!” Harry roared. “They’re my friends! I don’t want people dying for me, or killing for me, or doing horrible things in my name! I *never wanted any war!* You want a movement, find somebody else to lead it! *You* do it, if you want it so bad!”

“Did you ever think,” she said, with increasing pitch, “that it’s not about what you want? Actually. That I might not spend every minute of every day thinking about how to accomplish the things that *you* tell me to? That I might have aims of my own? Survival, for instance?”

“I never said that. I never even implied it,” Harry said incredulously. “Hermione, when in my life have I ever been able to tell you what to do? I’ve been doing what you tell me for five years.”

“And obviously you’ve somehow convinced yourself that wasn’t a choice you made,” she snapped. “Fine. But you’re not the only one they’re going after. I’m very sorry you’re the Boy Who Lived! It isn’t the least bit fair. But the war isn’t about you!”

“I never said it was!”

“And it is rank hypocrisy for you to tell me to fight with my hands tied —”

“You’re twisting the question,” said Harry furiously. “You’re muddling everything together. You didn’t have to curse Cho because of ‘the war’.”

“If they expel me, they take my magic. What happens to a mudblood without magic? I’ll tell you. There’s a song about it, actually, they sang it once at a quidditch game. You must have heard it, you were there.”

“Hermione—”

“Everything is about the war, for me,” she said, flushed and trembling. “The war *is* about me. People like me, who I will *never* stop trying to save, whether or not you want to help me—”

Harry’s anger visibly clarified into something purer. He slackened the grip of his fists and put a step of distance between himself and Hermione, as if he were laying the stage for something to fall.

“I would do anything for you,” he said steadily. “Probably I’d obliviate someone for you, Hermione, if you asked me to. But if you’re not going to let me in on things — if you don’t care what I think of your methods, which you’re right, you don’t have to — then keep my name out of your plans. And if I somehow made you think you *have* to protect me — if I ever told you to, or said something that made you think it was your job — then this is me letting you off the hook.”

Static flickered subtly over the carpet at Hermione's ankles. She was staring at Harry like she had never met him before. Ron braced at Harry's elbow as if he might have to jump between them. Draco touched his wand and felt a strange dark cousin to nostalgia, a nauseous feeling, memory stirring under the surface of the scene.

"Protecting you has been my job since I was eleven, you idiot," she said thickly. "Nobody else was any good at it. Nobody was half as good at it as I was."

Harry said steadily, "That's true of a lot of things, Hermione."

Her composure splintered. Her jaw trembled and she gave a quick, ragged gasp of air.

"I'm sorry for what happened to Cho," she said. "Is that what you want me to say? I never thought she would be the one I hurt. I didn't think of what it would do to her, because I never thought it would happen. I thought I understood her. I was wrong."

"She forgot me," said Harry.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"She forgot everything about me. I told her things I haven't told almost anyone, and she doesn't remember them. She thinks we've only had a few dates."

"I know, and I'm sorry, I never intended—"

"She likes me better now," Harry said, and his voice finally cracked. "She doesn't believe she'd have done — what she did. She swears she wouldn't. And you know, I really don't think — the version of her now — actually would."

"Oh, oh no, Harry — no, she doesn't — she just doesn't remember —"

She took a tottering step towards him, and Ron shifted back to give them space. But Harry did not reciprocate her gesture. He kept his arms folded tightly as a tourniquet. Draco noticed Neville in the corner of his eye, watching silently from the boys' staircase, and Daphne, with her hands crumpled over her mouth.

"You're too smart to finish that sentence," said Harry. "And even if you did, I wouldn't believe you. I shouldn't have invited her to the first meeting. It was the worst thing I ever did to her."

Harry's eyes drifted blearily to find him over Hermione's shoulder. An uncomfortable prickle of attention skittered over Draco's skin. He felt as if he were being spoken to, in some oblique way, but had no notion of what was being said.

But Harry didn't speak to him. He said, "I wish I had—"

The portrait-door unhinged with a gravelly declaration. Draco touched his wand from instinct and turned on his heel, but it was McGonagall, her head dipped low as she emerged from the stone tunnel in the wall. Her presence invoked in the gathering of already-quiet children in a wave of breathless silence. Her eyes moved from Harry to Hermione to the shape of the congregation around them, and a twinge of something registered in her face; Draco wondered how much, if anything, of the exchange she had caught.

"The headmistress has called an assembly," she said. "You are to follow me to the Great Hall."

"For what purpose?" Hermione demanded. She had blocked Harry with her body, and even after seeing it was McGonagall, she did not shift. "What does she have to say? Is she going to expel us?"

"She does not take me in her confidences," said McGonagall, radiating a dreadful type of calm. Draco felt its twin settle over him. It was out of their hands; it was out of their teachers' hands, to that end. Everything left to happen would happen because it had to,

regardless of what he did. “That said, I doubt she would call an assembly to expel you, Miss Granger, remarkable though you are.”

“But you don’t *know* — I mean, professor, with respect—”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Harry. He was more calm than McGonagall. Perhaps more calm than Draco. He pushed past Hermione, sidestepped Draco, and mounted the portrait-tunnel. “Whether we’re here or there, it doesn’t matter. She can expel us in any part of the castle she likes. I’m going.”

He pushed back the portrait-door. Gryffindor House came down from its tower.

There were patrolmen in the halls, chequered between squares of fleeting sunlight, as the House moved in a slow processional down the grand staircase. The other Houses had been already assembled at their tables, and watched with a sea of piercing eyes as their classmates filed through the vast doors. Impossible to say how much of it was curiosity, pity, or contempt. Absences mottled the high table: Dumbledore, Snape, Trelawney, Burbage. He tried to remember if the second two had been there at the last meal, and couldn’t.

Beneath, Umbridge had taken the podium. Patrolmen filed behind her, their bodies making the vertices of a lilac triangle. Aurors in black greatcoats on the steps, at her feet. Warrington at her elbow. When Draco turned, he saw the doors gliding shut behind Rufus Scrimgeour. The Head Auror’s scowl revealed nothing. The glare and the greatcoat reminded him terribly of Moody, which he quickly dismissed as a kind of nostalgia he could not afford.

Umbridge was smiling, not her cheerful grin of artifice, but a small, private smirk.

A sweep of the room revealed little. No one was hurt; no one was crying. Perplexion seemed to be the general mood. At the Slytherin table, Theo was missing. Draco might have found cause for alarm in that, if he had not been under the anesthetic of such dreadful calm.

He found a seat at the Gryffindor table. Impossibly, he made himself sit down.

The doors closed. Umbridge cleared her throat.

“Good evening!” she said. Her voice was higher than he remembered. She seemed shorter, as well. It was fathomless how much time had passed since the Astronomy practical. “Assembled students and faculty of Hogwarts School. I stand before you to report on the events of the past few weeks, and to reassure you of your continued safety and security in these strange times.”

Hermione tensed. In Draco’s view, this was innocuous enough to begin with; Ron was frowning; Harry was watching without any kind of expression at all.

“First,” said Umbridge, “it should be understood by all that the Ministry of Magic continues to function, and to administer effective governance to the many citizens of Wizarding Britain. You may have heard rumors of the disappearance of the Minister of Magic. These are unequivocal lies. The Minister remains in office. He wishes me to convey to you all his faithful dedication to his task—”

“Liar,” spat Hermione. She did not say it quietly; several students shot her furtive looks.

“—and his ongoing determination to defeat the forces that threaten peace and security in our society. What you have heard of is nothing more than a minor staffing turnover; several members of the Ministry, and of the Wizengamot, have disappeared with the help of aurors, in order to protect themselves and their families from the Order of the Phoenix, for whom they believe they are targets. They continue to correspond with the Minister from classified locations outside of the country, and wish their children to know that they will make arrangements for their care and keeping—”

“Liar,” repeated Hermione clearly. “That’s a lie, she doesn’t know where they are.”

Draco caught her wrist. *Careful.*

She flexed her hand, but didn't rebuke him.

"I'm sick of being careful."

"—and, in light of that fact," said Umbridge, "we are pleased to announce that Hogwarts will — for the first time in history! — remain open over the summer, to provide protection for students while the state of public order is in question. We have consulted with some of your parents — that is, those of whom we can reach by owl — to solicit their permission for this measure. Please see your Head of House after this meeting to inquire about what your parents have decided for you. In the temporary absence of our Potions Master, Slytherins should report to Mr. Warrington; and to all of you, I am very sorry for the inconvenience this may cause to your summer plans."

A local infection of whispering was metastasizing into a hubbub. McGongall rose from her seat at the high table and was hurrying down to the podium, though to do what, he couldn't imagine. It was not, after all, like there was anything to be done.

"Order," said Umbridge pleasantly, as if someone had interrupted her. "There will be order! Thank you."

"Dolores," said McGonagall. *"Dolores!"*

"There is another order of business," she continued, deaf to it. "Over the course of the spring term, the Ministry Bureau of Education has been submitting the faculty at Hogwarts to a competence review. We are happy to announce that many members have passed; Professors Snape, Sinistra, Sprout, Grubbly-Plank, and Vector will be returning next year, as will Madams Pince and Pomfrey, among other staff. The rest—"

But there was neither need nor time for her to finish. Across the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables the hubbub had thrown off reins of

decorum and sprouted into an uproar.

“McGonagall—”

“Of course not McGonagall, she’s decent—”

“What about Flitwick? What’s wrong with him?”

“—part goblin, if you believe the rumors—”

The blood had fled McGonagall’s face.

“In summary!” Umbridge called. “If anyone would like an academic consultation, they may arrange appointments on my calendar—”

“COWARD!”

She peered at the Gryffindor table. Harry had stood up.

Draco ripped out his wand. Hermione snatched his hand down.

“Don't.”

“You’re joking—”

“I'm not.”

“This isn’t noble, it’s suicide by bureaucrat.”

“It isn’t that simple. I think Harry knows what he’s doing.”

“Do *you* know what he’s doing?”

Harry was stalking up to the dais, his robes sweeping the floor behind him. Green lighting behind his glasses, white lightning on his face. His hands were empty fists.

“You’re a fucking coward.”

“Mr. Potter!”

“Potter, stop!” McGonagall wrenched herself free and moved to intercept him, but the aurors caught her again and held her back.

“Minerva McGonagall is the best teacher at this school,” shouted Harry.

McGonagall whitened. “Harry Potter,” she said, “you must sit down, now — I beg you—”

“Ten times the teacher you are, if you even call yourself that — ten times the witch, ten times the person — only you know that, don’t you? That’s the point—”

Umbridge curled her lip, and slashed her wand.

“Silencio!”

He dodged it, a quick half-step that Draco had taught him on a sunny afternoon in January, and Draco felt — something. Sharp. Not pleasant, not exactly, but close to it. Harry kept walking.

“Best teacher at this school, and you sacked her because you couldn’t push her around. Hermione Granger, best student — best student, best prefect, bravest person I ever met — and you made her apologize to you for it in her own blood. Feel good, did it? ‘When people are strong, they do great things. When they’re weak, they suffer.’ Did you feel strong when you said that? Big ups to you and your great works, professor, winning fights with teenagers. They’ll put you down in textbooks. You know Angelina Johnson? She worked for six years to make captain, and you took it away from her because you wanted me off the field. Six years. It’s quidditch. You could’ve suspended me. You won’t do that, though. You were afraid of me.”

“Ignore him,” cried McGonagall. “He’s a child. A boy. He doesn’t know what he’s saying. Look at me—”

“He is a liar and a killer,” said Umbridge, thick with contempt, quick with anger. “He has spread insurrection in these halls, and condemned his peers to suffering on his behalf. A child? Do you hear yourself? He is a *snake.”*

“So you are afraid of me,” said Harry, with vicious triumph. “Don’t worry, professor. Lots of people are. You think I lied — you think I killed someone — right on all counts, professor. I’ve lied to people. I tell people ten times a day that I’m hopeful, because if I only said that when I believed it, I wouldn’t have lived long enough to meet you —”

“Cortwaite! Robard! Arrest him!”

But they did not respond to Umbridge’s order; they were preoccupied holding McGonagall, who had begun resisting furiously.

“And people died because of me,” Harry continued. “Two of them before my second birthday. One more last year. Probably others I don’t know about. I rack them up. Sometimes I play a little game where I count everyone who loved them, and then I lie a little more.

“You’re angry about that? Not as much as I am. You want people to stop dying for me? Not as much as I do. You wish the other kid left that graveyard? Not as much as I do.” Harry threw himself to a halt at the foot of the dias, his robe furling around him in a brusque beat like a raven’s wing. He spread his arms.

“Do something about it,” he spat. “What are you waiting for? Dumbledore’s gone. I’m not running. Prove you’re stronger than I am.”

McGonagall gave a wavering shout of warning, which might have been *No,* but cut short; Robard had silenced her with a curse.

“Come on, Dolores,” said Harry. “Do something great.”

Umbridge tightened her grip on her wand. Her chest heaved.

“If you learn nothing else from me,” she said, “it will be to address your betters with respect.”

She whipped her arm. A white streak flicked from her point like a piece of rope and lashed Harry across the face. He toppled to the floor. His glasses dropped from his face and cracked on the flagstones.

Screams erupted. McGonagall threw herself against the aurors’ hold, bellowing. Hermione had to fling herself over the table to stop Ron from erupting from his seat, and even that did not stop him from shouting profanities.

Harry scrambled upright. Blood dribbled from a short, deep cut crossing his lips, staining the whites of his teeth.

He spit, and scarlet splashed on the floor. Then he swiped his hand across his mouth, smearing the blood wide over his cheek, and grinned at her. He picked up his glasses, carefully, and settled them on his face. The cracked lens fractured his left eye into a fractal.

“I will not tell lies,” he said.

And he shifted, with a staggering half-step, into a dueling stance. For once, his form was flawless.

A shout pierced the air. Umbridge’s eyes flit with agitation across the hall, her wand aloft. The assembled students of Hogwarts School reached a frenetic chatter like a swelling cloud of hornets, but the shout came from Gryffindor — Ginny had climbed out of her seat and stepped up on the table. She struggled briefly to balance, with her arm in a sling, but the Creevey boys caught and braced her up.

“The Minister is a servant of Lord Voldemort,” she shouted. “I will not tell lies.”

Umbridge’s wand snapped in her direction. Draco reached for his hip. He did not have time to draw himself. Ron swept the dishes from

his place and climbed up on it with a carillon of flying silver. Umbridge's wand darted from Ginny to accuse him, even as he spoke:

"Viktor Krum died trying to save Harry. He was murdered. I will not tell lies."

Umbridge's eyes narrowed. She opened her mouth again. There was a stirring at another table.

Cedric Diggory dispatched himself elegantly from his seat, stood in the aisle, and unclipped his Head Boy badge. He set it down on the table, and said calmly: "I believe Harry. He's my friend. I will not tell lies."

Several of his housemates stood up with him, without speaking. Umbridge's wand jumped again, though it faltered, it seemed, to accuse Cedric. But then it had to correct course to meet Neville, who stumbled and almost tripped his way from the bench, but righted himself. "I will not t-t-tell lies," he said, and his voice was first among seven. Then it was first among nine, and fifteen, and twenty. Lavender Brown wrenched up her sleeve and clambered on the table. She put her hand in the air, and her bandages fluttered free, stark white against her tawny skin.

The Gryffindor table rattled as silverware scattered and fell on the stone. It was hard now to hear what was being said by whom, for it vanished into indistinctness under the deafening unison of those saying it, and then the litany, which was spat and shouted and lifted wordlessly on scarred fists: *I will not tell lies.*

At the Slytherin table, Daphne stood. She didn't say anything, but she was shaking so badly that one could hardly expect her to. Someone tried to drag her back down again, and she threw their hand off.

Harry lifted his wand at Umbridge. "To the ground," he said, barely audible at a distance. "Head to foot. Wands—"

Draco leapt free of the bench, moved by the sheer electric freight of his alarm. He was mad. He would die. *“POTTER!”*

The first patrolman threw a spell at Ginny, and she parried it with a form-perfect whirl of her wand; and with a wave like a black tide, the crowd spilled from the tables and thronged the doors, tipping the knife-edge from agitation into a riot. The Gryffindor table shrieked and listed onto one side like a barricade, sending a wave of people hurtling to the ground and scrambling to clear away.

I will not tell lies— I will not tell lies—

Screams crested. Their echoes fulminated like harpies in the vaulted ceiling. Spells flickered against the vast slab of oak.

The aisles filled with dark cloaks like the welling bottom of a sinking ship. McGonagall did something forceful with her elbow and the auror holding her screamed, clutching his wrist; she ripped out her wand and lashed the other in the face with a spell that knocked him flat. Scrimgeour was roaring orders. Stunners and Petrification Charms fired in all directions. But there were too many children, and too few aurors, besides which, it was difficult for the patrolmen to tell which students were fighting and which were fleeing. Tracey Davis made a dash for the doors and was caught by a patrolman who shoved her back into the crowd. Two of her housemates flew past her and tried to unbolt the doors,

Draco vaulted the table and darted through the crowd. He narrowly made it to Harry before he was trampled by a wave of students, hauling him up by the collar. They were lost in the crowd, thronged on either side by a hellish mass of shouting bodies.

Ginny landed a curse on a patrolman who held Lavender by the hair. She backhanded a pitch-perfect *Flipendo* into his partner and knocked him into the wall, but his partner’s *Incarcerous* threw her down in a tangle of rope; Ron uppercut him into the wall, and she wriggled free. The patrolman staggered into George’s *Tarantallegra,* and also George’s fist. The two of them hauled her upright, and with

a war cry she took a running leap onto the back of a patrolman holding Seamus.

A bolt the size of a redwood trunk groaned into place over the doors, which sealed shut. Students surged up against it in a lemming-like wave.

The current shoved Draco against a wall of bodies and knocked the breath from his lungs. He gripped Harry's collar and shoved him down in time for a curse to shoot over their heads.

Hermione shoved through the crowd and latched to Draco's shoulder. "Doors," she shouted, and he read it from her lips, hearing nothing over the crowd. "Have to get out— get everyone away from the aurors—"

He pushed through. The bodies were thick, thrusting errantly and violently like riptide, and he had to use jinxes to pry them apart as often as not. Curses landed indiscriminately. The inability to aim meant it was impossible to throw spells of much severity without fear of hitting someone on the same side. It was ambitious, at that, to think of hitting anyone at all. In the crush they were too close to even see where the aurors were before they were on top of them. Draco was flung by a surge of the crowd into Auror Cortwaite's back, and barely got his wand up in time to parry a jinx. But it did not matter: Angelina leapt from the crowd and tackled Cortwaite from the other side, dragging him into another skirmish.

McGonagall and Umbridge were dueling on the dais — Draco watched, for a half-second longer than he should have, as a flurry of razor-beaked birds erupted from Umbridge's wand, and shattered into fine red mist at the sweep of McGonagall's arm; another sweep, and the pearls at Umbridge's throat began to writhe and contract, tightening around the folds of her throat as she clawed at them — but then the crowd hid them. Beneath the dais, patrolmen had organized roughly into a formation, and were pressing a phalanx down the center aisle. Students pooled at the end of the room and pushed up against the doors and there were cries of pain from those

being crushed against the wood. Hermione shouted something he could not hear and took off weaving through the crowd. She wriggled through the pack of bodies and he followed her into it, into the crush where the screaming was loudest and the pressure of hot thrashing bodies made it hard to fill his lungs.

No room. No air. No chance, no space, no breath for a spell. Even so, Hermione had forced herself close to the bolt and with her wand outstretched tried: *“Wingardium—”*

The steel bolt rattled, but she was jostled hard, and the spell broke.

“Damn, I can’t — it needs concentration, I can’t hold still enough—”

The crowd surged. The doors gave an earsplitting groan against the bolt. Draco shoved back against someone crushing him to the floor. “Ready a Shield Charm, then.”

“Why?”

“Because this isn’t a precision spell,” he said, and cast *Bombarda Maxima.*

Hermione’s shield flickered to life over the crowd just before the spell collided with the doors, and the world whited out.

A *BOOM* shattered the air. Splinters the size of spears exploded from the wood and thundered on an evanescent warping silver shield that extended over the crowd, unbelievably wide, ricocheting them into the walls and into the windows. The ancient slabs of oak flew outward from the Hall and tumbled on the staircase, dislodging a pair of sconces and clipping the chandelier, which swung wildly, dropping a helix of molten wax. The force drove a loud thunder of portraits from their hooks and sent them sailing down on the stairs. Students flooded out of the Great Hall and surged into the entrance, out into the courtyard, moving like one organism of a thousand feet.

The crowd carried them. There was no choice of where to move — no one was choosing; it was the crowd that decided, as one, on its freedom. In the entrance hall it whipped around to the courtyard and splashed against the grand staircase, and it was there that Draco broke out of the current, hauling Hermione by her waist over the balustrade, and following her with a neat jump. Harry and Ron were still behind in the Great Hall, fighting patrolmen; they were shoulder to shoulder with Ginny and the twins, five of them on two patrolmen, and making quick work of it. Ginny caught a curse for Harry on her wandtip and shoved him down to whip it back at a patrolman over his head; he rolled to his feet and rebounded a battery of fire against a Shield Charm.

Hermione gave a cry and dropped to her knees. He caught her.

“Hermione—”

“Fine! I’m fine, I think it’s sprained — listen. We have to get to the headmaster’s office. It’s the only place the Floo is open, we can call the Order—”

“Everyone else is still in there—”

“With aurors,” she gasped. “Maybe you could duel an auror — *maybe,* on his own — but we can’t, and there’s five of them, plus patrolmen. We need help. Draco, we need — we need adults.”

Her chest was heaving. Her eyes were wild. He took her hand, wordlessly, and ran.

They rounded the great landing and sped up the grueling courses of stairs, racing at a speed that rattled the floorboards and made portraits cry out. The sounds of the hall faded behind them as the stories disappeared beneath their feet.

The Transfiguration atrium loomed ahead of them like an empty cathedral. They were no more than a few turns from the

Headmaster’s Tower and passing under the wide open space, carved from white stone, when the call came: “Stop.”

Cassius Warrington blocked the path forward. His Ministry cloak had been discarded. The indigo waistcoat highlighted the broad span of his torso, thick and imposing, and gold glinted at his shoulders and chest. His sleeves, which swelled from his shoulders like blooms of lilac, were in the process of being uncuffed and neatly rolled back. He fastened one at his elbow and smiled at Draco, disarmingly.

“We really have to stop meeting like this,” he said.

Draco pointed his wand at him, and it only made Cassius laugh, softly. The room seemed to shrink to the size of the two-foot stripe of space between them.

“Go down two floors,” he said quietly. “Secret staircase by the prefect’s bathroom. That corridor takes you around the long way to the bottom of Headmaster’s Tower. If you run, you can beat whoever he’s sent there.”

She was predictably furious. “If you think I’m leaving you here,” she hissed, “to fight him *alone—”*

“Then come back with Alastair Moody. Two-on-one is only an advantage until one of his friends shows up.”

Cassius tapped his cheek, thumbing the line of a scar Draco gave him. “You can always run,” he said, “but it’s less sporting.”

Hemrione gripped Draco’s arm. Her curls had been knocked free of her braid, and hung over her face like a lace veil. Behind them, her dark eyes were large and locked on him, expression unfamiliar. She looked as if someone held a sword to her throat.

“Don’t lose,” she said unevenly. “Just — beat him, will you? Don’t lose. Don’t you dare.”

He said, “I live to please.”

“Draco—”

He kissed her, quickly, to stop her from saying something that would convince him to lose his nerve. It wouldn’t be difficult, so it was critical not to let her.

Movement stirred in his periphery. Hermione screamed, “ *Draco look —”*

He twisted. The spell whistled past his head and shattered a piece of the cloister wall.

His nerves seared. Draco turned, slowly, and replaced his foot on the duelist’s line. Advanced a step. Carefully put Hermione’s ragged breathing from his mind. She cast a searing stare at him over her shoulder and then ran from the atrium, vanishing around the corridor.

Cassius smirked. A lock of golden hair wilted from its coif and fell over his eyes, which glinted with a clear and impersonal malice, the color of pondscum. With his hair grown long and tied back, he resembled someone else. Someone from a painting Draco had seen once, or a memory of a memory, twice removed.

Draco felt a wave of familiar loathing.

He pushed it down, taking a moment of pause, and studied Cassius.

The boy’s form was stiff, formal, and perfect. He was also taller, broader, and three years older. But in the Triwizard Tournament, he’d cheated on his preparations in advance, doing strategy by committee, and in consequence, his moves were rarely interesting. Everything he did was appropriate. Textbook.

The boils from last year hadn’t healed completely. At close range, pockmarks ran up the sides of Cassius’s face. They were the kinds

of scars that healed slow and painful. Cassius was an eighteen-year-old with battle scars, and Draco had put them there.

They must have healed too easily, because Cassius had already forgotten the lesson of them: that he was a weak, clumsy bag of perforable organs, held upright by the mercy of dangerous men.

Say ‘thank you, Cassius.’ You’re rather clever, after all; you only need to learn to mind your manners.

Draco threw a curse.

With the whip-crack of a counterspell, Cassius deflected. Then he lunged, and they dueled.

Stones scattered around their feet as they met spell for spell. Chains crisscrossing the air between them in jagged lines, each one perfect and none of them landing. Draco parried, dodged, struck, and parried again, scampering up and down the duelist’s line, shifting his weight elegantly from foot to foot. He threw *Stupefy* on a backhanded lash and rolled under a spell that sheared a chunk from the wall, snapping a pipe. Water erupted in a high spout and fountained down in a jagged line over the corridor, splashing dark stains over the pale stones.

Draco whipped his wand and froze the spout into ice. He shattered it and swept the swarm of broken shards at Cassius, who melted and siphoned them away with a graceful sweep of his arm.

Cassius moved with the grace of a dancer, every pivot and arch of his wrist a thing of beauty, but he was not a duelist and his body didn’t know the things a duelist’s did. He knew it the instant Cassius ducked a curse by stepping off the duelist’s line.

If there had been a piste, the match would have been over.

There wasn’t a piste. In many ways, it wasn’t a match.

The air stung with the sulfuric, woodsmoke-aftertaste of magic. Mist swirled, sliced through by darts of color. Thoughts slowed and retreated in respectful observance of the body as it did its work. Power thrummed in his arm, moving up his hand in a warm current, loosed in bright hot bursts with each gesture and flick of his wrist. It was action with purpose. He wasn't a person straining in the hash of counterposed duties; he was a thing doing exactly and only as it should. Without thought, without doubt, without question. He was glorious, and without pain or fatigue or any of time's other quarrelsome fetters, he could be glorious forever. He could live forever, and never lose.

He let Cassius whip a jinx sideways at his uncovered flank. He folded himself sideways, pivoting his back foot around, and sliced his wand up in a backhand arc. He opened his mouth, and suspended in instinct, out flew the first spell to reach his tongue. He didn't know what it did, so he took a guess: when forming the intention, he grasped the magic and thrust it towards the purpose of winning.

Maybe I'll tell my father to take you on as a secretary. Might even let you have robes, like a real witch.

Cassius gave a strangled cry and clutched his temples. He staggered to the side, off-balance, so far off his line that Draco could have hit him in three different places before he lowered his hand. In the split second before he registered it, Draco thought: *Technical concession* — the duel was over, he had stepped off-piste — not that it mattered, not that either of them cared.

He twitched back his wand in suspicion. He hadn't cursed him.

"Warrington," he said warily. "What is this?"

Cassius gripped his hair in his fists, eyes screwed shut. "What did you do?" he gasped. "Malfoy, what are you doing — what are you —?"

"I'm not doing anything."

He tore his hands from his face. There was fear in his eyes, terrible and sharp, such as Draco had never seen, and certainly not directed at himself.

“What are you doing to me?” he mumbled. “What’s happening? Why did you—”

He crumpled his eyes shut, groaning.

“Warrington—?”

“Why are we here? Why — why are we dueling?”

“Warrington, what — *is* happening to you?”

“I don’t know,” he snarled. “I don’t know! What are you doing here? You — you’re Malfoy.” He hesitated, uncertainty leaving its telltale signs in the slackening of his wand-grip. “You’re Draco Malfoy. That’s your name, you’re — why aren’t you wearing the right tie?”

“The right … tie?”

He was wearing a red one. He stared at Cassius, who appeared to not have the slightest idea what he had said wrong.

“No,” said Cassius, frowning. “You’re… you’re not Slytherin, that’s right, you’re…”

Draco said slowly, “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I remember Pansy,” said Cassius, blinking. “Something… something about Pansy. Something important. She had to see me — I’m sorry, who are you?”

Draco stared at him. “Draco Malfoy,” he said, after a pause. Then he threw *Stupefy* at him.

It struck Cassius without resistance. He was too far off his line to parry, and too bemused to think of parrying anyway. He went down

immediately, with a cold hard sound when his skull struck the floor, and Draco stepped over him on his way through the atrium.

It was an incredulous prospect to him that Pansy had managed a Memory Charm of such force it was capable of structural damage to Cassius's mind, but he shelved his doubts for later consideration. The sound of shouting swelled around him and faded as he stalked through the corridors,

The gryphon was open when he arrived. At the top of the stairs, the doors were open, and there was a voice coming from inside. Umbridge's voice.

"... did you call? *Tell me!"* A slap. "Was it Dumbledore? Or one of his spy cells?"

"You're going to be sacked." Hermione. Her voice was clear, and gave no evidence of being in pain. "Assuming the Minister comes back like you think he will. A riot like this? With aurors and patrolmen? Even Dumbledore never let it get that bad. And you're no Dumbledore."

He stepped silently into the doorway. The scene fell at once into full and grotesque clarity. Hermione knelt by the Floo hearth, where green embers still glittered in the ash. Umbridge gripped her in place by a tight handful of hair, in which was also clenched Hermione's wand. The other hand braced a wand at Hermione's neck. A ring of swollen red welts hung around Umbridge's throat where her pearls had been, and blood eddied under her nostrils.

"You assume the Minister will blame his servant, instead of the vermin?" Umbridge hissed. "You believe there will be no consequences for you? The grand architect of the riot?"

"Oh, there will be," said the grand architect of the riot, with a faint smile. "But the worst you can do is expel me. The rest of the students — what will you do? You can't expel them all, you won't have a school."

Umbridge’s expression waxed at once from strained to glorious.

“I see,” she said. “You think that being expelled makes you safe. You think you have nothing else to lose!” She cocked her head and smiled, eyes twinkling. “But Miss Granger — do you not understand? Students who are expelled do not have permission to carry wands. And without a wand, you are not a witch.” She lifted her own wand, a short, stubby blade of a thing with a jeweled hilt. “Let this be your last lesson as a student of Hogwarts.”

Draco threw a curse.

It was a wordless, angry bolt of a thing, and he did not quite know what it would have done if it hit her; but it didn’t, for Umbridge jerked with surprising dexterity to parry it. She wrenched Hermione in front of her, a full-body shield; her head was wrenched back over Umbridge’s shoulder, baring the clean arc of her throat. There would be a dozen ways to jinx her if Hermione weren’t there — a wand pointed away from him and all the time in the world to choose his spells, in another fight he would have dropped her by now — but that fight wasn’t this one and in the time it took his spell to hit her she could whisper whatever curse she wanted into Hermione’s throat. *Diffindo* or *Defodio* or *Confringo* or anything that was flashing through his head in a carousel of green, green, green.

Green light. Green light, and the sound of a body on the floor, and *not her and not me.* A year ago in a different office than this one. Green light, every beat of his heart sent a new lance of pain through his body. Green light, green light, and his mind was a spinning coin, oscillating between two points in time. Green light, and Hermione was twitching with short high little whines of protest, each one a new screw driven into his memory to ache. Green light and Barty Crouch was staring at him from the corner of Umbridge’s office. Green light and Hermione took his place. Then back again. The past strobed into the present.

The smell of smoke and ash and the coppery tang of Floo powder rich on the air. He couldn’t breathe. It wasn’t a metaphor. His lungs

were seizing, forcing a series of smaller, shallow breaths. His pulse quickened.

He raised his wand in desperation, but there was nowhere to point it that wouldn't hit Hermione, nowhere that would be sure. It was an unacceptable risk. No clear shot. It flickered over her body and finally swerved to angle at the floor, the only place it wouldn't hurt her.

Umbridge jabbed Hermione's throat, and she choked. He caught himself moving forward and froze.

"Draco," said Hermione, high and light with faith and pain, and it simply, effortlessly, broke him apart.

Focus. A prehensile knife. Something *useful.*

"Your wand," said Umbridge. "Drop it."

"Let her go," he said. He didn't hear his own voice, and he had no idea how it sounded. It came from the bottom of his chest, and it felt like gravel being rolled in his lungs. Hermione went still.

"Drop it first," said Umbridge.

He should have been watching Umbridge. He wasn't. He looked at Hermione as if there was nothing else in the room to look at. If he looked away from her the green light would flash her out of existence, or perhaps both of them, and then at least this would be the last thing he would see. He drank in every part of her he could: the deep kindling brown of her eyes, the wild cowl of her hair, the scrapes and ash-stains on her heart-shaped face.

"Hermione," he said. Nothing in him was not on fire. If he had the magic or the power he would have stopped time, and stood there for a hundred years, just looking at her. A hundred years, to start.

"Draco," she said "it's going to be fine. Don't give her your wand. Go find Harry. She's bluffing."

He didn’t move.

“Go! It’s your turn,” she snapped, and tripped a bit on it, but pressed on quickly: “Get him and take the Weasleys, they’ll help you. I’ll be fine — I’ll be fine! She can’t do anything, now, there’s no point—”

Bloody and ashen and furiously begging him to leave her in a torturer’s hands, there she was: Hermione Granger, hurricane wild, terribly brave, the worst thing that had ever happened to him, and the best.

I love you, he might have said then. *I have loved you for years. I have loved you like I have loved no other thing on this earth; that is, almost selflessly. If I could have been selfless for anyone, it would have been for you.*

His breath came back. He held out his wand, point-down, and dropped it. Hermione gave a cry.

“Let her go.”

Umbridge wrapped Hermione’s hair around her hand and knelt to pick it up, dragging Hermione down to her knees with her.

“Pick it up,” Umbridge ordered. She wedged her wand into Hermione’s throat and shook her by the hair. “Grip out! No tricks! Pick it up and offer me the grip.”

Hermione flashed him a furious look and bent down.

“Hermione—”

“Don’t,” she said, low. Her mouth was drawn tight. She swallowed against Umbridge’s point.

Then she grabbed his wand and slammed her head back into Umbridge’s face.

It sounded like someone stepped on a bee’s nest. Cartilage crunched. He hadn’t heard someone scream like that since Neville caught Ginny’s Bat-Bogey on accident, and it had been accompanied by the same whole-body flinch of pain. Umbridge keeled back and fell over clutching her face. Hermione wrenched her hair free and tossed up his wand, which he took easily from the air, like a clean chaser’s play.

Hermione dove out of the way. Umbridge barely hauled up her wand in time to cast Shield before the first curse exploded against it.

“Malfoy,” she cried thickly. Blood dribbled thick from her lips. “Stand down! Stand down!”

Another curse pounded down on the shield, which fractured briefly into scintillations and refused.

“Stand down! I order you — I command you—”

“See, I thought I might find you two here.”

Draco twisted sharply, but he already knew who it was. It was with resignation, and no small share of vicious anger, that he turned to see Theodore materialize from the shadows of the doorway, his wand held lightly and pointed downward at his side.

Draco pointed his wand at him. Hermione arrowed hers at Umbridge. The tension stretched thin and translucent.

Slowly, Theo raised his offhand.

“Drop your wand,” Draco snarled.

Theo smiled wryly. “You first.”

“Drop it or use it.” This challenge was of questionable wisdom, after he’d fought two duels already, but he was in no mood to prevaricate.

The corner of Theo’s mouth twitched. With an offensively languid lack of urgency he nudged the door shut with his heel, and rolled his robe off his shoulders. The movement revealed that his robes were drenched up to to knees in water; Draco narrowed his eyes, but Theo interrupted the thought. “Interesting as that would be,” he said, “I’m not in the mood for a mess. By the way, do you even know who’s winning, down there? You cut out pretty quick.”

“What do you want?” said Hermione harshly.

He laughed, lightless, more of an acknowledgement of a good question than a show of pleasure. “Actually,” he said, “I wanted a word with you, Granger. You’re a hard woman to get alone, what with your pack of guard dogs.”

“I’m a little preoccupied, now,” said Hermione.

“Yes,” he sighed, glancing at Umbridge, “so it appears. You’ve already called in the cavalry, I suppose?”

“As if I’d tell you,” she scoffed.

“Just checking. I want to know how much time I have.”

“Theodore,” gasped Umbridge, heady with relief. “Help me. Apprehend the boy. I will take the girl to the Ministry, to fetch more aurors, and we will take Potter together.”

Theo’s smile stiffened and turned brittle like rotted wood. “You know,” he said, “I don’t mean to be a pill, but I’m getting really sick lately of people giving me orders.”

He pointed his wand at her. She went as still as a mouse bathed in wandlight.

“Ladies first,” he said, and looked at Hermione. Hardly a beat of hesitation passed before she pivoted, with a cool fearlessness in the

square of her shoulders, and fired a jinx that shattered Umbridge's shield.

The duel was short and brutal. It could not have been otherwise. With three against one, even an adult, it didn't matter. Hermione tossed a snare of ropes at her ankles, flinging Umbridge back against the hearth, dropping a baptism of broken porcelain around her shoulders. Theo flicked her weak countercurses out of the air with an almost bored assertion of the wrist. But Draco was faster than either of them. He batted away her *Confringo,* blowing out the window in a shatter of glass he barely heard. He sent three of Narcissa's favorite curses in a battery up the side of her guard and sent her lurching against the bureau, drove her into the corner, and disarmed her.

The taste of blood filtered into his mouth, blotting out the ash. His heartbeat was slowing, or perhaps that was time dilating, offering him time to choose what he wanted to do. So he considered her, twining his wand between his fingers in a slow, pendulous pattern.

Umbridge wailed, shriveling into the corner. Her robes were stained and ripped, and her hair was a mousy thicket. Tears and blood and pain turned her face into a wet, sticky crumple of a thing, her nose bent badly, weeping blood and mucus down the purple silk of her robes. She really was a small person. It had never been so apparent before.

He cast *Stupefy,* and she slumped to the ground: a dropped puppet in rags of bloodstained tyrian.

He could do anything to her, now. The possibilities seemed to weigh physically in his wand-hand. He didn't precisely like the way it felt.

"What are you thinking?" It was Theo at his shoulder, startlingly close. He looked at Draco with disinterested curiosity. "I need her fairly out of commission, if you don't mind. We don't have to kill her, but she shouldn't be anywhere close to lucid. Hey, Granger, how about a Memory Charm?"

She threw him a sneer.

“No? Come on. Surely she deserves it more than Chatty Chang.”

“Fuck you,” she said, with a disgusted dignity. “Do your own dirty work.”

“Fine. I will. More to the point.” He muscled Draco out of the way and grabbed Hermione’s arm, tugged it when she tried to throw him off. “Listen. When you cursed Chang, how did you do it?”

“Let go of me — what?”

“How do you stop the memory cascade?”

Hermione stared at him for a moment, redolent with revulsion.

“I didn’t. Is that what you want to hear? I didn’t manage to stop it. I botched the spell. That’s why she lost the whole year. Now let go of me—”

“Merlin, I don’t care if it was your personal best. I want your method.”

“Why should I tell you? Look it up yourself—”

“I *tried.* Hogwarts doesn’t teach them. Raises the question of where you learned them, but I’ve seen the Malfoy library, so I’m not entirely out of ideas.”

She pried his hand from her arm. “Get off of me. I would be doing incalculably more damage to the world,” she snapped, “by helping you learn to cast a Memory Charm—”

“He’s already done it,” said Draco. “To Cassius Warrington.”

Theo closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Landing on some basement reservoir of forbearance, he opened his eyes and turned to Draco.

“Where is he now?” he asked. “Seventh year? Sixth?”

“He asked me for my name.”

“Fuck,” said Theo, brightly. He turned back to Hermione. “Let’s try again. Granger: memory cascade. Briefly.”

Her expression shaded from wariness to pity, but suddenly sharpened back to contempt. “If I knew how to modify memory retroactively,” she said, “do you really think I would have let Cho stay like this?”

“Does that mean you wouldn’t?” He paused. “Okay. Sure, you wouldn’t. Let’s just — where, supposing you had to learn—”

“Why did you mess with his memory in the first place?” she demanded.

“To protect Daphne Greengrass,” said Draco, “from being reported to the Ministry as a lycanthrope.”

Theo smiled in a way that was part flinch. His face was bright with exertion, dark hair washed gray with dust, and his eyes glittered with an electric, glassy panic.

“You should leave the country, by the way,” he said, apropos of nothing. “As soon as you can. I mean weeks, not months. Take whoever you can, and go as soon as you can. Don’t tell your friends where you go. Don’t tell anybody.”

“Have you lost your mind? What are you talking about?”

“Probably. Old news. Tell Daphne,” though he struggled palpably to say her name, like it was a presumption, or an offense— “tell her I. Tell her — never mind. She got Pansy’s letter.”

“She did,” said Draco warily. The hollows under his eyes could hold seas. “When’s the last time you slept?”

“Train ride to Hogwarts. Nineteen-ninety-one. Slept like a log. Would you please piss off? Go stop your pals from blowing up any more of my school.”

“Theodore, I don’t know it’s a good idea—”

Hermione was interrupted by a cry from outside the broken window.

A large red bird with glittering wings, streaked in gold, sailed past them, did a turn around the headmaster’s tower, and flew out of sight.

She clutched at Draco’s arm. “Dumbledore’s coming,” she breathed. “That’s Fawkes. His familiar.”

“And my cue,” said Theo. He fetched his robe from the ground and swept it around his shoulders. It was too large for him, and Draco wondered how much he was eating. “You were right,” he called back. “In Hogsmeade. There are still choices.”

Even by his standards, this was a strange parting. The boy melted into the shadows beyond the door.

“I don’t understand him,” said Hermione. In the aftermath of the fight, finally at liberty to stand at ease, he studied her: there were fingerprints on her throat and bits of blood freckled over her face. “Daphne made it sound like she doubted he even remembered her.”

“I’m not sure that Daphne understands him, either.” He felt weary. He braced himself against the wall and tried to focus. The sore hollow feeling of exhausted magic took up gnawing on his bones. He could not contemplate seeing the others, the full Defense Club, and beginning the inevitable count of injuries. “The Order will be here any minute, if they aren’t already. You should go meet with them. I’ll watch Umbridge. See that she stays Stunned.”

She looked at him and frowned. “No,” she said.

“You’ll want to make sure the others are alright.”

“I will. But I’m going to stay with you, at least until the Order comes.”

She sat down, her knees drawn up to her chest, and touched the floor beside her. “You have a cut on your face. Come here, I’ll heal it.”

“I mean it. Last chance. Going once.”

“Just sit down, would you?”

He sat down. As soon as his weight left his feet he groaned, and a pain kicked up in his left side. One of the jinxes must have caught him. He hadn’t noticed.

“You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re in pain, listen to you. Pull up your shirt, I’ll heal that, too.”

“There are easier ways of getting my shirt off.”

“You’re not allowed to flirt until you’re healed.”

“I’m allowed to flirt with you whenever I want. It’s in the contract.”

She snickered, and it drew a twitch from the corner of his mouth. Her wand left a warm radiant patch on his abdomen, and he rolled his shirt back down over the fading bruise. “That’s the last time I sign something without reading it,” she said.

“It was highly out of character. I assume it’s because I’m irresistible. Is the blood yours?”

“What blood?”

He reached out and thumbed away some of it on her temple. She pressed her face into his palm, briefly, and he let it linger.

“Some of it,” she said. “I hit my head when I was dueling her. Reckon there’s a cut.”

“Show me.”

She obligingly bent her head forward. A dark rivulet sprouted from between her curls. He rested his wand against her scalp, cast *Episkey* , and it sealed over. When he lowered his wand to her neck, she bent her head back, giving him more access to the pale column of her throat.

The marks faded at the touch of magic, though not completely. Hermione sighed in relief and rubbed her neck.

Slowly her head keeled to one side, and came to rest on his shoulder. Her face turned and burrowed into his side. He slipped his arm around her waist, turned his face into her hair, and closed his eyes. He could rest. He wouldn’t wonder if he slept for a hundred years.

The Order found them that way, by and by — alone, with their heads braced together, in the wreckage of the headmaster’s office.

-In the interests of full disclosure, this chapter would not have been posted without bluebellandpie's "Greenhouse Seven," which was the bright point in my week and month and also a lot of the time when I couldn't work on this fic. I can't tell you how happy it made me, and still makes me, every time I open it. So: thank you, wonderful author.

-Happy fourth anniversary to this fic! Belatedly! I can't believe it's been four whole years, my God.

-I apologize again for the delay; the excuses I have are neither novel nor interesting, but they are mundane, and iterative. Sometimes I

have good writing weeks, and good writing months; sometimes, the opposite. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting!

-I have written this chapter, from end to end, probably three or four times since its conception. It has fought me tooth and nail every part of the way.

-Next chapter title: "The Golden Hours." To be published as soon as I can get my shit together, which will HOPEFULLY be much sooner than the last time.

The Golden Hours

Chapter 78: The Golden Hours

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Draco would remember the rest of that afternoon, and the night and the day following, as a revolving drill of questions and appointments. An iridescent barrier laid over the entrance to the battered Great Hall, where two of the tables lay lopsided and several of the chandeliers over pools of broken glass. The doors were hauled away for repairs. The Hospital Wing filled its beds and Madam Pomfrey, short of nurses, sent student aides out to the common rooms with Pepper-Up and Soothing Draught and poultices for bruises and scars. Rumors moved in swift dark currents through the hallways, though they always dissipated when pressed to the source. Someone said they had seen Rufus Scrimgeour and Alastor Moody dueling in the entrance courtyard; the other said the Head Auror had fled to the ward boundary, and Apparated. Some authoritative-sounding person said that Cortwaite and Robard had ambushed McGonagall, only for her to jinx them into stone; and the appeal of this account led to the percolation of a story that she had personally dispatched the whole auror patrol, with gory flourishes keyed to the author’s preferences.

Ron and the twins collided with Bill and Charlie on the first-floor landing. Ginny launched herself from the bannister to tackle Arthur. All day the halls resounded with a liberation carillon: weeping, shouting, crying for relief. In Gryffindor there were toasts and speeches in Harry’s honor; in the hallways, students jeered at each other for falling on rival sides of the fight. Colin Creevey took to holding court in the oral tradition for those unfortunates who had fled before the Order’s arrival.

“The windows blew out. CRASH! There was this flash of light — BANG! — and then Dumbledore was standing there with all of these

people, the Weasleys and the Diggories and the Boneses—”

“—don’t forget the Abbots, and Mad-Eye and the other one with the pink hair — and then CLAP! — he does this thing with his hands and all the stairs stop moving, somehow, and everyone freezes and it’s like I can’t feel my legs—”

“—and he shouts — never heard anything like it, ripping loud — ‘DOLORES,’ and the patrolman holding me passes out on the spot —”

“He did not, Colin.”

“Okay but basically he does. And then he disappears again and the other people come in and start pulling the patrolmen off us, and Moody drags them out of the castle, I don’t know where—”

“Probably lasered them to death with his eye. I heard he can totally do that.”

“That’s true, actually, I heard it from Katie. And Pink Hair says, ‘we’re the Order of the Phoenix, and we’re here to help you.’”

“And some prat said he was gonna call the aurors,” Dennis added, “but I don’t know if he did. Maybe he did call them, but they never showed.”

“They won’t come now, we’ve just beat them. But they’ll come,” said Colin grimly. “They’ll come soon. I hope they come while I’m here, so I can fight them. I didn’t hardly get any licks in, against the patrolmen.”

Colin excepted, the student body regarded the Order with supreme wariness; a year of the *Prophet’s* editorials had sapped dry their reservoirs of trust. It had helped greatly that most of the Order members Dumbledore had brought were parents, whose children could vouch for them; even so, the attitude of suspicion was not dispelled easily. Many blamed Harry for the violence, as was

inevitable. There were as many versions of the riot as there were witnesses. Some said they had been involved when they hadn't. Some said they hadn't, though they were. Still others had to learn about the change of administration second-hand: Astoria Greengrass had been recovering from a blood transfusion, and missed it.

The rumors grew to fill a vacuum of information. Hogwarts remained a zipped pocket of the world. No word came from the Ministry. The *Prophet* ran on as if nothing had changed, and if the pictures were reused from previous issues, few noticed.

Owls flew at last from the Owlery, but the letters they brought back were sparse and brittle, full of obvious occlusions. By and by it occurred to him that no one in the real world seemed to know what was happening, either.

As the status quo spun out, hour after restless hour, it grew upon Draco that the feeling he had expected — the one he had wanted and imagined for months, the relief from fear that Umbridge's departure would bring — had never arrived. The fear had come from somewhere else, and found in her only a face. Now faceless, it swelled out like an infinite desert in the doldrums of his quiet, bleach-bright, endless afternoons.

Dumbledore arrived in the headmaster's office not long after Tonks and Bill, stepping around them on the staircase as they evacuated an unconscious Umbridge. He wore robes of midnight blue, hemmed in dust as pale as bone, and the ends of his beard bore singes. He moved aside to allow Bill and Tonks to evacuate an unconscious Umbridge, but he closed the door behind him, and took in the room with a faint sigh of regret.

"I hate to impose more difficulties on you, in what has been an invariably difficult day," he said, "but you would brief me on the goings-on in my absence, it will spare you the trouble of my bothering you again on the subject."

Hermione spoke first and longest. She told him how they had unlocked the Floo, which made it possible for the Order to come in through the castle hearths. She told him about Cassius Warrington and Theodore Nott. Then, squaring of her shoulders, she told him that they had tried to escape once before, unsuccessfully; she told him, haltingly, what she had done to Cho Chang.

Dumbledore listened, behind loosely laced fingers, without any expression. Almost a minute passed before he spoke.

“Was she sworn against giving any information concerning Mr. Potter, or merely information concerning your organization?”

“The second.”

“And she never previously reported anything to Dolores Umbridge, I presume?”

“I… doubt it. The spell was strict—”

“Strict with respect to the information you specified,” said Dumbledore, quite calmly. “But not with respect to anything else she might have gleaned from Harry.”

“You mean information about the Order?”

“I am curious about the scope of her confidence. I would ask her myself, but as it happens, Miss Chang is no longer the expert on what she does and does not know.”

Hermione folded her arms. Her expression shuttered.

“I botched it,” she said, in clinical tones, like she was grading an exam. “That’s why she lost a year. It was a horrible thing for her to experience, I’m well aware. But if you want to expel me for it—”

“Do you think you should be expelled for it?”

“There’s a reason people don’t sit in judgment on their own punishments,” she said, a clipped sidestep of the question. “Expulsions are at the final discretion of the Hogwarts Headmaster. So if you are — considering it — then you should know that the spell was intended only to eliminate memories that put other people in danger.” She bit her cheek, and added: “I wasn’t being vengeful or petty. It was supposed to protect people. I was trying to protect people.”

“How would you evaluate your attempt?”

Hermione flinched. “At least there was an attempt,” she said, and Dumbledore paused his slow circuit of the office. Draco tensed. “And if you’ll forgive me, I’d rather get expelled trying—”

“Miss Granger, it was not I who brought expulsion into this conversation.”

He stooped to pick up a piece of shattered porcelain, regarded it forlornly, and settled it back on the mantle. The effect, in the wrecked room, was hilarity.

“Assuming the school will still be open,” said Draco. “Will it?”

“The doors of Hogwarts will always be open to those who need it,” said Dumbledore. “That mistake I have made only once.”

Hermione darted Draco a querying glance, but Dumbledore continued. “The school will operate through the summer, and next year, for all those who return to it. However, since I have no intention of leaving, I doubt that many parents will permit their children to return. My reputation has seen better days.”

“The school has seen better days,” said Draco, and Dumbledore did a thing with his face that seemed painful.

“The school will endure,” he said. “Miss Granger, what you did to Miss Chang, however unconscionable, occurred outside of my

tenure as the Hogwarts Headmaster, besides which I do not believe I should pass judgment on sins too similar to my own. I remand you to Professor McGonagall, who will decide your punishment moving into the next year."

"But she won't expel me," said Hermione, her voice uneven. "You won't take my wand."

"No. No, Hermione, I will not take your wand."

Something in her punctured. She braced herself subtly on the desk, but a tremble of relief betrayed her.

Draco moved to touch her. His hand found the small of her back, and she hiked her breath before she spoke.

"Thank you," she said. "Whatever McGonagall wants, I'll do. I'll do anything. I'll — I'll give up my prefect badge, if she wants."

Dumbledore smiled to himself and placed another piece of china on the mantel, considered the effect, then moved away. "It's a curious role," he said. From nowhere: "Were you aware that Victoria Frobisher requested to be made a prefect?"

Victoria's chief hobbies were swinging a beater's bat and threatening violence far outside her capability to perform. She was also abysmal in most classes. Draco registered his surprise with a polite silence.

"She can't," said Hermione. "She's just finished first year."

"I didn't ask what you thought of her prospects. I asked if you were aware, and, moreover, if you were aware of why."

"No idea," said Draco. The day had extended him far beyond his appetite for tiresome pedagogy. "The job's thankless tedium. I don't recommend it to her."

Dumbledore studied him intently over his glasses.

“She said she wanted to protect her friends,” he said.

Draco hated him for saying it. Something in his chest unfolded against the limits of his ribs, painfully.

“Why didn’t you do anything?” he said, and he marveled at his own vitriol even as he contemplated striking the old man across the face.

A thin whistle in the eaves voiced the wind’s opinion on the subject. But Dumbledore did answer him, with a clipped gravity.

“I judged it too great a risk,” he said. “Better, at any cost, to appear weak… to appear incapable of resistance… She wasted a year of rule on petty inquisitions and indulgences. And yet there are secrets at Hogwarts of which Dolores never scratched the surface.”

“Do you *know* the costs?” said Hermione, raising her voice. “Do you know what happened to Harry? What it did to him? What it *is* doing to him, now?”

“Does he still struggle with Occlumency?”

“The Dark Lord has a window into his brain,” said Draco. “It’s not clear Occlumency *can* stop it, if he could. Speaking of which. Where’s my godfather?”

Dumbledore did not react. “Severus is wherever his business takes him,” he said. “I rarely know his location precisely.”

“Your business, you mean.”

He did not deny it, either.

Draco found himself raising his voice, too. “Say that Snape didn’t betray the Order. He went to Umbridge on your instructions.”

“To what purpose?”

“To distance himself from you. To prove his loyalties to the Dark Lord.”

“Potentially,” said Dumbledore, blithe. “What purpose would you infer, if you were correct?”

“That you want a spy in his inner circle. That he needs absolute trust.” He paused. “Snape isn’t coming back next year. Is he?”

The twitch of Dumbledore’s mouth stirred his white beard. “Why would that be a poor idea?”

“It would be spending too much time around you. He would infer you still had sway over him. The Dark Lord assumes that people bend to the nearest source of power.”

“Severus Snape is an accomplished Occlumens. Shouldn’t that fact assure his master?”

“Snape shouldn’t want the Dark Lord to know that,” said Draco. His brain flitted along the line of thought, forking, checking corners, jittery with something almost like excitement. “The Dark Lord is a Legilimens. The last thing he wants in his inner circle is an accomplished Occlumens.”

Dumbledore inclined his head. “So what should Severus do?”

“Burn bridges,” he said. In the corner of his eye, Hermione turned her head. “Scorch the earth. Give him as many secrets as you can afford to lose. Start now. He shouldn’t have waited until—” His mind raced ahead of the sentence and abandoned it; he vaulted fast into another, angry now in earnest.

“Unless he didn’t wait, did he? If he started last summer. You were both planning this as soon as you knew the Dark Lord had returned.”

Dumbledore blinked. His eyes were the luminous color at the heart of a glacier. “It was a shame to lose Mundungus Fletcher,” he said,

and he seemed to mean it. “For once in his life, I think he was making an honest effort to do the right thing.”

“You let Moody hound him out for nothing?” Hermione was struggling; her tone was not accusatory, but of one failing to understand. “To protect Snape? That’s it? You could have quashed the investigation to begin with—”

“Alastor Moody loathes spies,” said Dumbledore simply. “He must believe that his people are loyal, no rival claims to their fidelity, no kernel of treason in their hearts. He has known too much of betrayal to abide it… and I have known too much of hearts to agree with him.”

His robes moved soundlessly over the floors. The door to the office opened soundlessly at his approach, untouched.

“Your mother is well, Draco,” he said, as the shaded stairwell swallowed his face. “She asks that you return home for the summer. And she will expect you at Platform Nine and Three Quarters.”

Then the door closed over the weary hunch of his shoulders. And they were alone, at last, in a shattered room.

The castle *post bellum* was a castle undressed: near the grand staircase, portraits listed from their hooks, and marble dust seized in froth-white whorls under each step. Evening glowed in bronze fragments on the broken glass under the windows. Thick, warm air stirred the corridors, motion without relief. It accrued in Hermione’s hair, turning her face pale, and her robes shimmering gray. Where it flickered through the fallen glass, Draco’s reflection was colorless. They climbed down a broken stair, which had been dislodged in some skirmish between the Order and aurors; when she listed on her ankle, she fell into his shoulder, and stayed there for a moment. The weight of her kept him from feeling as if he might float up through the surreal dream of the day, and wake, panting, on the first morning of September.

They went on.

A crowd had assembled in the Hospital Wing antechamber to the Hospital Wing. Ron leaned against the doors, encircled by siblings. Padma and Parvati sat together on a bench, sharing earphones, distinguishable only by their ties; Luna dozed with her head in Padma's lap. Dean, Seamus, and Katie were playing Hearts with one of Fred's trick card decks.

Hermione moved into the light, her hand drifting over Draco's elbow. She did not let go of him, not quite. The conversation dimmed to greet them, and there was a slithering susurrus of whispers.

Ron had straightened at the sound of their footsteps; at the sight of them, he was in motion. "Hermione," he shouted. "Draco—"

He shot forward and scooped her up in a single movement, so quickly that a wheeze was her only objection. His arms wrapped tightly around her waist and he wheeled her around, and she gave a shout less angry than surprised, clinging to him.

"Ron! *Ron!* Put me down! I'm fine! I'm *fine*— put me down, you're mad!"

His tolerance ratcheted to its limit, tipped, and broke. Seeing Ron's head buried in Hermione's neck had made him less irritable on days far more deserving of his patience. It didn't help that Hermione had started to giggle, infected, no doubt, by the intensity of his joy, as of course she would be, which was the reason that Draco withstood precisely three more seconds of it than he thought really decent, considering that she didn't belong to Ron.

"That's more than enough, thank you. You can put her down."

Ron did not care. He gave a breathy guffaw of relief and dropped her, clasped her shoulders, her head, her waist again, and rounded on Draco with a grin that was so electrically bright it half-threatened to seize Draco and give him a whirl, too. He settled for punching him

in the shoulder, and Draco let him. The ache flickered almost pleasantly through the sore muscles of his wand-arm.

“You son of a bitch,” Ron breathed. “I’m sorry I didn’t see it. Tonks said you had her out cold when they found you. Did you get her good?”

“You mean Umbridge, I assume?”

“Or any other old bints you knocked off on the way,” said Ginny. She clambered upright, flipping dust-clumped hair out of her face. “Hopefully not too many.”

“I think McGonagall’s sore she lost the pleasure,” said Fred. “You saw her going at it — reckon she nearly took off a limb, never seen her so mad as all that—”

“Most morale I’ve felt in years,” said George, “she should’ve beat someone to death on the first day of Transfiguration, I’d have aced the N.E.W.T.”

“Euan was worried she’d get off easy, Order being humanitarians,” said Ginny. “I told him: ‘Are you joking? It’s Malfoy and Granger. They’re gonna use her to ruin a hardwood floor.’”

Dean and Seamus jeered appreciatively. Hermione began to look uncomfortable.

“Where’s Potter?” said Draco, ignoring them.

“In there.” Ron jerked his head. “Collapsed when we were fighting Scrimgeour. Don’t think a spell got him, only—” He pointed at his forehead. “You know.”

The relief fell out of Hermione’s face in a tragic sweep. “Are you sure? He’s never fainted from a vision before.”

“Yeah, I dunno. Pomfrey’s got him. Mum, too. We’re just waiting for her to let us in.”

“Mrs. Weasley is here?”

“Yeah, ’course. Came with the rest of the Order. And Dad, of course, but she didn’t leave much for him to do—”

The doors parted. Neville stepped out wearing a nurse’s apron and stripped off a pair of blue gloves. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, and the ends of his fringe were damp with sweat.

“He’s fine,” he said, before anyone could accost him. “Pomfrey’s cleared him. No curses, no major problems. She’s holding him overnight to monitor, but she expects to release him in the morning. I’m supposed to take four of you—”

“Four!”

“That’s not fair, we’ve been out here for ages—”

“Neville, have a heart—”

“Four,” said Neville loudly, “and I’m allowed to take less, if someone gets s-saucy about it — if you don’t have an injury, go back to your common room, and if you *do* have an injury, come and see me. Ron, p-pick three.” He promptly turned and retreated behind the doors, deaf to a sweet chorus of whining.

“He’s been spending too much time with you,” Ron muttered to Draco.

“I can’t be credited with every competent act in this House. Only most of them.”

“I could leave you out here, you know — alright. Ginny, Hermione, you’re with me and Draco.” Ron swept his gaze over the assembly with a polite dictatorial air. “The rest of you piss off until tomorrow morning. Thanks for waiting with us, I’ll let Harry know you came. Fred and George keep their liquor in the false bottom of the broom cupboard—”

“Thanks, Ronnie,” exclaimed Fred, “last time I clock an auror for you.”

“—so go mad with that. Or don’t, er, if you’re like, twelve. Anyway, good job.”

“Thank you, Ron,” said Luna. Her voice was very un-Luna-like; it was flat and plaintive with tiredness. “Please tell Harry I’m sorry about the Grim.”

Hermione lifted her eyes to the ceiling, opened her mouth, and closed it on a long exhale.

“Consider him told,” said Ron.

The Hospital Wing sat pale and crowded under the warm descent of dusk. Each bed carried someone nursing a bruise or a split lip, and the chatter of them filled the room with a liquid ripple of inaudible voices: somewhere here complaining of an auror’s curse, another there of a sprain. The windows hung open to stir the stagnant summer air and heavy linen drapes, hung from the distant ceiling, moved like the slow wingbeats of a descending swan. It smelled of disinfectant, copper, and sweat. Pomfrey swept from bed to bed with the gravity of a descending peregrine, plucked, patched, dosed, or cut, and darted on to the next bed, while her attendants followed in a retinue of compresses and glass vials.

Harry’s bed had been sequestered by a translucent screen. He lay under a sheet as pale as shrouds, his knees propped up like whitecaps.

Molly Weasley was knitting at his bedside, though she looked remarkably unlike herself. She wore a plain black raincloak that hung like a poncho around her shoulders, a fitted tunic of midnight blue, and laced leather boots with mud up the sides. Her hands deftly operated the knitting needles while encumbered by a pair of fingerless gloves. An auror’s wandsheath ran up her left forearm.

If it had not been for her hair — frayed, sabled auburn curls, like fading leaves of the last flush, bound back tightly with a headband — he would not have recognized her. But the impression came back with a force when her children came in, for she stood and snapped out her arms with a brisk and familiar demand. Ron lurched in to hug her, and she nearly lifted him off his feet.

Harry turned as they came, his whole body quickened in bright relief. He sat up clumsily — a golden thread trailed from his wrist to a levitating bag of saline at his shoulder — and clutched Hermione's hand as she rushed to his bedside.

He gave a ragged, hapless laugh, as if he could not quite think what to say. She swallowed and did not say anything, either.

“Alright, Hermione?” he rasped.

“Fine,” she said. “Draco and I—”

“I know. You saved us.”

“Not alone,” she said weakly, with a hail-mary glance over her shoulder; Draco raised his eyebrows to indicate that she was without help, and she promptly punished him. “Draco dueled Cassius Warrington by himself. And won.”

“Fuck’s sake, Granger—”

“You did *what?”*

“It's true,” she said, with a silken note of proprietary pride. “It didn't take him fifteen minutes.”

He scoffed. “Not a fair fight. Warrington’s a poppet. Cut his strings, he falls over.”

“Nope, too late,” croaked Harry, and reached for him. Draco rolled his eyes and, with as much reluctance as he could telegraph, outstretched his hand so that Harry could take it. “Thank you, too.”

“Had half the school outside,” said Ron, jerking his thumb. “Ginny had to sell a kidney to get in. Neville’s let the power go to his head.”

Harry smiled thinly. “Good for him,” he said. “Tell him to start cutting me in on these deals. I’m sick of being the Elvis in this relationship.”

Ginny wriggled her way between them and hopped onto the mattress beside Harry.

“You missed out,” she said. “I totally kicked Warrington’s arse, too. You just didn’t see it, ’cause you fainted like a girl.”

“You know me. Had to make a dramatic exit.” Harry smiled, and it made the crooked bridge of his glasses lilt askew. The flat, angular, planes of his face hung shadows under them, and in the light his eyes were eerily pale, almost colorless.

Sometimes I play a little game, and then I lie a little more.

“The Order have Umbridge in custody,” said Draco.

“Where?” said Ginny dangerously, fingering her wand.

“No idea. Fancy an expedition?”

“God, you’re my favorite prefect. Can we go now?”

“Neither of you are doing anything of the sort,” said Molly pleasantly, looping a new strand of yarn around her forefinger. “You’re to stay away from that woman for the rest of her natural-born life, Ginevra. Draco, I can’t rightly tell you what to do, but I doubt your mother would disagree.”

She took his mother for a far more forgiving woman than she was, by his lights, but he laid the point aside from distraction. Hermione had lowered herself into one of the visitors’ chairs. The moment her weight left her heels, something wilted in her spine, and her eyes closed, briefly.

Years' experience informed him she was minutes from falling asleep wherever she happened to be standing, sitting, or reading, and he would have moved to take her back to the Tower; but Harry had started to relax for the first time they'd come in, and he knew she wouldn't leave. He placed a hand on the back of her chair, and she flicked her fingers in a tired gesture that meant she would push through, regardless of convincing.

The doors to the Hospital Wing cleaved and a pale head bestrode the gap. Daphne slipped through discreetly, though the effect was thwarted by the full attention of the room on her. She wore a navy-blue cardigan over her uniform, which happened to hide her Slytherin tie.

"Hello," she said hesitantly. "I heard that Harry was here."

"He'll be out in the morning, dear," said Molly, firm, but not unkind. "He isn't seeing visitors."

"S'fine. Just Daphne," said Harry. He waved her over, and she trotted in with the sly contentment of someone being permitted to breach a rule.

"Duck behind me, if Neville comes," Ron told her.

"I shall vanish entirely." She noticed Molly, and half-folded herself in an uncharacteristically awkward curtsy, which a less tired Draco would have found the words to mock. "Oh, *you're* — why, hello, Lady — Mrs. Weasley."

"This is Daphne Greengrass," Molly said, politely. "From the stories?"

"You *do* talk about me," Daphne murmured, pleased.

"Yeah, to complain," said Ron. "Anyway, she's cool, Mum. Stood up for Harry, in the Great Hall. Only Slytherin to do it." He smiled at her, perhaps urging some show of pride, but Daphne hesitated.

“That’s not quite true,” she said. “A few of the very young ones did, too… admittedly, I think they just wanted to stand on the table, I’m not sure they quite knew what was going on. Anyway, I wasn't really fighting, like you — I mean, Ron punched one square in the neck—”

“He gets his aggression from his father,” said Molly haughtily. Ginny gaped at her in disbelief. “I raised him better than that.”

“Mum! *You* punched Cortwaite in the d—”

“And I raised you better than to use that language in front of company!”

“It’s Harry’s company,” said Ginny irritably. She chafed against her mother’s tone, her shoulders creeping up, and Draco remembered their fight from St. Mungo’s. “Not yours. Let him say if he doesn't like my language.”

“I’m his guardian for the time being,” said Molly sharply. “I’ll look after him. Now—”

“But you're not,” said Ginny, with an equal and opposite streak of flinty stubbornness. “His guardian's Sirius. Where is he?”

“Ginny,” rasped Harry. “Don't—”

“Drinking, I expect,” said Molly, quite bright and quite cold. “So whatever your preferences are, young lady, I'm sorry to say you're stuck with me.”

Ginny sucked in her cheek and rolled her jaw mulishly to stare at the floor. She did not apologize to her mother, but she didn't prosecute the argument, either. Molly set down her needles and scowled at her hands.

“How's Dad?” said Ron suddenly.

Molly took up her needles again, shaking out her wrists with a sharp gesture. “He's fine,” she said curtly. “He's searching the castle for

traps, with Mad-Eye. The Healers expect him to regain some of his voice by September."

"How much is some?"

"Less than all," she said, and pulled tight the loop.

Daphne averted her eyes. Draco thought someone ought to breach the awful silence. He said, "What's that you've got, Greengrass?"

Her gratitude was spelled in her sharp intake of breath. "I brought some things for Harry." She began digging parcels out of her knapsack. She was obviously trying to play it off casually, but the parcels were wrapped in pink tissue paper and tied in satin ribbon, and he had rarely seen her put so much effort into anything except her hair. "Whenever Tori and I were in hospital," she added, "we'd bring each other handsoaps, because hospital soaps always smell like bleach, it's dreadful. And some dry shampoo, and toothpaste — Scouring Charms just never *feel* clean, do they? And a silk pillowcase, so your hair doesn't get mussy on those awful cheap sheets."

"Tell me about it," said Harry, "those cheap sheets," and Hermione pointedly jogged the leg of his bed.

"And some Turkish delight, just for a treat. Hospital is a fine chance to gorge yourself without anyone telling you off." Daphne placed the box in his lap and patted it. Then she stepped back awkwardly, her grace vanquished without a task to perform; she seemed suddenly adrift, waiting for someone to give her a heading.

Ron was staring at her. She glanced at him furtively, twice, and sighed: "Oh, God, he's allergic, isn't he? *Don't* tell me, I'll jump out a window."

"No," said Ron oddly. "He's — he's fine, eat mud if you let him. Why'd you come?"

“I don’t know,” she said. “It… seemed like a nice thing to do.”

“Well, it was,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “I know.”

He nodded, averting his eyes. She clasped her hands behind her back in a posture of elegant uncertainty.

“Don’t get much of them,” he said. “The fancy sweets. Bit rich for our blood.”

“Oh, Turkish delight isn’t expensive. Honeydukes has a deluxe box for ten galleons.”

Ron blinked.

“Which is a lot of money,” she blurted. “Quite a lot of money, for most people, in fact, and actually, I think I’ll see about that window—”

“I’m having you on. I’ve had Turkish delight before. I’m not, like, homeless.”

“I didn’t say you were homeless,” she gasped. “I would never say that. Or think it! And if I did, which you can’t prove, then it was for a brief period early in our acquaintance, and I should not be held responsible for it.”

An owl broke through one of the open windows of the Hospital Wing, its raven-black feathers gilded in the last veins of sunset. It settled on one of the other students’ bedside, drawing Draco’s eye to the only other bed in the room that had a screen. Emerging from the screen to receive her owl was a short, dark-haired girl in a Slytherin uniform. She slit the twine with her wand and fed the owl a treat from her pocket, flipped open the letter, and skimmed it, her snub-nosed face pursed in concentration.

Sensing that she was being watched, Pansy glanced up at him. She folded the letter into her robe pocket and turned to say something to

the person behind the screen. Draco harbored few doubts as to who lay there. Daphne followed his gaze, choked on air, and fell silent.

With a bellicose square of her shoulders, Pansy crossed the ward, her steps long and brusque and graceful. Her presence was neither unnoticed nor welcome by Ron and Ginny, the latter of whom removed her wand from her pocket. But Molly disarmed them with a lift of her hand, and she rose at Pansy's approach.

"Hello, again," she said, and Pansy hesitated — caught off-guard, perhaps, by the familiarity in it. "You've changed your hair."

There was something he had forgotten. The last time they had seen each other, Pansy's hair had been splinched by Theo. A hairdresser of preternatural skill had rearranged it into a French bob, tapered at the back and rounded at the front with a long fringe, and it hung so low it gave her the impression of a perpetually uplifted glower.

"Yes. My mother cried," said Pansy, in a clipped tone that was almost cordial. She turned to Draco. "I assume you caught Umbridge," she said, "since Granger's still got her wand. *Bien joué.* I hope it was satisfying."

"What's it to you?" snapped Ron. Molly laid a hand on his arm.

Pansy curled her lip. "I'm doing reconnaissance," she said. "I'd like to know what plans the Order has for me."

"For you, personally?" inquired Hermione, with a sharp edge of amusement. "Are you under the impression that they're thinking about you?"

"If they're not, they bloody well should be. Theo and Cassius are already gone. You should be more careful with your hostages."

"Hostages!" said Molly scornfully. "My days. You're not a *hostage,* dearie."

“I am, in fact. In effect, if not by intention. Daddy will never attack the school while I’m here. Congratulations! You have all once again failed catastrophically upwards,” she said. “But if Dumbledore intends to let his leverage walk out the door, I won’t stop him.”

“The Order of the Phoenix does not fight wars with children,” said Molly.

“You mean you won’t employ them,” Pansy snapped. “Which is bully for your kids. But your enemies don’t share your inhibitions, and I somehow doubt you’ll risk your children’s lives for mine. So I would be careful, if I were you, about acting too sanctimonious. The next time we see each other, you might not have quite the reach for the moral high ground.”

With a delicate step, she disengaged from their circle, cutting a wide berth around Daphne, and strode forthwith out of the Hospital Wing. Neville, who had been watching at a distance, stepped in front of her at the doors — she recoiled and reached for her hip — but he merely took the handle and drew one back for her, his expression shuttered, if not unsympathetic. She said something to him, short and inaudible. His reply was brief; she stepped around him, giving him a wide berth, as her robe flickered out of sight.

Harry’s heartclock murmured up into the forefront of the silence. Hermione sheathed her wand with an unsteady hand. Ron and Ginny were having some sort of unreadable silent communication, and Molly was saying something about letting Harry rest, her brisk manner sweeping the conversation mercifully into the past. People were staring at them, each the wide unembarrassed stare of someone with a reason to. A crawl ran over Draco’s skin and it occurred to him, for a second time, that this was what winning felt like.

Dumbledore held an assembly the next morning. Ongoing renovations on the Great Hall sent them to the lawn. Because there were no tables, it was difficult to see who had turned out for it, and

which, if any, Houses had abstained. It told them little they didn’t already know: that Hogwarts would stay open, for the summer and the year beyond; that the Ministry, whatever was left of it, would be ousted from the school’s administration; that the students not eager to stay would be permitted to leave, as usual, on the Hogwarts Express, which would arrive for them on June twelfth. Hermione intended to go with it. That was fine. She had agreed for a member of the Order to go with her.

She had not agreed, despite efforts, to stay at Hogwarts for the summer, or indeed to do anything else that might lower Draco’s blood pressure.

Most of the Order had stayed. Moody prowled the battlements of the castle regularly, and Draco overheard the tail-end of a heated conversation between him and Dumbledore about the remaining Slytherins. The Boneses and the Diggories, reunited with their children, stuck closely together, although Amos enjoyed informing strangers about his son’s role in single-handedly starting the Hogwarts resistance, until Cedric dragged him off by the heels. Arthur and Molly had been given rooms in the guest wing of the castle, and held tea services for students seeking information about the Order of the Phoenix. Tonks, Bill, Fleur, and Charlie ran patrols at Moody’s behest along the exterior of the castle and grounds, checking the secret passageways and tunnels of the Shrieking Shack, but their reports came back clean.

The students fell into wary rhythms with the new police force, in form not so different from their old one as to upset routine. The suspicion mellowed over time, as their new freedoms expanded, and more students were allowed to go home. Alfie Chrissenpoffer flagged Draco in the Transfiguration corridor to address it.

“Malfoy,” he said, nearly whispering, “these Order people — they are the right sort, aren't they?”

“What?”

“I mean, we can trust them? They're behind Harry, and everything?”

At twelve, Alfie had failed to grow into his hair, the ruddy mop of which still draped in his eyes. Draco sighed.

“Trust them absent reason to do otherwise,” he said. “As a rule, you needn't fear them. They're reasonably domesticated.”

Alfie nodded firmly. With an experimental air, he snapped off a salute. It was a striking imitation of how Bill and Tonks signed off to each other.

“Don't do that,” he snapped, queasy. “You're twelve. It looks ridiculous. Two points from Gryffindor for public embarrassment.”

Alfie nodded again, half-started another salute — winced, aborted — and settled on two rigid thumbs-up. He scurried into a secret passage behind a tapestry and was gone, leaving Draco roiling with nameless unease.

Three days after the riot, Lupin still had not come. Harry said, “He’s probably with Sirius,” but Draco sensed his apprehension, and dispatched himself to ask Mad-Eye on a discreet occasion.

“Classified,” said Mad-Eye. He glared around the corner of the alcove, though they were alone, and Draco cast a Muffling Charm. “Classified, boy, and I wouldn’t tell you if it weren’t. Are you dull?”

“Potter won’t accept that answer.”

“It’s not Potter I’m talking to,” said Mad-Eye. His lone eye pierced the locks of lanky, gray hair in his face. He seemed ages older than he had been last year. “You don’t know what kind of information you’re asking for, Malfoy. Much less how much of it you want.”

“Fine. I won’t ask, I’ll give it to you: Potter wants to see him. Earlier this year, the three of us had to talk him down from running back to Twelve in the middle of term just to see him alive.”

“That was damn foolish.”

“I know. So let him see his godfather. Or Lupin.”

“Can’t be done,” said Mad-Eye grimly. “Twelve’s too valuable. And Lupin’s out of play.”

“Hogwarts is ten times a better safehouse than Twelve. What do you mean by out of play?”

“I don’t mean as a safehouse, boy,” he snapped. “Christ, you’re a Black, you ought to know. It’s the seat of an ancient house. Bound and kept by the Laws of Blood, consecrated with the magic of twenty dead generations. Of dead tyrants. Padfoot doesn’t know the half of the evil in that place, and it’d be worse in the hands of the Dark Lord.”

The chill of this infused him while Mad-Eye muttered on. “No telling what could happen to it. No telling where the enemy even is. Could be London. Could be Oxford. Could be Edinburgh. He’d change his seat in the day… made a game of it, I would’ve sworn to you, he slipped us clues. He liked to dance. I’d let him. We made a secret of our power, and let good men die to keep it… Never asked if Albus forgave me. No! I played a game of whispers when to breathe the truth was sin. Now he won’t give us the facts. *Prophet* won’t report them. Even those who know won’t last, Kingsley found two explosives in his Floo powder… When they write the history of this war, they’ll ask the winners what was true.”

In alarm, Draco watched the old man’s rheumed eye slip into the middle distance, sharpen, and swivel back to him. It occurred to him that Mad-Eye had the twin of Dumbledore’s pristine, grieving silences: this muttering, fervent conscience, which crawled out luridly in idleness, practically begging to be unburdened. He wondered if it were possible for it to be any other way. He could not decide which was worse.

Mad-Eye's face did not soften, exactly, but a new chisel opened in the rock. He clapped Draco on the shoulder with a blow that could have crippled a smaller man. It surprised Draco, the collegiality of it.

"Ah, boy. I'm not cruel," he muttered. "Potter's had a hard go. If I can have Moony brought here, I will. But Padfoot's out of the question."

Mad-Eye left him in the alcove, his leather duster sweeping the ground.

Harry noticed the absence. He noticed it even when Arthur Weasley came to visit him in Gryffindor, his smile broad and strained, speaking in the softest of half-whispers, little more than a rustle of air at the back of his throat. They spent an afternoon conversing over a piece of parchment they traded to and fro over the table. At the end of it, Arthur left with Bill, and Harry curled himself into one of the window-seats, fending off efforts to draw him into conversation with polite muttered denials.

He was surrounded by family again: Weasleys aplenty, McGonagall and Tonks, all of Gryffindor, all of them at his beck and anxious to please. But for want of Sirius Black, Harry's victory turned to ash in his mouth. He wrote long letters that he burned un-sent. In the evenings Draco came down to see him lingering by the fireplace, long after the others had come to bed, watching the embers with his knees tucked under his chin.

Draco would be the first to say he found it irrational. He found it maudlin, and more than that, he found it a waste of Harry Potter, whose affection seemed too high a thing to bestow on someone who could reward it so poorly, with such a twisted, reckless kind of affection. Someone who had known him so briefly, and loved him too ferociously, for that brief time, to believe that love belonged to Harry alone. It was love borrowed on credit, and borrowed things demanded to be repaid.

The creditor wasn't hard to guess. But he remembered Tonks's eavesdropped exchange, at Christmas — *my little fucking spy*

assessment currently finds that the ward master of the Order headquarters — and it wasn't like he hadn't seen it, hadn't heard it even, the wild edge of Sirius's voice when he was drunk, the cinders of rage smoldering under thirteen years of insouciance and grief. To be alone in Grimmauld Place did not seem a pleasant prospect. He did not seek to imagine what Sirius Black was doing to himself without anyone to watch him.

Four days after the riot found him with Hermione on a window-seat in the boys' dormitory. The stone chamber flooded with sunlight: it pooled in sheer white boxes on the floor, speared the eye where it caught random bits of glass and mirror, and set the gilt on the leatherbound volumes at his bedside aflame with rare brilliance. It inflamed Hermione's hair from beneath with a volcanic warmth, the hints of gold and red lifted up amongst the unpinned chestnut coils. She was annotating something with runes; Draco laid on the bed, paging through a book Remus had given him for Christmas about potions. The Cure's *Disintegration* album thrummed statically from her earphones. Her quill moved in rhythm with the sound.

Through the window, the grounds soaked up the light like a latticed spill of jewels. The Whomping Willow twitched its fingers in the dry, still air. Harry was flying overhead, an incongruous dart of jet against the blue slate of the sky: someone in the Order, probably Bill, had fetched Umbridge's keys and unlocked the Gryffindor quidditch room. Ron and Ginny made smaller, less ambitious loops in the sky beneath him.

The carceral days of May seemed to belong to a different season, a different year. June crawled to them on its belly, hot and flat, practically stifling. A single sluggish cloud strained across the southern horizon.

He wondered when he would start feeling happy again. It was taking more time than he had expected. It was a great relief, of course, to have Umbridge gone, and it was a greater relief to have the weight of custody off his shoulders — it was the Order, now, who pried students apart when they squabbled, who jinxed bullies from their

quarry, who kept the peace by being omnipresently around the corner. A vast weight had lifted to hover a few inches from his shoulders, a shadow without force. It was not his outlook any longer to ensure that the many students of Hogwarts Castle did not tear each other to pieces under the strain.

“It’s a bad idea.”

The dorm was empty: Dean and Seamus were downstairs in the common room, by the faint pulse of music on the floorboards, and Neville was still helping Pomfrey on the ward. Most of the Tower was out attempting to wring every drop from its freedom. His voice rebounded from the stone walls, vanishing into the wood rafters.

Hermione finished drawing a rune, made a critical survey, and blew on the ink. It flashed gold and blazed into the paper, vanishing. “You lost this fight the first three times,” she said, “so perhaps we ought to skip the fourth. I’m getting bored of winning it.”

“Try losing it, then, for a change. Here, I’ll let you: it’s not even so much that it’s a bad idea, it’s that I don’t believe you *have* an idea for it at all.”

She capped her inkwell and shook out her wrist. “The train arrives,” she deadpanned. “I get on the train. I get off the train.”

“I object. You discover compound sentences.”

“I — ha, ha — fine. I see my parents, I show them I’m not dead, and the reason I couldn’t write them since January wasn’t because I’m a terrible daughter, although considering what else I haven’t told them, they probably shouldn’t waive the charge.”

“And you have to do that in Hampstead Garden?”

“You say that like it’s Clapton,” she said mildly. “It’s a suburb. I live next to a church.”

“What about the Manor?” He tossed the book on the table and lowered his legs from the window seat.

“We talked about this.”

“It’s a practical compromise. It’s warded, it’s remote, it’s comfortable. It’s far from London.”

“I agree with you.”

“And I’d be there.”

“Yes, I’d hope so.”

“Then do it,” he said. “Say yes. It isn’t hard.”

“I have to see my parents,” she said, in the singsong of one repeating herself.

“Bring them.”

“The Manor has muggle-repelling charms.”

“I’ll deactivate them.”

“You don’t know how to do that.”

“I’ll learn how to do it. Or I’ll buy a house in the area and put them up. Be a damn sight easier than letting you walk around London alone.” He pushed off his bed and prowled to his bureau. The bruises on his torso were still healing, and they twinged stiffly when he rolled his shoulders. He tapped Ulysses’s cage, and the owl croaked at him in a distinguished, reproachful manner.

Hermione’s robes rustled as she drew her knees down from the window-seat. She tugged out her earphone and wound it neatly around the little grey Discman. “I’m not going to be alone,” she said, truthfully. “Tonks is coming with me.”

“Thank Merlin. Dark armies of hideous strength are arraying against us, and you’re taking a twenty-something with a tongue piercing.”

“Tonks is perfectly capable, you admitted it. You’re just recanting because you don’t like the plan—”

“I admitted nothing like it.” He used his wand to fill the cage’s water trough. Ulysses nipped at his fingers in gratitude, breaking the skin; he daubed his index in his mouth to stop the bleeding and shut the cage. “I said I preferred her to Charlie. Who also, I believe, has a tongue piercing. And for the record, ‘perfectly capable’ isn’t good enough.”

She threw up her hands in exasperation. “Well, I’m a bit ‘capable’ myself. If it comes to it, I’ll have my wand, and I’ll be fine—”

“No, you *won’t,”* he snapped, turning on her. “You can’t use magic—”

“Neither can you!”

“—until your Trace comes off in September. Until then you’re a walking beacon—”

“The Dark Lord’s armies aren’t going to target a pair of dentists.”

“Don’t be coy. You think the Dark Lord doesn’t know who you are?”

She blinked, her eyelashes shuttering slowly over her cheeks. When she opened her eyes they were hard, intent. “Stop trying to scare me,” she said crisply. “I’m quite good enough at it on my own.”

He gave a short exhale and paced. Ulysses crooned in concern. Hermione stretched her ankle, twisting the joint in an exaggerated pronation, flashing the blueberry stain of a bruise under her heel. When she tested her weight on it, her calf flexed, and she padded to the bed, where her satchel was, to root for some of the poultice Neville had made her. Absently, she nudged some of her hair out of her face, and it spilled over her shoulder, twining threads of rust on

ivory cotton. Her bottom lip caught between her teeth, and she pressed a faint divot in it. Habitual overbite, orthodontically corrected. Muggle braces. Off by fourth year. She'd asked him how they looked, because it had mattered to her. Though she hated the idea of how she looked mattering to her, and she hated feeling like it should matter. Never wore jewelry but for a leather-banded watch, her grandmother's. Code-perfect uniform, no accents. Makeup, sometimes, if she had a spot. Anything she could use to restrain any amount of her hair. He remembered so much about her sometimes it overwhelmed him.

“Fine. I’ll come with you.”

“You w— I—” Her cheeks warmed. “You’d be very welcome to meet them, but I’m not talking about a short visit. I can’t just swing by, tell them what’s happened, and catch the eight o’clock train back to Scotland. I’ll have to convince them to let me come back to school. Again.”

“We’ll make them understand.”

“It isn’t that simple. How would you explain that you wanted to come back?” It was a touch, perhaps, uncertain. “What sane person would?”

“Because it’s your inheritance,” he said immediately. “Because it belongs to you. Because you belong to it.”

Her mouth worked. He dropped his eyes to it. Her lip folded softly under her teeth, edging a raw dark line of red at the swell.

“Well,” she said flippantly, “if that’s what your mother told you about magic, it would explain a lot.”

She was too late to dodge as he clipped a Lasso Jinx at her ankles, a skittery and harmless that made her squeak and fall on the bed. No one stood above the sacred rite of petty vengeance. Hermione, laughing in surprise, retorted at once by snatching her wand out of

her hair and Disarming him, snaring his wand towards her with a canny twist of her wrist. It was a short-lived scuffle. His reflexes still ran jittery and quick from overuse, fried nerves smoldering at noises around corners. Hers were sharper than they had been before.

Both their appetites for scrimmage were wanting. She folded too quickly to make it any fun, and levitated his wand with a lazy swish of her own, which he caught and pocketed as an olive branch.

“The only thing I’m heir to is a dental practice,” she said, laying on her back. Her hands laced over her stomach. Her skirt rode up, drawing like a curtain over a stretch of soft sun-neglected skin that reached perilously high. “And I think they plan on giving it to the cousins.”

“That’s not true,” he said, leaning against the bedpost. Dissonance frissoned at the sight of her in the boys’ dormitory, not because she hadn’t been before — she made episodic invasions on Christmas, or whenever Ron or Harry overslept — but because usually, when she had, it was full of other people. “You’re more witch than anyone alive.”

“Magic isn’t something I inherited,” she pointed out. “And I live in the muggle world. I can’t just leave it, and I wouldn’t want to. Draco, before the Order came, did you ask Ron to take me on the run with the Weasleys?”

The flank attack on the topic was a characteristic maneuver. “He offered first of his own accord,” he said, noncommittal.

Hermione sat up, radiating furor. “You *did.* Where were you planning on doing?”

“Finding my mother. Getting her out of her oath to Dumbledore. Fleeing the country,” he said. “Past that point, I hadn’t bothered to think.”

“You were planning to do that without help?”

“Not by choice, but with others gone—”

“If you stayed in Britain I’d stay with you, you dolt,” she said, reckless and intent. “You’re my — you’re you. If you were here, I’d be here. I would stay if they hauled me in front of a tribunal and snapped my wand and posted a warrant for our arrests. I’d stay if they pulled down the towers of this castle, looking for us, and I’d dig you out from underneath them.”

He shifted upright, standing over her. Hermione reached up and palmed his jaw, hot pressure, like she was trying to infuse her point through the skin.

“I’d find you if you ran away,” she said, with destined certainty, “and vanished from the earth, hid yourself somewhere no one else would think to look. I’d come looking for you. And then, when I found you, I’d make you regret it.”

It was not a question. It was not last year: *Please, please stay.* Love had not gentled her. If anything, the opposite.

His fingers grazed the soft underside of her chin.

“You know,” he said, to swerve the danger of saying something with significantly more emotion, “you’re distinctly lovely when you’re threatening me.”

That knocked her off her guard well and far; Hermione loved the warpath, but she waded into intimacy with the bewilderment of a small and developmentally challenged deer. It was hopelessly predictable of her to twitch. Gamely, however, she grappled her hesitation and said: “I could keep going, if — you’re enjoying yourself.”

It must have registered to her at the same time that there was no one around, and no one likely to come looking for them. That they were without work and without chores and without pretexts to distract

each other. For the first time in months, they were totally and indefinitely alone.

He grabbed her and kissed her.

She swayed back from the force of it with a muffled yip of surprise.

He shoved his hand greedily into her hair and wrapped his hand around her waist, slanting his mouth over hers with a bruising force. She tasted of tea and lemon and the whole fucking field of sugarcane she always put in it, like a raw lick of honey.

Her leg slipped over his and then, with a short little tug on her waist, she was sliding half on top of him, and he carried her weight back onto his elbows, still kissing her in hard, hot rhythm, her mouth fixed to his like a singing nerve of raw pleasure. He couldn't stop. He couldn't remember why they'd stopped in the first place, when this was what it felt like.

Her hum was a perfect, little catlike sound that vibrated through the back of his skull. Her shirt bunched under his fingers, rising out of her skirt, and he slid his fingers inside to glide over miles of soft skin, riding up the faint ridge of her spine, tracing the thin rounds of her vertebrae. Her hair was warm and soft under his fingers and it shrouded his face, spilling over his neck, his chest, everywhere.

She pressed flush to his chest and sighed again, breathy with a light, vapid sort of pleasure, and he gave another tug at her, senselessly. She gave a pleased chirp, and her knees tightened on either side of his hips, and then there was an electric bolt of something moving through his body and he broke off kissing her to gasp.

The aftershock of the feeling left him wired and filled with an aching, restless sensitivity. He shifted his hips back into the mattress, which did precisely shit, because Hermione apparently wasn't inclined to offer a morsel of fucking help; she made another contented little sound and leaned down to kiss him again, drinking the gasp from his lips, and he canted into mouth before he had thought about it. This

was the wrong move. She took the inch and stole planets; with her arms draped over her shoulders, she pressed flush into him, driving him down, so soft, and so very warm, and her hot mouth driving out any consideration of why he shouldn't be running his hand up the hem of her skirt.

She went still. A half-inch of distance appeared between their mouths, and she opened her eyes. Hesitation stilled his fingers at the top of her thigh.

"Right," she said, nonsensically, and licked her lips. He could have whined at the unfairness. "Okay. I didn't mean to do that."

He had no idea what to say to that.

He offered: "Which part?"

She laughed a bright, shy little laugh. Then she eased herself upright. Her weight rolled back, and down.

"Fuck," he said.

"I meant the conversation. I didn't mean to have an argument and then snog about it. Although it is, admittedly a lot better than just having an argument," she admitted, with characteristic brilliance and wisdom, "and for preference, really, very strongly in favor of this approach — but it does have costs, vis-a-vis our conclusions—"

"Fuck. Fuck, stop—"

She was still reciting analysis at an anxious speed. "—specifically, that it's rather easy to get carried away. Again, not to complain. Very good and all that. But I don't, I mean I didn't intend to — I mean that I wasn't thinking—"

He seized her hips.

"Granger. Stop moving."

She went still. She looked down, looked at his face, and a blush rose steadily to her cheeks.

“Oh,” she said, in a faraway voice. “You.”

“Right,” he said, nonsensically, to this nonsensical statement. “So.”

“I should — sorry. Sorry. I don’t mean to — make you uncomfortable.”

“I wouldn’t say uncomfortable, precisely,” he said, with diligent focus on the ceiling.

She made a noise somewhere between a trill and a gasp. That absolutely wasn’t helping, and he would have shot her a dirty look for it, if he’d been capable of looking at her.

She still wasn’t moving.

“What… is it like?”

He let out a very loud bark of hysterical laughter.

“You were sent here to kill me, I think,” he said to the ceiling. “Incredible work. My compliments to my enemies, they’ve outdone themselves completely.”

“You’re rather dramatic,” she said, with a blasé and eyewatering hypocrisy. “It’s an honest question. Of pedagogy.”

“What’s it like for you, then?” he shot back. “Of pedagogy.”

She blinked. The mental image *that* conjured did nothing at all to help him. It in fact made his life several times better and worse, in a complex way, along multiple dimensions.

“Point taken,” she said. The red in her cheeks had suffused down her throat, making a glowing line into the V of her blouse.

She could rule any country she wanted, probably, if everyone could see her like this. He would, unfortunately, have to kill them all, but the reign would be brief and glorious.

“I’m going to move,” she said, “and — sit next to you. Instead. To help with — everything.”

“You might consider leaving the country,” he said. She twitched, and spoke thickly.

“You can’t flirt, either. That’s not fair.”

“That wasn’t even flirting, I was just *saying* something—”

“Saying things. In that voice. Counts.”

He squinted at her. “It’s my voice.”

“It’s a voice of yours,” she agreed.

He lifted his head, intrigued. “Do you like my voice?”

“In fact, I don’t. No. I find it incredibly distracting.”

“You *do.”*

“You said something about going to another country,” she said haggardly, clambering off of him. Draco was having such a good time he almost didn’t mind.

“You like it,” he preened. “You find it ‘incredibly distracting.’ Do I often seduce you by accident?”

“This was a mistake,” she said, resigned. “I see that now. I have made, it occurs to me, many mistakes—”

“We’re well past that, dear. Let’s return to the part where you’re seduced.”

“No,” she said primly. “The moment’s passed. I’ve decided to live a life of chastity and contemplation.”

Typical Granger, taking vows to avoid snogging him. He laid back down, dispirited.

She made the world normal. That was partly the reason, he decided, that the details stuck: they were his accounting of the indispensable facts of the universe, the things which were silly and human and true, and which could be relied upon to re-orient him, come the worst. They were a collection of keys cut to evoke a particular kind of happiness. They were his to have, and his only, as long as he lived.

For a moment they laid there, parallel lines on red quilting, no sound but the restless shuffling of the boys’ familiars in their cages. Then Hermione reached between them and found his hand, pried it open somewhat sharply, laced their fingers and placed them together on her knee. She held it loosely, with a dignified sort of presumed authority, but her palms were clammy, and an itch in his fingers made them fidget. One would be forgiven for finding something embarrassing in it. The helpless fatalism of desire. The cruel tyranny of the body, wanting.

Abruptly she said, “You can come home with me,” and then: “When I go, I mean. You can meet my family. We don’t have a spare room, and they absolutely won’t let you share with me, so you’ll have to sleep on the couch. But if you’re alright with that, and driving in a car, and dressing normal and going to Tesco and so forth, you can come and stay.”

She said the words like a rehearsal. They were slowly chosen and carefully pronounced. She said them like a declaration of contract, read drolly and firmly and finally into the record of a court for signature and seal.

It was all really quite romantic.

He tugged on her hand. The scars on it had healed to a stiff, shiny ripple of taut skin. Her pen had left calluses on her third finger and thumb. On impulse, he sat up to kiss her, and she kissed him so fast it rocked his head back. It was instinct, not reason, that made him grip the back of her neck in his hand, run his thumb along her curls. Probably it was instinct that made her grab a handful of his own, although that might have been Hermione, too, with full knowledge and intent, digging in her fingernails so hard it'd leave cuts.

He hoped she would. He hoped the feeling would cut deep and stay there, so he'd remember what it felt like, laying here with her, in the sunlight and the silence. The taut line of something yet to be discovered between them, the moment before something happened — the moment where it was sure to happen, but not yet. One thing left, at least, to run towards in earnest. Past and future strung out like a line, and between them the tightrope walkers, dancing, dancing.

The train would leave soon. There was still a little time.

There was time for quidditch skirmishes in an empty pitch, Katie and Ginny and Harry and Angelina, weaving red ribbons across the iridescent sky; for Fred and George's product showcases, fireworks from the Astronomy Tower, Filch's mournful shrieks, and little vaudeville shows with Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder and Screaming Yo-Yos; for betting games of poker and Snap with the Weasleys, who all cheated so diabolically and brilliantly that the odds were practically fair; there was time to bicker over who used up the hot water and left their socks on the floor. There was time for the Room of Requirement, and sparring bouts against Ron, or Harry, or Ron and Harry, or Ron and Harry and Ginny, or Harry and Ron against Draco and Ginny, or Draco against Ginny and Dean and Seamus and Katie, and permutations; for midnight trips to the kitchens, to let Dobby foist off as many bottles of Ogden's as he could get away from his supervisor, while flaunting Hermione's present of a mateless (she had been busy) hand-knit sock; for them to return, thereafter, to an approving common room full of boys

without ties and girls in uniform code violations, and for Seamus to throttle the volume on *Music for the Masses* until it rattled the casements.

McGonagall had taken a few days to scour Umbridge's office, and discovered there the Ministry exam results for sitting fifth and seventh years. Customarily posted by class rank in the Entrance Hall, to vomit-inducing effect, she instead announced that they would be delivered discreetly, by house-elf, to each recipient's dorm by the next day. "In order," she concluded, "to ameliorate the emotional effects of the scores, which come — it is acknowledged — on the heels of a considerable ordeal."

"Bless her," said Ron, as they went up. "I didn't even take half of them. If I fail, Mum can't say shite, because I did it to fight the fascists."

"What about those of us who expect an 'O'?"

"That's fine, Mione, you just lack my vigor for the cause."

The blow was swift, and left him cackling.

In the common room, the rustle of parchment concealed a buoy of half-glad whispers. It was of no consequence, really, who did well on exams. None of the fifth years would be barred from coming back, and in any case, for the seventh years, it hardly mattered. Fred and George ripped theirs apart without opening them, and gave the pieces to first years to practice fire-setting jinxes.

Some cared, despite the stakes, of course. He had noticed Ernie Macmillan body-check Cedric into a wall in his haste to get back to Hufflepuff. Hermione had picked hers up, tentatively, and held it like a breakable bit of glass.

Draco found an alcove and broke the seal with his wand, bisecting a purple 'M' in wax. At the top of the sheet was printed DRACO MALFOY.

ARITHMANCY (O) - 100/100

ASTRONOMY (O) - 100/100

CHARMS (O) - 100/100

DEFENSE AGAINST THE DARK ARTS (O) - 101/100

HERBOLOGY (O) - 94/100

HISTORY OF MAGIC (O) - 100/100

MUGGLE STUDIES (E) - 82/100

POTIONS (O) - 102/100

TRANSFIGURATION (O) - 100/100

RUNES (O) - 100/100

Wordlessly, he held his parchment to Hermione, who snatched it and shoved him hers. He'd beaten her by one point in Potions and two in Defense, lost out to her in Herbology, Muggle Studies — no shame in that — and Runes, where, inexplicably, she'd picked up a bonus point. Probably she'd gone off on a screed about the Romans and bewitched the examiners with her trademark brilliance and possession of irrelevant facts.

Hermione was trying to dislocate his arm.

"Two bonus points! In Potions!" she exclaimed. "I could kill you! I only got one!"

"That 'E' in Herbology is a joke. I only slipped up once in the practical, and that was because I didn't pot the mandrake in one go — would've hocked the bloody thing like a quaffle if I knew I was being graded on speed—"

“One hundred and two! They don’t *give* extra points on Potions exams! Most people don’t even finish them!”

“It’s mere recitation,” he said, unwillingly pleased. “The formulas don’t change. Half the answer’s embedded in the question. They don’t ask for a show of genius.”

Hermione waved this off haphazardly, flitting over to check Harry’s and Ron’s. Triumph eddied swiftly from distraction. Neville had flipped his sheet open and had sat down hard in an armchair, his face pale and shiny.

“Longbottom.”

He could not quite strike the tone of indifference he wanted. In truth, he did not know. Neville seemed to him adequate to pass; but the markers in Potions were notoriously demanding, and Neville’s worst enemy was the feeling of being watched.

Neville jumped and twitched the parchment to his chest, which induced a sinking feeling. “Draco,” he said. “Hi. Er.”

ASTRONOMY (A) - 71/100

CARE OF MAGICAL CREATURES (O) - 96/100

CHARMS (E) - 83/100

DEFENSE AGAINST THE DARK ARTS (O) - 90/100

HERBOLOGY (O) - 100/100

HISTORY OF MAGIC (E) - 85/100

POTIONS (E) - 89/100

TRANSFIGURATION (A) - 67/100

“Remarkable,” said Draco, quietly.

Neville choked on air. “I — well, really, it’s not an ‘O,’ or anything—”

He thrust the parchment back at Neville’s chest. A constrictive feeling wrapped around his ribs. “I was referring to myself. All you did was pass an O.W.L. *I’m* the finest Potions instructor born on English soil. Anyway, you were only off by a point.”

“I don’t know how,” Neville said, as if he really expected better of the Potions examiners. “I didn’t add the powdered starkbulb in time for the Cure for Boils to reach full coloration, and I had to k-kill the heat before it reached full simmer—”

“You passed. Who cares?”

Neville gaped. “Well — sorry, but— *you* do,” he said tartly. “And Snape requires an ‘O’ for the N.E.W.T. class, so, him.”

“Snape isn’t coming back next year,” he said, ignoring a twinge in his chest, and Neville’s face carefully flattened to polite concern. “I don’t know who’ll replace him, but the standard benchmark for advancement is ‘E." You should speak to McGonagall about it.”

“I’m sure she has other things on her mind, and anyway, I-I-I’m — I’m sorry he’s not coming back.”

This was unlikely. Few students had more reason to celebrate his disappearance than Neville, who would have gladly traded his Potions class for an hour on the rack.

“You don’t have to say so.”

“I am, though,” he replied. “He’s your godfather. You liked him. And he liked you, I think. In his way.”

Draco snorted. *In his way.* Whatever that meant, for someone whose personality consisted in liking just about nothing at all.

Ginny trotted over, flushed from celebrating Ron and Harry's 'O's in D.A.D.A., and peered over Neville's shoulder. Her eyes became lunar in size.

"Holy shit, Nev. You passed Potions."

"Don't say it s-s-so loudly," said Neville nervously, but Ron had overheard, and his head snapped up.

"He passed it?"

"You're joking!" said Harry, sitting up straight.

"Good job, Neville," exclaimed Hermione, "that's really lovely. After you worked so hard."

"After *he* worked so hard," said Draco. "Of his own initiative, I suppose—"

"I should think you're proud enough of yourself for both of us!"

"I'm sure they c-curved it," Neville said, raising his voice.

"They don't," said Ron. "Someone would have assassinated Hermione ages ago."

"Honestly," said Hermione mildly, tucking her results into a secure pocket. "I'd like to say not, but I think Ernie might."

The mood of the room had lightened into a taut, tentative sort of relief.

Ginny latched her arm around Neville's shoulder. "Do you know what I want?" she said.

"What?" said Harry.

"Another crack at Auror Robard," said George.

“Seven minutes alone with Michael Corner,” said Fred.

“Visible biceps,” said Ron.

Warmly, Ginny fired her middle fingers in a slow battery around the room. “Fuck you all! When I’m ripped, you’ll still be single. Harry, ask me what I want.”

“I thought those were good guesses,” he said innocently, and she swiveled one middle finger with ease from Ron to Harry.

Draco would be loath to disclose it, but even among Weasleys, one had favorites.

Ginny wanted a party.

It was one of those bejeweled June afternoons where sunlight dripped like liquid gold over the green labyrinth of the forest, which enclosed like an emerald-studded circlet the clean, flat mirror of the lake. Flowers foamed promiscuously from the ferns and the grasses and the rushes on the lakeside, heather and Scotch thistle, iris and crocus, butterfly orchids like knotted stripes of white silk, butter-yellow buttons of celandine and primrose, tyrian foxgloves like royal spears. An orchestra of swallows decorated the afternoon with their piping. The tawny pelt of the hills shone and rippled under the twin waves of sun and wind.

Fred and George smuggled teapots full of Pimm’s from the kitchens, and splashed it in porcelain teacups between plates of lemon tarts and fruit galettes. Luna and Neville went blackberry-picking in the forest and came back, grinning and thorn-scratched, with four whole bucketsful; Hermione charmed the ice cream to stay cool. At the end, the kitchen envoys unveiled from beneath a large silver cloche a two-tier chiffon cake with strawberries and turrets of buttercream frosting, which said ‘HAPPY BIRTHDAY’ in crooked red piping. It was walked in a grand redheaded procession three times around the willow tree where they picnicked, and ultimately delivered with much pomp and circumstance, to Draco, whereon he was shouted at until

he consented to put out the candles — a compromise he secured by flicking his wand at them and casting a Wind Spell.

It was a sign of the times that it startled Draco to see it. He had almost forgotten: it was June. He was sixteen.

Harry gave him a pack of sweets from Honeydukes, and Ron hocked him a puck of broomstick polish, to “keep you from griping about me using yours up, pissant.” Daphne presented him with a silk handkerchief whose embroidery was only slightly wobbly, and crowded him impatiently until he complimented it. Neville admitted, under some duress, to making the cake.

“Thank you,” said Draco, and George made a show of pretending to faint. Draco ignored him. It failed to spoil the moment, which was otherwise quite adequate, being fully concentrated on celebrating him.

When the Weasleys began singing, however, Hermione had to stop him from absconding up the tree.

It was a good day. The sun was full in the leaves. There were children on the shoreline. In the distance, there were Order members with their hands on their wands, watching the horizon, which was good, because it meant he didn’t have to do it. Seamus and Lee huddled together in the effort of reconciling an unavoidably muggle CD player with immutably magical amplifiers. He looked around at their faces, under the dappled shade of the willow — Ron tussling with Ginny over seconds; Neville laughing at something Luna was reading from his palms; Lavender braiding Daphne’s hair; Harry, spread on the blanket with his hands laced behind his head, his eyes closed, the sunlight washing out the faded white forks of his scar.

The scene should have left him content. It sent nausea rearing up his throat. War — the likelihood of death, the certainty of suffering. The number of them. Statistically poor odds. Impossible that anything should ever happen to them, these people, who had done nothing wrong really, who had been kind and he had not been — not

always — and they were here, even so, all the same; impossible also that he could stop anything from happening to them. There was time left — yes, time — but not much.

When he was younger, it had been so easy to write off everything and everyone that did not belong to him. He tried to imagine the way that had felt, that shell of ice, and failed.

“Alright, Draco?” Harry slitted one eye open.

“It’s nothing.” The dissonance passed. The present stubbornly edged out the future: heat, grass, dew, breeze. “It was good of you to remember.”

Harry’s lip twitched. “You don’t have to say thank you for that,” he quipped. “Have some self-respect.”

It twigged Draco’s memory, and he narrowed his eyes at him.

“You *are* an ass, you know.”

“I don’t know why more people don’t notice,” said Harry, snuggling deeper into the blanket. “Look at who I hang out with.”

Seamus’s yelp of success prefigured a splutter of the Ramones through a gutter of washed-out static. No sooner had the pair of them rushed to get their share of cake than Bill wandered over from the Order patrol and switched it out for Springsteen, which he called a diplomatic concession to Moody, to avoid a noise citation; but Draco rather suspected he just liked it more. Ginny threw off her robe and raced down the shoreline wearing only code-breaching shorts and a shirt for a band called Elastica, sleeves shorn, baring her freckled arms to the sun.

Her brothers took off in chase, a pack of tall fire-haired teenagers racing fast and gangly and golden through the afternoon sunlight, and collided in the water with splashes that glazed the water white where it rose in the sun. Behind them the darkest head made quick

work of scrambling down and jumped after them, whipping off his glasses and robe on the beach, staggering in with his trousers rolled up. Daphne stood primly on the beach, and after repeated exhortations, relented to delicately remove her socks and shoes, fold her jumper on the rocks, and tiptoe into four inches of water. Something there must have touched her foot, because she screamed and leapt like a frightened cat onto the nearest freestanding object, which happened to be Ron. She refused to relinquish her grip on his neck, despite being plied with assurances, and a compromise was reached wherein she changed position and rode around on his back, directing him judiciously and often where she wanted to go.

Draco and Hermione ambled down in their wake, picking their way leisurely over the moss-strewn pebble beaches, and sat cross-legged on a round flat stone that protruded over the water. The lake stretched out from his ankles to the distant hills, a massive plane of glass-bright water, scintillating.

Hermione fidgeted with her fingers. “I have a present for you,” she said, by and by. She unearthed from her robes a small package neatly wrapped in brown parchment-paper. “Sorry it isn’t pretty. I didn’t have time to get any tape or ribbons, and Moody wouldn’t let me go to Hogsmeade for it.”

“Some people have no sense of priorities.”

She sniffed. “It would have been fine,” she said, “but I digress. Go on, open it. It isn’t very nice, just so you know, it’s a small thing. I would have gotten you a proper present, but I couldn’t get to the shops, and anyway I can’t get my pounds exchanged at Gringotts anymore, so it had to be something I could do in the castle and there wasn’t any time and you’re horrible to shop for, truly, because there’s hardly anything you can’t buy for yourself. So it’s your fault if you don’t like it.”

“Would you like me to sign a waiver?”

“No. Fine! Just open it. Don’t be disappointed.” Her fingers laced and clutched, a nucleus of tension in her lap.

He counterspelled the Sticking Charm, and the package unfolded elegantly in his lap. Inside lay a framed photograph, of the wizarding type, colored and strained through the bleary soft grain of film. The photographer — Colin, it must have been — had shot them candidly in the Room of Requirement. Harry and Ron were standing on the dais, talking to Ginny; Ron had his arm slung around Harry’s shoulder, casually, and they were laughing. Fred and George lounged on the steps, as was Neville. Hermione sat on the steps, slightly apart from the rest; she was the only one who had noticed Colin, because she was glancing at the camera, and every so often the image of her would give a halting, nervous smile, or tuck her hair behind her ear.

It was a moment Draco did not remember, but must have participated in, because he was in it, too: almost hidden by the pillar at Hermione’s elbow, the image of him leaned on one hip, his wand twirling through his fingers, giving the camera an occasional nonplussed glance. It was strange to see his own face in motion. The boy in the picture was a tall, cold, impassive creature, a thing apart from the rest. A lurking presence in the corner. A shadow on the wall.

Hermione had filed a caption neatly on the bottom, in her own hand: POTTER’S ARMY. 03.17.1996.

“He didn’t want us to call it that,” he said, eventually.

“Harry wants to make a lot of decisions that aren’t up to him,” she said. “He’ll cope.”

Her voice revealed little. He thought of Cho Chang, and of Hermione’s conciliatory politeness around Harry, and a bitter, tangled history of things that they had all said to each other. The ties that bound were not always clean.

“This is very good,” he said, and her shoulders drooped in relief. “Thank you. How did you get it?”

“I helped Colin rig a darkroom in the spare Potions classroom. He’s actually rather good at chemistry. I told him he should try to O.W.L. in Potions next year.”

He snorted, tucking the photograph safely aside with his robes. “Dumbledore’s declared against the Ministry. There aren’t going to be O.W.L.s next year.”

She pursed her lips and looked down at her hands, which plucked at a loose thread on her skirt. “For class, then. McGonagall said they’re still going to operate as a school.”

“With what staff? Snape’s gone, Umbridge is gone, I’ll be shocked if Dumbledore even has the time—”

“Moody’s coming on again, as Defense professor,” she said, which was a pleasant surprise. “They’ll find someone for Potions. Snape wasn’t the only qualified wizard in the country.”

“I reserve my judgment.”

She huffed in amusement. “Have you heard from him?” she said, with a furtive glance. “Or your mother?”

He shook his head.

“Oh. Draco—”

“They’re fine. Owls are likely being watched. My mother will see me tomorrow, anyway.”

His stomach did an unpleasant thing at the prospect. It warred with his heart, which wanted to see her enough to walk to London, if he had to. The experience was strange, and impossible to recommend.

“I don’t suppose you could send a message,” she said reflectively. “To Snape, I mean. If he’s undercover.”

“I don’t know any Death Eaters.”

She hummed. “You know their children. And Theodore owes you.”

“I've done him no favors on purpose.”

“No, but Cassius Warrington is probably alive,” she said matter-of-factly, picking a reed from her skirt. “The memory cascade doesn’t kill you. It destroys organized long-term recall. I don’t know how Theodore plans to deal with that, but short of killing him, it’ll have to be drastic, and probably noticeable. It might even have been related to whatever he was doing in Myrtle’s bathroom,” she added, with a sharp twinge of interest. “I wonder if he was asking her about the effects of a Memory Charm. If her memory had been modified, it would explain why she can’t remember how she died.”

“It would take diabolically complicated magic to perform a Memory Charm on a ghost. I’m not even certain it’s possible. They don’t have ‘minds,’ as such.”

“I know,” she said, in frustration, “I know. It’s not a good theory. But I don’t have anything else.”

“Nor do I,” he said freely, “but I can think of better things to lose sleep over.”

She frowned and shook her head. Then she leaned over and kissed him on the mouth — catching him by surprise, too quick for the red-iron awareness of being in public to forge any resistance — and pressed there with a forceful sweetness, as if she were making a point about it, her ability to do it, her authority.

“Happy birthday, Draco,” she said. Once he had recovered from the freeze of it, he laughed slightly.

“You should’ve done that last year,” he said, mostly against her mouth. “Spared us both some trouble.”

“As if you would’ve let me,” she laughed. “You think holding hands in public is for libertines.”

“And it took you two months to kiss me without running away. If we’re debating who was more of an impediment—”

“At least I *did* kiss you. If it were up to you, we’d be prevaricating on hand-holding.”

“I deserve more credit than that. By some interpretations of the rules, I’ve already stolen your honor, and your father is allowed to duel me on sight. He’ll have to give you a fearsome dowry to make up for what I’m doing.”

Hermione laughed again, brightly, loudly, almost ungainly, like a bird battering the air with its wings before flight. She patted his shoulder and confiscated it as a cushion, as was her right. “Sometimes I can’t believe you say things like that,” she said, “and then I remember in a year you’re going to be a lord. What a silly world.”

He had not forgotten it, precisely, but the reminder slapped him like cold air after a long time underwater. On his seventeenth birthday, he would be Lord Malfoy, in the formal sense. The entail would descend on his shoulders. He would have command of the Malfoy estates. It was, ostensibly, the position for which he had been born. It was the reason he existed, in a not-insubstantial way.

His fingers found his ring, rolling it around the groove over his knuckle. A black garnet, the emblem of a double-headed snake. The band was stone; the Malfoys weren’t as showy as the Blacks, whose goblin-silver ring nearly swallowed his mother’s hand. He could always have it reset, he supposed, but he had grown rather accustomed to its weight.

Out in the waters, Ginny used her wand to slap a wave over Harry's head, then led him on a merry chase through the shallows that left both of them soaking. Amends were made, somehow, in a game that involved her sitting on Harry's shoulders, and wrestling with Luna on Fred's. Ginny's natural athleticism and hard elbows prevailed: Luna went sailing with a scream of laughter. Then George plucked Ginny off Harry's shoulders and hurled her into the lake like a discus, kicking off a turbulent Weasley civil war.

In the aftermath, Harry came paddling up to the rock where Draco and Hermione sat, and they each took one of his arms to help haul him up. He flopped on the stone, breathing heavily, his face cracked open in a rare giddy grin.

"I could fall asleep here," he said. One arm drifted up vaguely, his finger sketching an invisible shape against the sky. "Just like this."

"It'll be like this all the time, when the castle's empty," said Hermione. "You'll have it to yourself."

"Yeah, but you won't be there."

She hesitated, glancing at Draco. "No," she said, "but we'll be back before you really miss us."

"No, you won't," he said, staring up and not at her. "No one ever is."

Ron slipped like a dart through the water and emerged beside them, slicking back the burnt-umber strands of hair from his eyes. He lifted himself effortlessly onto the rock and dropped down beside them, splattering droplets.

"I won," he said triumphantly, "if anyone cares. Harry, thanks for totally bitching out, mate, left me one on three against Fred and the girls."

Harry laughed, closing his eyes.

The sun burned in its cradle of the western hills. A smoky purple rose on the trees, the first hint to the eye that the afternoon could end, though the rest of the sky remained an immortal blue. The slap and chatter of water on the lake quashed the song of birds and the rustle of wind that moved, like stirring cymbals, through the old trees. The castle above them had grown a trail that fell long behind it over the forest, a cloak of rippling black, shadow proliferating upon shadow.

“I’ll miss this,” said Harry. He did not say what he meant.

“It's a touch cold,” said Draco.

“It's a touch cold,” imitated Ron. “I'll give you my jacket, you nancy.”

“You really oughtn’t swim in still water too often,” said Hermione, professorial, and Harry sighed.

Hermione rested against Draco's arm, and the other two lay glittering as they dried from the lake, their blood high and clothes translucent in the searing eye of the aging sun. Shadows dug deep rivets on the earth, beneath the trees, beneath his own hands. Seconds of his life rolled out in a rout march under the murmur of wind and water. There were children dancing in the lake before them, their bodies young and strong and shining.

-That’s it! That’s the end of Lionheart! Thanks for reading, please like and rev— [sharpshooter nails me through the head]

-Just kidding. Wouldn't that be horrendous?

-In OOTP, Dumbledore really is that tuxedo mask "my work here is done" meme. I get that he's ignoring Harry for Plot Reasons, or possibly Character Reasons depending on your read, but it really is funny that he takes off in the middle of the book and then comes back at the end to have like a 30-second zoolander staredown with Riddle at the tail end of a huge battle that he's shown up late to. this is not criticism. I love this extra old man.

-Another 15k chapter, because I have no self-control, and also because the last few chapters were A Lot to deal with and it's time for some excess in a warmer direction.

-Everyone who commented or sent mail to my inbox on tumblr, you are a miracle, and this chapter is dedicated to you. Seriously. If you're a repeat commenter in particular, I recognize your handle, and I am always so specifically and genuinely glad to see you. I appreciate it. Bonus extra shoutouts to cervidame and bluebellandpie, who are writing beautiful fics that make me tear up and want to lie down in anguish (affectionate).

-The next chapter will be up on a vaguely fortnight-y basis, and it'll be called “Heroes.”

Heroes

Chapter 79: Heroes

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

By nine o'clock on the day of the train, Gryffindor boomed with the traffic of students packing far too late: hollering for socks, bellowing about lost Sneakoscopes, first years pleading for Cramming Charms from fifth years far too busy squirreling away their contraband to notice. Draco lifted a pack of cigarettes from Seamus, some suspicious-looking turquoise plant from Katie, and delivered both in an anonymized box with the rest of Fred and George’s liquor to McGonagall, who greeted them with a surprising lack of astringence.

Her office was a round stone room walled in glass bookcases, carpeted with a thick layer of Turkish brocade, with leather armchairs of rich red leather so old there were sun-bleached stripes in the same pattern as the windowpanes. It smelled of old things, must and books and dust and sweetness, and the earthy tang of tea from the pot on her desk. McGonagall was packing a set of fifth-year Defense textbooks into a box. Its kin lay in stacks along one wall.

“What’s going to happen to her? Umbridge.”

McGonagall’s glasses glinted as she turned her head. “She will await justice until such a time as Professor Dumbledore feels prepared to give it to her.”

“How long will that be?”

“Until Albus feels like it. So it will behoove Dolores to delve deep in her stores of patience. In the meantime, she will not suffer for want of food and water; of course, she may not find the decor of the dungeons to her liking, but lacking a wand, I suspect there is little she can do about it.”

To hear the castle dungeons being used as actual dungeons reminded him that the castle was, in fact, a castle: a fortification. Built for warfare.

“What if someone comes looking for her?” he said, though the idea of her rotting in a cell under the earth did not fail to suit.

“For Dolores Umbridge?” Her mouth twisted. “For all the allies she purported — for her Ministry contacts, her important connections, the friends she so liked to tout — I doubt anyone will notice she is gone. You may leave that here.”

He placed the box of contraband on her desk. McGonagall surveyed it with a strange, unguarded expression.

“This belongs to the Weasleys,” she said.

“Not all of them. I’m sure Ginevra has her own supply.”

She nodded. After a moment, she pushed the box away and balanced her fingertips on the desk.

“The twins have submitted to join the Order of the Phoenix,” she said. “Moody intends to accept them. Their parents have not been able to dissuade them from joining.”

“It would be somewhat hypocritical if they did.”

“I understand that.” When she dipped her head, her horn-rimmed glasses sat low on her nose. The wrinkles around her eyes seemed to sink deeper into her face, and he perceived for a moment that behind the screen of raw indomitable authority, McGonagall was not a large woman. He was taller than she was, and twice as broad.

It was a terrible thing, to see great creatures made small. It ought never happen. It filled him with a volatile, unsettled sort of grief.

She still had not spoken. He said, “Professor?”

“Four years ago,” she said, “Fred and George Weasley celebrated their thirteenth birthday by turning the third-floor corridor into a swamp.” She added, with a thin, alarming note of approval: “It was a remarkable piece of Transfiguration.”

He waited for elaboration. She did not seem to expect him to reply.

A watery echo from third year: *It’s tall for you. Choke up.*

“Potter still uses your broomstick,” he said. “The Nimbus. It’s the sole possession he hasn’t damaged.”

She sniffed and pushed her glasses up her nose with a delicate adjustment of thumb and fourth finger. “It’s an excellent model,” she said. “His father preferred a Comet. His seeker, Marlene McKinnon, preferred the Nimbus Six. Florian and Gideon Prewett had mint-condition Starsweep Tens.”

McGonagall lifted her head. Her expression cleared. “Have a good summer, Mr. Malfoy,” she said.

Clouds feathered a sky of perfect blue. The highlands shone red and purple and green, slit through with the silver ribbon of a river. Those going on the train would depart in the afternoon, but the goodbyes started early, as some students were leaving by portkey in Hogsmeade and going directly to their family homes. Most were purebloods; many, but not all, were from Slytherin. It was lost on few that not everyone would be coming back, and not everyone knew who they were, so every goodbye took on an apocalyptic aspect.

Neville set off in the next wave, a knapsack tucked over his right shoulder, Trevor perched on his left. “I’ll be back in August,” he assured Harry, “don’t worry, won’t hardly seem like a minute. Gran is c-coming to join the Order. Says she’s taking her scalping knife out of the attic.”

Harry winced.

“No, she’s glad,” hurried Neville. “I mean, not *glad,* but — she’s really good with it. She was so p-pleased I passed Potions she offered to give it to me, but I couldn’t take it, really.”

“We’ll get you your own,” Ron agreed, slapping him on the back. “Safe travels, Nev.”

“Thanks. See you, Harry — see you, Draco! I’ll be practicing!”

“You’d better,” Draco called. “If you fail next year, I’m telling Frobisher to use that toad for target practice.”

“Ha, ha! Nice one, Draco. Okay! Bye!”

He waved furiously, walking backwards down the trail. The wind ruffled his hair, and his rucked-up sleeves showed a bevy of stains, but his crooked teeth winked cheerfully from his freckled face. Then he spun on his heel, and striding at a brisk clip, he caught up to the other students trailing down to Hogsmeade.

“It’s no fun to threaten him anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” said Daphne consolingly. “There’ll be plenty of nice people to threaten next year.”

“Yes, but it won’t be the same as it was, with Longbottom.”

Luna came not long after, wearing a yellow blouson, ornamented with moths that flapped their wings when she twirled. She carried a trunk larger than she was, and stood on tiptoe to kiss Hermione on the cheek, at which Hermione made an expression like one getting one’s face licked by a small dog.

“Thank you for teaching me the Patronus,” she said, clasping Harry’s hand. “Daddy heard what happened, and he’s ever so pleased. Let me know if you ever want an interview in the *Quibbler.”*

“I’m pretty much done with print media, I think, Luna.”

“You’re very right to be! Daddy’s been trying to invent publication by astral projection for years. Now there’s going to be a war, he thinks it’s really important for us to communicate without leaving traces.”

Harry cracked a smile. “Let me know when he figures it out.”

“I won’t have to! That’s the point, Harry.”

“Oh, God, right. Sorry, my mistake.”

Luna kissed his cheek, too, and Ron’s, though it made her stretch on her tiptoes. To Draco, she dipped a curtsy. Then she sailed down the path like a kite, with the gliding gait of one intending to fly home.

The Slytherins came up last, when the crowds had thinned. Pansy and Astoria came last, long after Blaise had sauntered down the path with Tracey Davis, and Millicent Bulstrode had sneered past on the arm of Vince Crabbe.

Pansy carried a leatherbound case. She wore fitted cigarette trousers and a black lambskin jacket whose shine and texture suggested eyewatering expense. Her finger sparkled from her engagement ring.

Astoria wore an argyle skirt, and her pale hair was plaited, and she set her jaw like she had stopped in at the abattoir on her way from finishing school. They were holding hands like they were the first two children to think up friendship. Harry and Ron shifted to let them pass into the entrance courtyard.

“Hello, Pans,” said Daphne, very quietly. “Hi, Tori.”

“You’re still going to marry him, then,” said Hermione.

Pansy’s reply lagged a beat while she looked at Daphne, but gamely, she flipped her hair and smiled like a double-shot of Dreamless. “At speed, too. What can I say? I liked the way ‘war bride’ rolled off the tongue. Why wait, after all, when you’re deliriously in love?”

“You’re fifteen,” said Hermione incredulously. “He’s barely nineteen, for that matter, but you—”

“Yes. I’m fifteen. And in *Britain,* where I have to assume you live, the age of marriage is sixteen. Which I will be in November. Hence.”

“Will Theodore be attending your festivities?” interrupted Draco, partly of curiosity as to the boy's whereabouts, and partly to stop Pansy from hammering on Hermione's visibly fraying patience.

“One hopes. He’s the best man.”

“Oh, Pansy,” said Daphne. “I’m so sorry.”

Pansy twitched. After a moment, she said: “It’s nothing, really. Would have happened anyway. Don’t pity me.”

“I don’t. I don’t pity you, darling, I *worry* for you, but—”

“Worry is pity with a hat on!”

“It’s not! It’s *sad* with a hat on, Pansy, I don’t like what you’re doing to yourself, I don’t like what Theo’s making you do—”

“Theo doesn’t make me do anything,” Pansy snapped, dropping Astoria’s hand. “Please. You used to know me better than that.”

That was a hit below the belt, scored and salted. Daphne flinched like she felt it, too, and lifted her hands to ward it off. The crowd through the doors had bottlenecked, the burble in the courtyard quelling under the hot sun.

Astoria intercepted, calmly, by laying her hand on Pansy’s arm.

“The new transfusions are working,” she said. She gripped the side of her chair, white-knuckled, and in her face was the razor intensity of someone flying a broomstick, or playing a game of chess with half the pieces. It was the zealous focus of someone making a wild play on a thin margin, going all-in on a hand of junk. “I don’t sleep as

much as I used to. I'm stronger. It turns out — now the doctors have it handled — I don't need you."

"Good for you," said Daphne, clipped. "I hope they feed you more."

"I'm eating plenty."

"You're a paperclip."

"Mum says I haven't come into my figure."

"Well, I had more figure than that, at twelve."

Astoria pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. "Oh, my God," she said, angry and wondrous. "You're such a — sorry, Pans. You're such a bitch, Daph."

"At least I'm a natural. *You* became a bitch because Millicent Bulstrode told you to, which is frankly just embarrassing," Daphne said coldly.

"Millie was *nice* to me!"

"Nice! She called me a half-breed, but all water under the bridgetroll; she's nice to Tori, which is really the final measure of anyone's soul."

"I told her to stop," Astoria said doggedly. A lacrimal glistening had painted her eyes. "I did. Why don't you believe me?"

"Merlin, you still can't lie without crying," Daphne scoffed. "Your tricks don't work on me, idiot, I taught you half of them."

Astoria sniffed. The glistening faded, and she straightened in her chair.

"I did tell them, though," she said plainly. "Millie said Odin Davis was going to hunt you down with the rest of your herd, and I told her if she said it again I'd do to her what she did to my sister's cat."

Daphne froze on the verge of a retort, her mouth a perfect round.

“I could have done it, too,” she said smugly. In the empty entrance courtyard, her boast skittered in echoes on the marble, stirring dust. “I’ve been practicing jinxes. I’m really good. And I’m getting clever with them. Mummy says I’m going to be the best in my year at Charms, like she was.”

“Mummy didn’t even N.E.W.T. in Charms,” said Daphne wearily. “She only says that to impress people. Darling, what do you want me to say? Threatening them won’t change their minds.”

“They aren’t the point. *I* am. I don’t need your blood anymore.”

“I know, thank you,” she snapped, “you said it already, you don’t need me for anything, you can lark off without me and never turn back — what do you want, my permission? Take it. Go flirt and drink and go to parties. Go be the only Greengrass girl that matters, Tori, it’s what you always wanted.”

“I don’t *want* to be the only Greengrass girl,” cried Astoria. She gripped the sides of her chair like the arms of a throne she had fought two wars for. “You said you loved me. Prove it. Come home.”

It was a truth behind a lie behind a truth. Exquisitely cruel; compellingly simple. He suspected there were more layers to it than that, even, things Daphne never told anyone about, and Pansy must have glimpsed some of them, because she was the first one brave enough to speak.

“Teddy found a healer,” Pansy said quietly. “Someone who says he can work with you. Orpheus wants to try it.”

“Try what?” snapped Ron. “Parenting?”

“Is the doctor reputable?” said Hermione, brow furrowed.

“Of course he’s not,” snapped Daphne. Her composure was a friendly memory. The set of her face was all panic, and the clench of her fists was a failing countermand. “There *aren’t* any. I’m sure Theo believes it, but Theo believes in grumpkins and snarks. I used to think you were equal parts victim and martyr where he was concerned, but now I think you might be merely gullible. He isn’t going to *fix* it, Pans. He threw in with Odin Davis and thought it wouldn’t matter I was infected; then he tried to estrange me, and when that didn’t work he tried to hide me—”

“Come home,” said Pansy, dreadfully. “He loves you. I love you. Come home—”

“Stop saying that!”

Her voice was high and ugly, and it made several people step back from her. No sooner did it leave her mouth than Daphne snapped it closed, cringing in self-contempt. Draco remembered that feeling clearly — of wanting to rip words out of the still-trembling air. “Don’t say it. Not when you know full well it doesn’t matter,” she said. “What did he tell you? That I would come back, and everything would be as it was, and he would protect us from the grumpkins and the snarks? Did he tell you all of us could be together again? Did he tell you he could cure me? Theodore *lies.”*

“He still talks about you,” said Astoria. “We all do. When we have your favorite pudding, or Teddy hears your favorite song. He asks me to play it for him on the piano, sometimes, when it’s raining.”

“You’re useless at piano,” Daphne said tightly, “so that’s his loss.”

“I learned,” she said. “I learned lots of things, while you were away. Like the Levitation Spell. And how to talk to mermaids. I’m very grown-up now, you see. Everybody says so.”

“Do they, now.” Daphne shot an angry look at Pansy, which made the other girl turn her face away in guilt. Astoria reached out, calmly, and touched Daphne on the cheek: the scarred side. Second blow.

“Come home,” she said, with the awkward coaxing of someone to whom nothing had ever come easily. “Now I’m a grown-up, I understand everything, and we can be friends for real.”

Observing the patent manipulation would not have helped; it would have been an insult to pretend Daphne had not noticed. It did not matter. The manipulation might have been what touched her most, in fact: that she could be the treasured object of such an arrant, vicious snare. Draco saw which way the wind had turned from the sink of Daphne’s shoulders, and the curl of her fingers over Astoria’s.

And the pureblood girls who never learn.

“It won’t be safe for you,” Hermione said flatly. “Living with them. If things get worse for you, medically—” She chose her words carefully, in light of their surroundings. “It’ll be very dangerous. Staying at Hogwarts—”

Daphne turned around. Her expression made Hermione break off, which was no small thing to do.

Pansy had begun to glow. “Daphne,” she said, “if you make me ask again, and say *no—”*

“I will. So don’t ask,” Daphne interrupted coldly. She rose to her feet. With unhappy dignity, she kissed Astoria on the forehead. “I’m not coming for you.”

“But you—”

“We’re not going to be friends again. And I don’t want anything to do with your little movement, either.”

“You won’t. I won’t let you.”

“I think it’s utterly hateful, what you and Teddy are doing,” she snapped. “You ran around all year for that awful woman. And if that was all you were doing, it’d be enough. She made little children

bleed and you didn't say a *word.* What *happened* to you? I thought you couldn't stand unfairness, Pansy, I thought you were going to break all the rules, and — never mind. It doesn't matter. I won't have anything to do with it. I want your promise—"

"I promise."

"I'm not finished. I want your promise on Teddy's life that Astoria won't have anything to do with it," she said curtly. "Nothing. You *leave her alone.* No meetings, no youth clubs, no paramours. No more *very grown up.* You stop bringing her around Millicent and Tracey and all of those girls. None of them get to see her. And I don't want to see Teddy, either," she added curtly. "If you want to see us, you come to Meadowridge, and you come alone."

"I promise," Pansy said.

"Do you understand?" Daphne stepped up to her, and imposed on her a striking height difference. "I can't stand to watch you befoul yourself," she said bitterly. "You're friends with foul, grimy people, you've let them put their grimy fingers on my sister. I can't help you. I gave up helping Teddy *long* ago. But bring any more of it near her, I swear to you, I'll tear you apart."

Pansy set her jaw and nodded. Astoria, apparently dazed by her success, seemed far less credulous of the threat; she stared up at Daphne as if a corona had grown behind her head.

Daphne, however, did not see it, as she had turned to Harry.

"Hermione's right," he said. "I don't mind if you leave, but you shouldn't let them… this is really scummy. What they're doing."

Daphne smiled sadly.

Ron cleared his throat, and her smile disappeared. She took an anxious half-step away from Astoria, her hands spasming and

flattening against her skirt. “Ronald,” she said. “You — you have a sister.”

“Yeah, I do.” His eyes flitted to Astoria, over her shoulder, and tightened. “She wouldn’t ask me to do this, though.”

Daphne gave a hard exhale and smiled again. “Lucky you,” she said. “Lucky her! You both have my undying envy and respect. Please tell her not to burn effigies of me in the common room, the smoke irritates Lavender’s pores.”

“She’s not gonna be mad at you,” Ron said. “Disappointed, maybe. No one's gonna be mad.”

“Oh, don’t be *nice* to me,” she said bitterly. “You don’t have to be nice anymore. I know everything they’ll say about me. ‘Daphne Greengrass had her vacation, and then she ran home, just like the rest of them.’ I know it all.”

Hermione, who was tapping her foot with the textbook rhythm of a held tongue, might have. But when she caught Draco’s eye in her periphery she folded her arms and shook her head in a way imperceptible to anyone else. It was less tact than tactical surrender: it was not her circus.

“Nah.” Ron slipped his hands in his pockets, shifting his not-inconsiderable weight. He was one of the biggest boys in the crowd: almost six feet of Weasley, barn-broad, dark-red fringe sideswept over his intent eyes. “Won’t.”

She twisted her fingers to the point of obvious pain. She stepped away from Astoria and Pansy, who followed her with her eyes.

“She needs me,” she said. “Nobody ever needed me, really except her. And nobody ever will.” She gave a bitter laugh. “And I d-don’t have anywhere else to go.”

There was a pause.

“Right, yeah, except for the great fancy castle where all your friends are,” said Ron. “Wouldn’t want to be too predictable, you.”

Daphne choked, once, and then swallowed her tears.

“You’re so *nice* to me,” she said. “It’s not fair. You were already tall! Why did you have to be such a *nice* boy?”

Whatever reply Ron would have made to that was erased from history by Pansy, who cleared her throat with a deafening trumpet.

“I am sorry to cut this maudlin dialogue short,” she said, “but we have a portkey to catch, and if we miss it, I have to sit through six dreadful hours on a train. If any of you have parting sniffles for me, I will accept them by post.”

The look Daphne gave her was anger cut with naked relief. The look Ron gave her was the same, without relief, and reserved in many cases for insects.

But when Pansy reached for Daphne’s hand, she gave it to her. And when she stumbled alongside Astoria’s chair, it was the only time Draco had seen Daphne move without grace.

They stared at each other, although in her case it was refracted through her watery eyes, and she was moving too quickly for it to hold for long.

Pansy wheeled them with fugitive speed down the path to Hogsmeade, and didn’t look back. Daphne did, of course, her whole shoulders twisted to the point of pain while her body was navigated assiduously along by the girls on either side of her.

When they were out of earshot Ron swore, quietly, and kicked the flagstones.

“Do you think that’s the last time we’ll see them?” said Harry, with a dull curiosity that raised Draco’s hairs. “Any of them. Not just

Daphne.”

“Daphne will come back,” said Hermione, with a strange certainty. “She wants to save her sister. Either she will, or she won’t, and I think she has just enough self-preservation not to let that stop her from saving herself.”

Draco made a noncommittal noise, though somewhat reassured; Hermione’s belief on any given subject was as good as scientific evidence.

“Do you think she can?” said Harry. “Save her.”

“I wouldn’t have said so,” she said, “but then — Daphne often surprises me.”

The bell tolled eleven. A rasping shuffle of footsteps laved over the old stones, and the whispers diminished as more and more hurried downstairs to catch their portkeys.

Hermione cradled her elbows and blew out a long breath. “I think Draco and I should head to the train,” she said. “Walk us down?”

“No, thanks,” said Harry. His tone flinted. “Cedric’s portkey’s at noon, I promised I’d wait for him. You go on ahead.”

Hermione gave him an odd look. Harry shrugged, fidgeting with his hands in his pockets. She opened her arms, cautiously, and he cracked a little; he stepped forcefully into them, and hugged her tightly, while she put her nose down and tried furiously not to look verklempt.

“You’re sure you won’t come to the station?” she said thickly.

“I’ll see you before you know it. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

Harry smiled into her shoulder, brittle, and withdrew. “Get yourself some other hobbies,” he said, not in bad humor. “Watch the telly. Go hang out in London. Take your boyfriend to the movies or something.”

Hermione colored and did a terrible job of not looking at Draco. “Harry,” she said curtly, as if her possession of a boyfriend was a national secret. “That’s really none of — I don’t know what you’re — I’m not going to respond to that.”

Draco interceded, noting the sudden interest Ron had taken in the flagstones. “Check your corners, Potter.”

“Watch each other’s backs,” said Harry, and shook Draco’s extended hand with a dignified solemnity. Then he hugged him, painfully, because it was still Harry.

“Well, I’ll go,” Ron said, somewhat pointedly. “Won’t see you tossers for three months, and a chat won’t kill me. Walk you down, c’mon.”

Steam from the engine twined over the singled roofs of Hogsmeade and lay in film over the hills, which receded flat and dim under a purpled thatch of midsummer clouds. Trolleys rattled over the stones, and shouts broke out as the departing reached down from their windows with grasping fingers to touch their friends for what might be the last time. Tonks trotted down the platform, counting heads, her magenta duster flapping behind in a batlike train.

Ron walked them to the prefects’ compartment, and stood awkwardly at the step.

“Say hi to Herb and Denise,” he said gruffly. “Draco, remember to change your gold out, the muggles use paper notes.”

The train screeched. A fresh skirt of steam unfurled from the undercarriage. Hermione flinched, and with a groan of worry, she launched into Ron’s arms.

“Don't be an idiot,” she said, muffled.

Ron lifted her off her toes, rocking back on his heels. He screwed his eyes shut so tightly it pursed his whole face. Then he opened them and settled her down, carefully, like a delicate object he was liable to damage. He shoved his hands in his pockets.

Draco extended his hand. Ron hauled him in to slap his shoulder.

“Write,” he said. “Train. Stick together. Not that you two have any trouble with that, but. In case you need reminding.”

The glance he traded with Draco was unsettled in two directions. The whistle blasted again, and Draco stepped up onto the carriage. Hermione took his offered hand and climbed in after him. Ron stepped back as steam poured in earnest from the tracks.

“Hermione?”

She stopped on the stairs. Draco stilled with one hand on the carriage door.

Ron hesitated. “I love you,” he said, like he was afraid of it. “You know that, right? You know I was for real, even when I was a prick about it. It wasn’t a competition thing, or a shiny-toy thing, or a last-resort thing. It was you. For the right reasons, and not because of anyone else.”

Draco turned sharply, but Hermione touched his arm.

“I know,” she said bravely. “Thank you for saying that. I — I do love —”

“Don’t say it,” he said with a wince. “Sorry. Just don’t… say it, for a while, okay? Not until I mean it the way you mean it.”

Her lips pressed together. “Okay,” she said in a small voice. “I won’t. But I hope you get everything you want. And I really think you will, you know. You’re terribly easy to love.”

Ron’s mouth crooked. “Always, you two, with the dramatics,” he said. “You’re pretty great, Hermione, but I’m not gonna kill myself because you rejected me.”

“Sporting of you,” said Draco. “You would deprive Gryffindor of its keeper, and I would never forgive you.”

Ron laughed. “I'll call you up,” he said finally. “You owe me a tour of your castle, prat. I haven’t forgotten.”

“Do, and bring others. It’s the only house in Britain large enough to comfortably host your family.”

“It’ll have to be, if it fits your ego.”

The final whistle piped over a near-empty platform. The steam had grown thick as fog. Hermione drew back from the carriage steps, but Draco found himself jumping back down to the last step, to hang from the rail, as the wheels ground to life.

“You’re the better pureblood,” he shouted back at him. “There’s your second-to-none, Weasley. If merit was pedigree, you’d outrank me.”

He was glad that he said it, even on impulse. First Ron nodded uncertainly, and then his lips twisted into a wide and incredulous grin, as if he had been given some hilarious secret that he couldn’t believe Draco would willingly part with. His red tie hung flapping in the breeze under his unbuttoned collar, and his shirttail hung out of his trousers, a too-short pair of Charlie’s that Molly re-hemmed, and he thought of Ron on the train to Hogwarts, five years before, fierce, game, and fearless, full of a terrible bitter pride, a lord’s descendant wearing tattered hand-me-down trousers. Son of Molly Weasley, grandson of Cedrella Black. Great-great grandson of Phineas Nigellus, whose last living heir was named Draco.

Ron waved at them until the train canted around a corner, and a hillside blotted out the dart of red against the rooftops.

The castle towers shrank into the neat spinnerets of a child's dollhouse, and retreated behind reams and reams of craggy highland until the points of the uppermost spires bowed under the bristly trees. Then the train slipped into a tunnel, and a brief purge of darkness locked the whole valley out of sight.

He turned to Hermione, who was smiling in the great starry dazzle-eyed way she did when he fought a dragon for her. It wasn't his fault for flushing.

"Put that away, you'll hurt someone with it."

"No," she said, radiantly insouciant. "You can be so wonderfully decent, when you want to be. It's this gorgeous talent you have, and hardly anybody knows about it."

"It exhausts me. I saved up effort for that one for years."

"I'm surprised it cost you so little," she said, and her smile slackened into something more serious and thoughtful. "You know, if merit was pedigree, you'd still be you."

The flush pitched hot, and he brushed it off. "Thank you," he said. "I had in mind some order of monarch, but I'm not so far off it's an insult. Let's find a compartment."

Her laughter was a passel of bells, trilling behind him, as he tugged her into the carriage.

In the prefects' compartment, few remained of the cohort that had gathered in September. Padma Patil and Anthony Goldstein had also chosen to stay at Hogwarts, but Hannah Abbott was coming home to see her mother, a pharmacist in Leeds. Instead of the prefects', she shared a compartment with Leanne Thomas, the tallest girl in her year, and Romilda Vane, who was sewing a patch in the shape of a lightning bolt into her denim jacket.

The afternoon passed like a dream. Voices in the corridors, rustling luggage, the chuffing of pistons underfoot. The clouds kept a woollen seal over the sky and washed pale the lakes and rivers that pooled in the space between hills. An owl followed their train for some time, shadowless in the grey light, vanishing now and then when they threaded a tunnel. There were few people on the train, and they were hardly an unruly selection. Bill, Fleur, and Tonks took periodic patrols down the long and soundless hallway between compartments. There were coronation chicken sandwiches for lunch, and Bott's beans from the trolley, and watery builder's tea in paper cups with single-serve creamers.

Draco sat with his back to the window and his knee thrown up on the seat, a book balanced on his thigh. It was Hermione's, a Penguin paperback of *Brideshead Revisited,* its cover a photograph of a glass conservatory under snow. Hermione cradled Crookshanks in her lap, practicing charms under her breath on a pocket snitch that Katie had given her.

He marked his place with a finger — *reeled back to my rooms under a starry heaven which swam dizzily among the towers, and fell asleep in my clothes as I had not done for a year* — and tilted his head to watch her.

"I think you've mastered *Verdimilious."*

"I lose my magic once we get to London," she said, following the snitch with her eyes. "I should practice while I can. What do you think Daphne is going to do, if she transforms?"

He grimaced and made an equivocal gesture. "No idea. Her parents let Briarfield Hall, and I don't know what facilities they have. I had thought she might use the Shrieking Shack, if she were going to be at Hogwarts, but I doubt she'll have access, unless she can find a way from getting away from her parents on full moons."

"Oh, that's a good point. But I meant the Wolfsbane Potion," she said. "If Snape isn't here next year. Remus said once that Slughorn

couldn’t do it, not to satisfaction. Do you think you could?”

He tried not to be flattered by the implication, and failed eagerly. “Likely not. It’s famously difficult to gather ingredients for, and—”

“Sprout gave Neville keys to the hothouses. He might be able to grow something, with notice.”

“Assuming I could even manage it, which is a gamble. There’s a precarious sequence of reactions you have to perform in order to temper the ingredients, and obviously, if you fail, you have a werewolf to deal with. There’s a reason it doesn’t appear on the Boards. Most people find it too technically demanding.”

Hermione muttered something like “two bonus points,” but let it drop. She nodded at his book. “How is that, by the way?”

“Maudlin,” he replied. “They’re all traipsing around like common drunks. It’s begging for a comparison to Wilde—”

“Dorian and Basil, without the portrait?”

“Or the psychological intimacy. But the jokes are funny, I’ll give him that.”

She smiled slightly. “Hm. How far are you?”

“They’ve just left Oxford.”

“Remind me to ask again when they’re on the ship,” she said. “Catch that for me, will you?”

Turning a page, he snagged the snitch casually with his offhand and tossed it to her. She was tucking it into her satchel when a tap came on the glass door of their compartment.

“Wotcher, you two. Coming up on London,” said Tonks. She had turned her hair black again, and it brought out the parts of her that resembled her mother: her pointed chin, her rounded face, her

beetle-brown eyes. Full resemblance was held at bay by a boxer's nose that looked to have been broken, and the careless way her pixie-cut spilled like a mop around her ears. "Remember to change into muggle gear."

She caught him staring, and cocked an eyebrow. It was Narcissa's expression. Draco's head ached.

"My mother will be there," he said. "I don't know if you were warned."

"Yeah, Dumbledore briefed me," she said. "Cute of you to worry, though."

"Tonks—"

"Kid, it's fine. I'm a big girl. I never knew Mum's family, and I don't expect a tearful reunion." Tonks grinned, a bit jagged. "You tell me how to play it. You want backup, or a wide perimeter?"

"She may not know you exist," he said, with difficulty. "I would be wary of shocking her."

Tonks snorted. "Yeah, she knows I exist."

"I wouldn't be sure. Mother would have forsworn contact after your parents' marriage. She still won't—"

"Mum was up the duff before she got married," said Tonks, crinkling her nose merrily at his expression. Hermione stifled a laugh. "That was the whole to-do, boyo. They eloped and had a do-over ceremony with Dad's family when I was five. Mum made me flower girl. Last time the devious wench got me in a skirt."

"How *old* was she?"

Tonks rolled her eyes back in reminiscence. "Er. I'm January '73, so she's… what, eighteen? Nineteen, when she had me?"

Hermione startled. "She was in *school,"* she said, appalled.

“Yeah, and a prefect,” said Tonks, which elicited a minor noise of outrage from Hermione, seemingly on behalf of the position. “Not a great one, obviously, but still. Dad says the Slytherin Head was a pure slimebucket — both of Mum’s sisters made prefect, too. Apparently Slughorn was always wheedling for an invitation to one of their balls.”

“That’s abhorrent clientelism,” said Hermione, even more appalled than she had been at teenage pregnancy. As usual, her priorities were strictly organized, and inscrutable.

“That’s Dad’s line,” said Tonks. “Mum says it’s called a business relationship, and more people could stand to try it.”

She knocked twice on the doorframe and stepped out. “Jeans!” she said, in passing. “Jeans! Trainers! Et cetera. Step lively.”

“There is a pernicious and false equivalency,” said Draco, nobly, “between nonmagical culture and slovenliness, which I object—”

“JEANS! TRAINERS! ET CETERA!” faded down the hallway.

Hermione, being hard-hearted, failed to reward his valiant defense of muggle civilization. Unfolding from her seat, she drew the blinds with a flick of her wand, and stretched up on tiptoe to levitate her trunk down from the luggage rack. “You heard her,” she said. “You ought to go change. I think there’s an empty compartment next to ours.”

“I don’t see why I have to leave.”

He’d meant only that he’d as much a right to evict her as the opposite; but her mouth fell open, and he abruptly reevaluated.

“I didn’t mean *that.”*

“Didn’t you!”

“Though it’s no less than what you were wearing in the prefects’ bathroom last year. Ostensibly.”

“Those were extenuating circumstances!”

“You were still in your pants,” he pointed out, tipping his head back, and she colored fiercely.

“It doesn’t count,” she said, folding her arms firmly over her chest, as if to retroactively shield it from view. “I wasn’t looking at you that way.”

“You were looking a *bit.”*

“For pedagogy! We were talking to each other. It would have been rude not to look. But I certainly didn’t intend anything by it, and anyway, it was a public bathroom! We had a job to do! A highly unsensual context for disrobement! I was having platonic thoughts,” she finished, “the whole time.”

“Good for you. I haven’t had a platonic thought about you in years.”

Hermione’s face spiked to a temperature that could melt glass, exorbitantly lovely, and she made a strangled noise, flapping a hand over her shoulder. “I — that’s immaterial. Go *change.* All this to get out of wearing muggle clothes — you’re a complete diva.”

He laughed, rolling to his feet, and she had to press her knuckles to her mouth to stop herself from smiling. He dropped a kiss on her temple as he strolled out into the corridor.

Moors had given way to fields and pastures, knolls thickly trussed with farmhouses and shrubs. They had passed through the Midlands and started on into the fenced hillsides of the southern English country, faint sloping mounds of golden wheat crowned with furls of trees, and villages dotted here and there on the bank of a river or in the lee of a hill. The clouds thickened as they came upon London, and the light was flat and strange, like camerafire.

Draco found an empty compartment and snapped the blinds. His robes were exchanged for a pair of dark grey trousers and a cobalt

shirt, which, if it failed Tonks's instructions, at least plausibly passed for muggle. He folded his tie and prefect badge into the trunk with his robes and snapped the clasps.

The shirt rode high on his wrists. Nice as it was to be taller, it was exasperating to keep having new things fitted. He slipped his wand down the pocket of his trousers and stepped back into the corridor, folding back his cuffs.

As he drew the compartment door shut behind him, the loo at the end of the hallway rattled open and shut. Nothing passed through it; it merely swung free of its own accord, paused, and latched behind itself neatly. Draco frowned at it. His eyes narrowed.

He approached, drawing his wand. Another compartment door unhitched discreetly beside the loo, and he caught it before it closed. The compartment itself was empty, but Draco stepped inside and slammed it behind him. After a moment, he raised his wand, and he said, "Show yourself."

Nothing happened. The farmland streamed past the window in a twining braid of green.

"Hominem revelio."

The charm rippled through the compartment, and flashed briefly over a silhouetted shape of a boy standing in the middle of it, four inches from the point of Draco's wand. He lowered it, and snarled.

"Potter."

Harry tore the Cloak down around his shoulders. His eyes were massive with self-explanatory guilt, which dismissed any reservations Draco might have had about being furious with him.

"I have to see Sirius."

"You're fucking kidding me."

He scrambled in front of the compartment door, Draco nearly side-checked him into the wall. “I’m going there, and I’m coming straight back. They’ve closed the Floo, but I’ll take the train—”

“You’re supposed to be at school!”

“—use the Cloak, nobody’ll see—”

“You thought you could fuck off and no one would *notice?* That you’d swan in and out as you like, no responsibilities, no one liable to wonder—”

“I keep dreaming he’s dying!” Harry scrambled to stop him from grabbing the compartment-door. “Draco, hang on — I keep seeing him getting tortured, he’s at Grimmauld Place and he’s — and I told Dumbledore if they’d just let me *see* him, just once, but he told me to keep doing Occlumency, which, sorry, doesn’t work on Voldemort—”

“—whole Order is in fucking Scotland right now for *your protection,* three of them here just for Hermione, and you’re bloody—”

“—won’t tell me where Remus even is, and they expect me to sit there and wave everyone off, meanwhile Sirius is *rotting* in a house he hates! It’s cruel! It’s cruel, and I don’t want to be cruel, I told myself when I came to Hogwarts I never would be— I told myself if I ever had the power to stop someone feeling that way,” said the boy who had lived eleven years of his life in a cupboard, raggedly, “I would *stop it,* I wouldn’t let it happen, I wouldn’t be one of the people who walked past and *let it happen to me!”*

“—pitching a fit because you’re not *inside-track* on Mad-Eye’s agents — the difference between an eleven-year-old and a thirty-seven-year-old man demeans us both to state. For fuck’s sake. I don’t know where you come by this idea that everyone in your life suffers at your whim, waiting for you to save them.”

“MAYBE I HAVE TO! NOBODY ELSE WANTS TO BLOODY DO IT!”

“The world is not your remit! *Sirius Black* is not your remit!”

“I say he is.” Harry stood to his full height, and Draco clocked nearly half a foot on him; he had been left behind in the year’s dissemination of growth spurts. “He’s my godfather. Without Lupin, I’m the only person he’s got.”

“So what, I don’t know where my godfather even is, or if he’s alive, and nobody else gives a damn, why don’t I just blow up this fucking train—”

“Because I’m his family! Because Lupin left him! He’s got one person, one, and it’s me. I thought you of all people would understand!”

“Because my father’s dead?” he snapped. “Because Lucius Malfoy was murdered, I should understand what tempts you to join him? Think again. Severus Snape never had any delusions about who my father was, and if he did they weren’t the sort that would send me running after him to death’s doorstep. He certainly never fed them to me under the pretense of connection—”

“Sirius isn’t like that—”

“—or intimated they would be worth the cost of catastrophic danger. To myself *or* others. Did you imagine what the Order would think when they noticed you were gone? If you didn’t come back? They’ll come looking for you, you realize, as soon as they notice. At no small risk to themselves.”

“Nobody knows where I am. Alright? I didn’t leave a note. I took the Cloak, my wand, nothing else. He’s my godfather, nobody’s risking their lives for him but—”

“Then I take it back,” he said icily. “I do understand. You’d rather the dead for company than the living.”

Harry lunged at him. Draco didn’t resist. His back slammed against the compartment door, rattling fixtures. Harry’s face loomed close, twisted in a snarl, eyes slitted and dark like raw tide-laved glass.

“Apologize,” he said. His grip flexed on Draco’s shoulders, digging into the muscle. “Apologize for that, you shithead. Come on.”

“James Potter is never going to tell you he loves you,” said Draco, with soft contempt. “Not if you spend a lifetime running after Sirius Black.”

“Maybe not,” said Harry, tightly. “Maybe I’ll keep waiting for that my whole life, Draco, you’d certainly fucking know. But my dad loved him. He’s the last thing in the world I know Dad loved. And he doesn’t have anybody else. So I’m going to save him.”

He shoved him back, and Draco let go.

He had mistaken the tenor of Harry’s relationship with Sirius. It was both more selfless and far more treacherous than he had reckoned with. Before he could recast it, however, the door rattled back.

Hermione barged into the compartment with her wand up. She had changed into muggle clothes, jeans and trainers, and maroon polo with golden stitching at the breast pocket, her hair confined strictly by a headband and a few sleeking charms. When she saw Harry, her face dropped at once into the pitch of a thunderstorm.

“What's going on? I heard Draco— oh.” She forced her hand down and breathed, “Oh, I’m going to *kill* you.”

“Good, right, perfect,” said Harry savagely. “Hi, Hermione. I’m not having this argument again—”

“How nice of you to decide in advance!”

“—so you just assume Draco already read me whatever riot act you’re preparing, and bin it, please.”

“Right!” she said brightly. “What happened? Did Sirius run away again? Or did you have a nightmare?”

“You say that like it isn’t real!” Harry exclaimed. “Like he’s not *actually out there,* doing things I can see — you think I can’t tell the difference between his memories and mine?”

“So you think he has Sirius,” she said, “and you decided to run away, *alone*, without telling *anybody,* letting everyone else on this train drive straight into what could well be a trap—”

“He’s not in London.” Harry was curt. “He’s in northern Scotland, actually, best I can tell. Coast of the North Sea. Nobody knows I’m coming.”

“Except Voldemort,” she snapped, ignoring Draco’s exhale of displeasure at the word. “If you know he’s in Scotland, he *absolutely* knows you’re in London.”

“I have the Cloak, and once I get behind Grimmauld’s wards—”

“Bully for you! What about the *rest of us?”*

“You’ll have Tonks! And Bill! And Fleur!”

“You think they’d leave you?” she said, her words jagged around a knot of anger in her throat. Magic did a lightning-skitter around the fist that clutched her wand. “Really? You think if it was between me and you, the Chosen One, Nymphadora Tonks would protect *me?”*

Harry stopped short, blinking, his chest rising in quick, deep bursts. He lowered his shoulders, and the Cloak slithered to his feet.

“Nymphadora Tonks is a jolly person,” Hermione said tightly, “so a lot of people forget she’s Alastor Moody’s deputy. Second-ranking field agent in the Order, *de facto* ranking officer on any mission without Moody — she was top grade in her cohort at the Auror Academy, and they don’t give marks for tender-heartedness. Did you know any

of that? If you think she lacks the guts to decide between us, you've fallen for her cover. And I'm sure she'd feel badly about it, but it wouldn't stop her, and personally, I don't begrudge her that decision one bit."

"I would never run away from you," he croaked. "Hermione, I would let them kill me before I—"

"Why isn't it enough?" she demanded. "All the Weasleys, and the Order, and Dumbledore, plus our friends. Everyone is at Hogwarts. They moved the whole Order. Partly for you! Everyone but the one person you think you *have* to have to be happy! Why isn't it enough?"

"I don't know," he said tiredly. "It just isn't. No matter how many people love me, or tell me they're with me, it doesn't feel different. And it's not because you're not enough, you are. It's not you. I think I just. That when I was young, or — maybe last year, or — always. I reckon. I don't know." He broke off and lifted his glasses carefully back onto his nose. The bridge was taped together. "I'm just broken, I think," he said, quite calmly. "I never feel the way you're supposed to feel. That safe thing, the bit where you want to stay, and let them... do whatever parents are for. Molly and Arthur, and Hagrid, and Remus. When they leave a room, a bit of me goes: 'That's it, that's the last time you'll ever see them.'" He added, "Sometimes I'm right, and that doesn't help, either."

Hermione recoiled, startled. She hesitated.

"Does Sirius make you feel… that? The way you're — supposed to feel."

"No," said Harry. "He's not a great parent, really. I know that, I don't know why everyone acts like I don't." He sank his hands in his pockets. Then, "I don't know why everyone acts like it matters."

A serene chime from the train broke through his words. Footsteps in the corridor pitched them into silence until they receded.

Harry caught Hermione's arm. She turned back sharply, her lip curling, and he tightened his grip.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "For doing this. I am. You think I don't take the war seriously, but I do."

"Now, Harry, really isn't the time—"

"I do," he repeated. "I take it seriously. And I know you're not doing it for me. It's your magic, and your war. It is. When Viktor died, it was your friend they killed. I haven't ever forgotten it."

The train eased to a halt in a bath of steam that flushed the windows white. The doors sprang open with an echoing shudder of metal, like an unsealed vault.

Harry slipped up the hood of his cloak and vanished. Draco stepped in front of Hermione, checked the corner of the door, and they descended through curtains of mist to the platform.

It was cold. The steam from the tracks ought to have warmed the stone, and the June air ought to have helped it, but the gusts that rose to meet him were chilled, and left condensation trails on his skin. He frowned and scanned the ceiling, but the glass ceiling was grey and dry, untouched by rain. The clouds behind it rolled, a dark wave unknitting from the underbelly of the storm.

Children began to drop from the carriages, a skeletal crowd compared to the usual. They streamed out to meet their parents and had bleary reunions behind veils of mist. Hermione stepped down behind him, and a rustle at her back meant Harry had done the same.

Low chatter issued from family reunions, coalescing like islands in a sea of silhouettes. Dean and Seamus were ushered off with a pair of besuited professionals that must have been the Thomases. Katie's mother, a foot her junior in height, was bemoaning her new piercings. He tapped his wand restlessly on his thigh.

From the mist, anyone might have been his mother. He could feel with unusual clarity the toll of his heart against his ribs, but he still craned his neck to find her, as if any stranger in the mist might turn and reveal a French twist of pale hair at her nape, or cut the crowd with vulpine grace.

“There she is,” said Hermione suddenly. For there she was.

Narcissa stood at the entrance to the platform, dressed in a flowing, high-collared summer robe of green organza, the wide brim of her hat drawn so low it almost hid the crimson-painted curve of her lips. A wandpurse of black lace dangled from her wrist, matching the thin netting of her gloves, her signet a large and lightless swell on her third finger. The way she wore the finery it all seemed eminently natural, as if she'd been born clad for a party to which everyone else had shown up tragically underdressed. There she was, his mother, exactly where she needed to be, on time and well-dressed, and she brought with her a world of rules and order, with impregnable walls.

She flitted through the crowd with weightless grace, and then she was in front of him, smiling with a slightly brittle hope, lips parted in an apprehensive show of teeth.

“Draco,” she said. When she spoke, her voice was low and reedy with effort, as if overused.

The parting of her arms was tentative. There was no time for it, but he did it anyway: he stepped forward and embraced her. Startled, she touched the back of his head, and then her arms slid around his shoulders. “Darling,” she said. “Oh, I’m sorry. Come and hug your mother that loves you.”

He braced his head on her shoulder. She smelled of clean soap and perfume: jasmine grandiflorum, saffron, woody and warm.

And there were so many things he could not say to her. And Hermione stiffened a bit, when Narcissa touched him, as if perhaps fighting the wish to intercede. But she was his mother, and she was

real, and he had been away from her so long he had forgotten how much himself he felt when she was near.

Narcissa drew back, keeping her hand braced on his neck. The comfort cooled. He turned back.

Hermione cleared her throat. “Hello, Mrs. Malfoy.”

Narcissa’s mouth twitched to the side in a crooked not-smile. “The singular Miss Granger,” she said. Hermione’s cheek twitched.

“Mother.”

She flicked her fingers in a dismissal. “I can be trusted,” she said lightly. “If the mouth ‘speaketh from the abundance of the heart,’ I wager I can still manage a conversation without coming to arms. Under a certain baseline of respect.”

“The one thing that makes you remotely respectable is the fact that Draco loves you,” Hermione said tightly. He turned to her, startled, and she was staring at his mother like she might draw on her. “The only thing I ever respected about you for a fraction of a second was the fact that you raised him.”

Draco stared at her as if he had been clubbed over the head, because he felt like it.

Narcissa noticed it. Her eyes flit up, and she inhaled through her teeth.

“You’re fearless,” she said, a compliment soured by defeatism. “And very angry.”

“Quite, yes,” said Hermione. “I am also — sorry — in a bit of a hurry, so if you don’t mind, I have to see an auror about a boy.”

The situation did not give her time to introduce it. It came hurtling across the platform in a flourish of leather and robes. Nymphadora Tonks was marvelous at top speed: high spots of color in her cheeks,

her duster skimming high like a duck's wing, her shoulders rolling with the weight of each step, her wand a seamless extension of the line of her arm.

"Draco!" she barked. "Where's Lightning?"

"Lightning?"

"Here," Hermione said quickly, throwing her hand behind her to check for him. "He's here, Tonks, he's wearing the Cloak—"

"Great, thanks, Hermione. Kid, wherever you are, grab my arm and run when I tell you. We need to get off the platform to Apparate."

Harry did not reply. Hermione whipped around, her hand sweeping through the air, and it met nothing. Her eyes glazed with panic.

"He was here," she snapped. "He was here just as second ago—"

Tonks did not waste a millisecond on dismay. "Done a runner. Got it," she said. "Aiming for Number Twelve, innit?"

"—but he *knows* how dangerous, and he told us he did, and I told him why—"

"Don't kick yourself," she said calmly. "He's not thinking about you. He's not even really thinking."

"Oh my God, is that supposed to make me feel *better?"* Hermione snapped, tearing her wand from her satchel. "That he's forgotten us?"

Narcissa had not moved. The back of her hand sealed up her mouth.

"Hullo, Lady Malfoy," Tonks added. "Nymphadora Tonks. Lieutenant Commander, Order of the Phoenix. Don't fuss about the title, Moody made it up. And I'm pretty sure Mum made up the name, so don't fuss about it, either."

“Nymphadora,” said Narcissa, roughly.

Draco’s neck ached from the speed he turned. Tonks blinked, her fingers stilling on her laces.

“Your name is Nymphadora,” she repeated, with difficulty, as if each word were being carved into her skin. “You were… named… for a virgin martyr of Bithynia.”

Tonks blinked again, her eyes wide, and slowly straightened. “Okay,” she said. “Very neat. I have to—”

“One of three sisters. They fasted together in the wilderness. The older two were tortured to death,” she said, “and their bodies made examples to the youngest — your namesake — but she refused to give up the faith. She died with them. They burned together, on the pyre, and were martyred.” Narcissa tried to breathe deeply, and it caught. “Your mother,” she said, “was always — an *abominable* sentimentalist.”

It was the first time he had ever heard her invoke Andromeda of her free will. It made his skin crawl. He stared at her.

“Cool,” said Tonks, indifferent. “Tell her you said so. Er, hate to run, but it was nice to meet you. Hermione, stick with Bill, I'm going after —”

Thunder broke over the platform. A downfall opened on the roof, loud and harsh. It was too harsh for rain.

A hundred faces tipped back to watch the volley of hail pelt down on the glass, a shadow rolled down the platform in a long sweep.

The clouds were moving swiftly and strangely. They congealed into a roiling, swirling, eye. Draco grabbed Hermione’s arm.

Black smoke dropped from the eye like ink through water. Coils ribboned through the darkling sky.

“BRACE!” roared Tonks, and tackled Hermione to the floor. Draco dropped with her, landing flat on his palms, and the ceiling of King’s Cross shattered above them.

Glass poured like rain, pieces shattering into brilliant starbursts near his head. He dropped his head and a stinging hail prickled his scalp, retreating when the last of it broke to glittering dust around them. He leapt up with a roll of his shoulders and found himself under the glowing hemisphere of Shield Charm. It had spared Tonks and Hermione from the brunt of the glass.

Narcissa held its stem on the tip of her wand. She flicked it out, but her attention locked on the sky. Her wand arched forward and down, in the duelist’s position. Smoke descended over the ragged maw of the station’s ceiling, and tatters flared from its edges.

His ears rang from distant screaming. Down the platform there were students on their knees. Blood eddied on the asphalt. The crowd crushed tight to the entrance to Platform 9 ¾ and fought and clawed at each other to get out and his heartbeat was high and fast in his ears. Tonks sat up and Hermione scrambled out and she caught his hand to pull herself up. She was bleeding from scratches on her arms but she was alright, she was fine, and she was looking at him and shouting something and he only heard it over the sound of his heartbeat when the shape of her mouth clearly spelled YOU.

A hand clamped down on his shoulder. Sound cut in.

“Run when I tell you,” Narcissa whispered.

Smoke coalesced. Ragged coils of it unfurled and creatures pried themselves from the rippling cord of it like some horrible birth. The desiccated hands prying through the air. The black hole of a mouth, the wretched, rasping howl.

The chill over the platform turned subthermal. He knew what this was, he had seen it before. A dementor sank from the group and fell

like a diving hawk on Tonks and with her wand in the air she shouted an incantation he knew very well.

A silver jackrabbit tackled it to the side, and it fell to the tracks bleeding ribbons of white. She lashed two more out with a cleaving forestroke-backstroke, the tip of her wand a white scythe in the air. The swarm broke apart, but then there were still dozens; the screaming and the rasping coalesced into a terrible chord and cloaks gloved the slate-dark sky.

Down the platform, Bill cast a wolf that bounded up and batted one out of the air. Fleur shielded a group of children under an enclave. Her fox ripped through the billowing folds of the dementor that trawled down the platform to meet her.

He needed a patronus. He needed to cast a patronus, to help them, to save them. They needed help, and he knew the Patronus Charm, and he could do it, it was a simple thing that he could do. He had done it at thirteen, under a moonlit sky.

But it was so cold that he was numb. And the sky was falling. And he was bleeding and Hermione was bleeding and there was nothing happy in the world and there had never been.

Narcissa grabbed his elbow and she was pulling him inexorably and he stumbled after her, and Hermione was shouting again. Narcissa's wand streamed ribbons of white, a full shield of it, but it was diluted, not a full corporeal, and her face was drawn with the strain. The screaming turned dull under the deafening rasp of the dementors' shrieks.

They had followed Harry. Or they had attacked them all the same, on the chance he would be there.

Hermione tore free of Tonks and took off running down the platform without a backward glance. His heart leapt up his throat and he ripped his arm away from his mother, running after her, shouting her

name, and for a half-second his fear-stalled mind fumbled through bafflement at where she was going and then he understood.

Her parents. She was going to find her parents, who were waiting with the other muggles beyond the platform entrance.

Hermione shoved between a pair of cowering children and raced, at the top of her speed, but he was faster than she was. When she hurled herself through the platform wall he was behind her, a heartbeat behind, his heart in his throat.

Outside, thousands foamed over the plaza and surged outward towards Pancras Road. The cars, locked in standstill traffic by the charge, blared a compliment to the symphony of panic. Trees flushed green dripped icicles in the middle of high June. People tripped over concrete benches set into the plaza and crawled over each other in screaming masses of hands and boots. A whisper on the back of his neck was the only notice for him to duck as a dementor swept overhead, the icy tail of its cloak whipping his ear. Hermione broke out of the crowd and made a dead sprint for the row of cars parked roadside, where she collided with a couple that were running against the current of the crowd — running towards her, to greet her.

The details of them registered at a subconscious level, slipping under the presiding dominion of fear: Older, both of them; fifties, greying. Her mother’s hair in dark ringlets, eyes blue, Hermione’s freckles scattered over her cheeks. Something of Hermione in the horrified set of her face, in the way she held her jaw. Her father, with one arm braced in front of his wife, short hair in retreat over a narrow face, clean-shaven. He had her eyes. Hermione had her father’s eyes. Herbert and Denise, she’d told him that. He hadn’t forgotten it.

Hermione had muggle parents who loved her like breathing and who had parts of her studded all over them like geodes in rock. She had her mother’s freckles and her father’s eyes and it made something inside him twist to the point of strain, and when she leapt up so her father could catch her in his arms it broke and he remembered what

a crooked thing it was to love a parent who couldn’t save you. To leave parts of you behind, far away, and all the pieces scattered over the country like so much shrapnel.

The moaning rasps swelled as more dementors poured from the broken ceiling. Hermione was trying to drive her parents away from the station, one-armed, with her wand-hand braced for a patronus. The Grangers didn’t understand; they were all shouting at each other and her frustration was patent in the way she shoved her mother back towards the car.

A dementor came slithering out of the crowd, its claws scuttling over frosted ground, and Hermione’s mother screamed. Hermione shouted and brandished her wand, but the otter she cast was translucent and flickered out after a futile snap of its teeth. The dementor swept up to avoid it and dove back for another try, and her father grabbed her shoulder to drag her behind him, his face pale, while Hermione thrashed against the movement with the fury of someone who knew how futile it was.

Draco shoved his shoulder through fleeing muggles and slipped over one of the benches, landed with the ease of sliding a bannister. His wand arced a white line in front of his face, gleaming with a prefigurative current of magic, and the words on his tongue moved seamlessly, as if they had been only waiting for him, like it was easy, like it had always been easy.

A white owl the size of a thestral tore free from the misted air and plunged its claws into the dementor’s back.

The wretched shrieking must have been the creature’s pain. It bucked and rose, wrestling together with the white wings of the patronus until the twin trails of smoke and mist bloomed grey against the sky. Its kin were regrouping over the rooftops as the crowd flooded out into the streets and cleared the plaza. The owl harried it off to join its flock, howling.

Draco skidded to a halt. The air rasped cold against his throat. The Grangers were staring, their arms latched tightly around their daughter — who was also staring at him, flushed and panting, her eyes bright and aghast and relieved.

“Draco Malfoy,” he said, when it became clear she wasn’t going to introduce him. “We’ve corresponded.”

Denise Granger opened her mouth, soundlessly, and closed it. She looked at Hermione. Hermione’s expression gave her a sharp, unreadable instruction, and she pried herself free of them.

“That was a magical creature,” said Herbert, remarkably calm. He smoothed his hair with a hand that was almost steady. “I thought they weren’t supposed to interact with us.”

“They’re not,” said Hermione shortly, sweeping her wand over her arm. Her cuts sealed under the watery glow of *Episkey.* Her mother blanched at it. “Those are dementors. They guard the wizard prison. They’re not supposed to leave unless ordered.”

“And why were they ordered *here?”* said Denise, her voice rising. “This is London. It’s a normal place, it’s not one of their places. They aren’t supposed to come here, you said.”

“Because — I don’t know. I think they’re looking for Harry, but—”

A shout interrupted her. Tonks, Bill, and Fleur strode across the plaza at a clip. Behind them, Narcissa glided over the frosted concrete with a snap of green skirts.

Tonks broke into a run and closed the distance with a barking laugh of relief. “Thank Merlin,” she shouted. “They’re regrouping to the east. Reckon they figured he’s not here, and wretched things go by scent, so they’ll trace him. Hermione, take your parents and get as far away from Islington — sorry, you lot, I’m aware you’ve got no idea who I am or why I’m giving you orders, but if you trust your

daughter you're gonna take them anyway. Bill, Fleur, and I are going after Harry—"

"I'm coming with you," Hermione cut in. Tonks pinched the bridge of her nose. "Sorry. I am. You don't have time to argue with me."

"Hermione," muttered Draco, and it was thin, half a groan. But no one noticed except, perhaps, Narcissa, whose breath caught.

"I'm sorry," she repeated steadily. "I am coming. You're only three. I have a wand. I'm not running away."

"What? No," said Denise, high-pitched. "No, you're not. You're not going *towards* those things."

"It's up to you," Hermione told Tonks. The fist of her hand drew tight the ribs of her scars, and at sixteen, she was far too young to sound so old, to speak with such contempt for others' hesitation to sacrifice her. "It'll waste your time to call my bluff."

Tonks sucked her lips inward, pensive, and glanced at Bill. He shook his head.

"Right, okay," she said. "Fuck. Sorry, Mrs. Granger. You want your daughter to stay, you make her do it."

She took off at a sprint. Bill and Fleur followed at her heels. Hermione tried to do the same, and father caught her arm; she threw a Stinging Jinx behind her. It was perfect form, flawless, even done backhanded and under her own elbow. Herbert gave a cry of surprise, and let go.

Freed, his daughter took half a step and then stopped and turned back to look at Draco. The wind threw a cluster of curls over the dark stare. She reached her hand back for him, with the thinnest flicker of uncertainty.

He reached for it automatically; he didn't know what he was going to do except run after her, which was the only thing he could do, the only option left to him besides let her go and throw herself carelessly in front of someone's curse — and then a hand closed on his arm and there was a jerk under his navel and the world twisted out of sight. His fingers slipped past Hermione's without touching them.

They sprang into existence in a square up the street, a block of townhouses shading a fenced park. A thatch of trees gave them cover from passersby. It couldn't have been far from the station; he recognized the knot of clouds in the western sky.

Narcissa dropped his arm, gasping from exertion, and he staggered away from her. The cold-water shock of betrayal made his gorge rise.

"What the hell are you doing?" His voice was louder, by far, than he had intended. "I didn't say you could—"

"We'll take the Knight Bus to Paddington," she said, her voice firm and ragged. "We can be at the Manor by day's end. Moody's agent will alert the Order of the attack. She and her aides will secure Potter. We need not do anything more."

"You're fucking joking." He tore a hand through his hair. His breath came fast and hard in his throat. "There's four of them. Hermione—"

"Had the same opportunity you do," she rasped, straightening. "She rejected it. Her bed is made. Do not martyr yourself to prevent her from lying in it."

"That's *not your choice!"*

"It is unfortunate, truly, that her parents lacked the strength to stop her," Narcissa said, with surprising compassion. "A young witch without reins is a terrible thing. We must move quickly."

“The dementors followed Potter. They don’t act without orders. Do you understand what that means? Someone far more dangerous knows where Harry Potter is, and wants him followed—”

“And cares nothing for the collateral of finding him. Take my hand.”

“*Listen* to me! Hermione—”

“Is in danger, if you’re correct,” she snapped, reaching for him. “When the Dark Lord’s servants find her, there will be nothing you could have done for her.”

“Stop. Stop talking.”

“But Draco — you are so, so young. And I do not ask you to understand, but I beg you to believe — I swear it on my father’s name — you will thank me someday for not allowing you to follow her.”

The image spilled across the front of his mind, unbidden.

He pointed his wand at her. Narcissa jerked backward, her eyes falling on the tip.

“Don’t ever,” he said, unsteadily, “don’t ever — never say that to me again. It’s a lie. I wouldn’t. If she — I wouldn’t forgive you, for that.”

She watched the point of his wand. Her dark eyes flicked up. “You could not forgive,” she said slowly, “a mother saving her son’s life.”

“If she died today, and I wasn’t with her, it would be the last day I ever spoke to you.” His heartbeat muffled the sound of his own voice. “On *my* father’s name, I would not forgive you. Yes.”

“Don’t you dare use your father’s name to baptize this suicide quest, Draco Malfoy.”

“It's not his name, actually.” The force of it tore out of his throat, venomous. “It’s mine. He gave it up. He died, and he left his name

behind, and now it's mine, and I decide what it means. I've decided Malfoy means *I win.* Malfoy means *all my enemies are fucked.* Malfoy means no one takes *anything I want away from me,* not now, not ever," he snarled. "No one touches what's mine. That's what my name means. When I swear on it, that's the promise I'm keeping."

Narcissa scoffed, stepped forward, and shoved his wand off its line. He stepped back, wary of her, wary that she might grab him and try to Apparate him anyway.

For his tenth birthday, his mother had taken him to London under the pretense of visiting the Royal Wizards' Ballet. When they arrived, dressed in finery, she had tugged him off to Diagon Alley, and loosed him instead on the inside of a toy shop with a cheque for a thousand galleons. Then she had bought them a pair of bespelled pints at Fortescue's, and they had walked up Primrose Hill in the warm June evening and had ice cream for dinner, sitting on the bench atop the hill while she whispered Confundus Jinxes at any muggle he pointed out, and together they went to pieces laughing, watching them all stumble over each other.

It had felt impossible for two people to be closer, more content in each other's company, than himself and his mother; he had understood, with a childish godlike certainty, that he would never love anyone so much, or perhaps anyone else at all.

When he was a child he'd known everything, doubted nothing, hesitated never. He had been king of a little world he imagined for himself, where no harm came to anyone, nor ever could, because Mother was there. It was his own mistake, believing it, but a part of him had still been angry at her when he discovered the mistake.

"My mother lost two of her daughters," she said suddenly. "I was all she had left. Her least favorite — she would have denied that, but daughters always know. Druella Rosier. Drugged herself to death when you were three."

The trees creaked overhead where their fingers twined together in the wind. A siren blared in the distance.

“They found my uncle’s body at the bottom of a cliff. For the sake of his dignity, they called it an accident. The last Lord Black of Witherfell,” she said, “and he died like a muggle. Of a broken neck.”

“Sirius Black is alive.”

“I had given him an heir,” she said, ignoring him. “But you wouldn’t have my name. He used to mock my father for not having sons, it was the one thing he could hold over him. Cygnus was the strongest wizard in the family, and Orion wasn’t even the strongest in his own marriage... He died knowing his legacy would fall to the lesser daughter of a cousin he loathed.”

“Do you hear me? Sirius Black is alive. Andromeda Tonks is *alive.* If you’d drop these wretched prejudices you’d realize how much of your family’s still with you.”

“I was never best of anything, among my sisters,” said Narcissa. “I was not the bravest, or the strongest. I was not charming; very few ever loved or admired me. But I was dutiful. I had no equal in that. The curse of the dutiful, of course, is that they cannot entice anyone to stay.”

His breath came like sandpaper in his throat.

“You’re far braver than we were,” she said, which pierced him. “Braver than Lucius, and he was the bravest man I ever met. Braver than Bella, and I never thought that was possible.” She paused. “I did that. Not them. I carried the glory of our house in our body, and I raised him to love better things than myself.”

He wasn’t; he was a coward, terrified at all times of how much could be taken from him, and what he did in the name of that cowardice deserved nothing like the honors of the brave.

“I’m not the glory of our house,” he said harshly. “I gave it up. And it is possible to love two things at once.”

The corner of her mouth curved. “Yes,” she agreed, “but it’s terribly painful.”

She held out her hand again. “Come with me,” she said, but though it was tender, it was not hopeful.

“I’m sorry,” he said, backing away, and he was. He could not remember being sorrier for anything in his life. He was sorry he did not live in a world where he could have come with her. He was sorry that neither of them were any version that the other could accept. It was a terrible thing he was doing, he knew that. It was only just less terrible than anything else he could have done.

Neither of them wept. They had both been taught not to. The wind was still, and the pavements were empty. The street was silent when Draco turned his back on his mother.

-Merry Taylor Swiftmas, again. If you’re binge-reading this fic in the future, then yeah, it was really *that* long between chapters. The pit is a powerful thing.

-The age of marriage in Britain actually was 16 until 2023, when it was changed to 18. ‘Age of Marriage Act of 1929.’ Pansy’s right about the law; Hermione’s right about the ethics. The more you know!

-That copy of Brideshead Revisited is the 1990 Penguin Classics printing, and in my opinion, the most beautiful cover for a very beautiful book. It also has one of the worst sex scenes in all of classic literature, wherein the protagonist sleeps with the twin sister of the man he’s been catastrophically in love with since adolescence in such a staggeringly un-sensual way it actually doubles back around to being homoerotic again: “[T]here was a formality to be observed, no more. It was as though a deed of conveyance of her

narrow loins had been drawn and sealed. I was making my first entry as the freeholder of a property I would enjoy and develop at leisure.” (mfw i’m sleeping with a girl because i’m in love with her brother and also probably her house and regard her as a transitory object of voyeurism. highly normal behavior.)

-Behemoth chapters are an end-of-book tradition. You have no idea how much stuff I cut from this bad boy to even get it down to this size. My scrap folder is through the roof.

-It's been... I won't lie, it's been kind of rough. I took some hard knocks from a supervisor who's not the most people-friendly person — not like a monster or anything, just likes to joke in ways that make me feel small. and then like if you object, he goes :(why are you hurting my feelings :((so like you have to pretend you're okay with this dude who is not your friend making sort of unpleasant or snide jokes at your expense, but you can't actually make the kind of jokes about him that he makes about you, or he gets offended. you know? anyway, i had to deal with That Guy, so. your kind words have been a real-pick-me-up.

-in that vein, I couldn't respond to all the comments i got on the last chapter, but they made me cry. you write such beautiful, hearty comments, I really don't deserve it.

-Next chapter up in a week or two. Title: "As Though Nothing Could Fall."

As Though Nothing Could Fall

Chapter 80: As Though Nothing Could Fall

TW for violence and gore. Reader discretion advised.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

If you were fast, you could get to Grimmauld Place from King's Cross in ten minutes.

The square was unnaturally empty. Dementors twisted in the air, and a shimmering in the air suggested a ward of some kind, which squirmed uncomfortably over his skin when he passed through. He'd cast a Disillusionment on himself, and though it wouldn't hold against scrutiny, it would hide him from anyone not looking for him. The first thing he saw was Tonks, who stood in front of a glowing hex of golden runes, her hands lifted, her face glowing perspirant in concentration. Bill and Fleur stood together in front of Hermione, which jolted him in relief. But Harry was nowhere.

He moved flat-footed around the edge of the square, slipping low behind the row of cars. Bill caught him in his periphery, and grimaced in exasperation. Hermione gasped, and leapt at him: her hug was bruising, and her fingernails bit deep into his shoulders. He caught her and gripped her tightly, but briefly, and let her go to free his wand-arm.

"Malfoy," Fleur hissed. "What are you doing here? Get out!"

"What are *you* doing out here? The warded building's right behind you. And where's Potter?"

“Here,” whispered Harry, gripping his wrist invisibly. Draco seized his arm, and smacked him.

“That’s the start of what I owe you,” he snapped, while Harry hissed. “Why aren’t you inside?”

“Tonks worries it’s trapped,” Hermione said lowly, crouching beside them. The wind dragged her ragged, sweat-limned curls over her temples. With a flick of her wrist, she threw an absent *Episkey* in Harry’s direction, but her gaze was intently on Draco. “Fleur’s put a muggle-repellent charm on the square, and a Concealment Charm, in the meantime, and Bill’s putting up wards. Did you cast a Disillusionment before coming in?”

“Of course I did. Who do you take me for?”

“Thank God. Anyway, *I* wanted them to take Harry in side-along Apparition—”

“Won’t work. You need—”

“—incredible skill to do long-distance side-along, I know that—”

“And there’s a hard upper bound on distance traveled—”

“—inversely proportional to the quantity of matter, and I *know,* I was trying to think of something, and we’ve only been here five—” She stopped and inhaled. “Draco,” she said, “where’s your mother?”

“She’s behind me,” he said, shoving all attendant thoughts pointedly to the side. “She had other plans for this evening. I disagreed.”

“Oh,” said Hermione. She wet her lips. “Are you — are you two alright?”

The pain of keeping them aside was quite keen. “No,” he said shortly. “Probably not. Let’s not talk about it.”

“But—”

“How are *your* parents?”

She recoiled fractionally. “All right,” she said. “Fair enough.”

Tonks finished the incantation with a jerk of her wand. The gold hex of runes shattered into the air, and she lowered her hands with an even exhale.

“Should do it,” she said. “Now get in, kiddies. One of those runes was an alarm sigil, and if it’s keyed right, they’ll know I broke it. Let’s —”

Lightning slit across the sky. It stole the visible world, and when it gave it back, it gave it back unevenly, with a dark stain on it. On the roofs across the square, there stood a ridge of figures, billows of smoke still dissipating from their hems, as if they had come fresh from a walk through an inferno.

There were five. The first was Sibelius Nott, an elderly man, the folds of his face an edifice of years’ bitterness; his hair was far closer to white now than it had been when Draco saw him last. Like the others, he still wore the tattered grey smock of Azkaban.

The other three men were strangers. One had wild curls, stained black by filth, his face masked by the same; the second was dark-haired and bearded, with blood splashed in lurid brown over the front of his smock; the third had no hair at all on his head, but his eyes seemed to protrude from his face, a blue so bright they seemed manic. All had wands.

The last of their number was a pale, diamond-shaped face, cut by searingly dark eyes, and a cowl of wind-battered hair. Her lips peeled in a harsh, broad snarl, an expression that was ugly on purpose, as if to disown the cold beauty of her face.

The lull between the flash and thunder yielded to the hoary bellow of the sky, like a child crying belatedly at a cut. Tonks dropped back to flank Bill and Fleur. With a single lash she cast a patronus, and

started talking to it quickly in a low flat tone, without removing her eyes from the peopled skyline.

“All hands. All hands, to Grimmauld Place. Emergency call, five hostiles. Calling Fool, Hierophant, Empress. Five hostiles. Lightning is here. I repeat. Lightning is here.”

“Inside,” Hermione said unevenly, and groped behind her for Harry. “Get inside Grimmauld Place.”

She shoved him to his feet and fumbled him towards the door. Draco was staring.

Her face was familiar. Broader than her sisters’, furred with thick brows and a wide mouth, it had far more of Cygnus than Druella. He had seen its childhood counterpart, once, in a dream of a memory. Years’ growth and years’ suffering, and the grime of Azkaban, could not remedy the resemblance such that it was not striking.

Bellatrix stepped up to the ledge of the building, put her arms out, and laughed. It was a hypnotic, crystalline sound, and it was lovely, like a lady’s; it was a sound so refined it seemed wrong to come from her throat. Her fingers waved slightly, as if relishing the very feeling of the air. Static glinted frantically in the air around her, magic coalescing in shivering waves around her body.

“So Potter *does* come when he’s called,” she said, and it echoed queerly around the empty square. “My God. How genteel.”

She leaned forward, off the ledge, and dropped.

Her body became a rippling fold of black smoke. It dipped and split across the square in a reforming bloom, snaked through the road, and rippled under Tonks’s guard, the auror’s curse slitting harmlessly through the fabric. Bellatrix leapt from the smoke and landed on the stoop of Number Twelve with an elegant drop. Her wand whipped behind her back to deflect the splatter of curses from Bill and Fleur. A

Shield Charm so thick it was opaque sent their curses soaring back at them, and they dropped for cover. Her head didn't turn.

She pointed her wand down. A shockwave boomed from the ground at her feet. All the cars on the street rocked. It threw Harry and Hermione on their backs, and the cloak slipped from Harry's shoulders.

He leapt back to his feet, and with cruel ease Bellatrix flicked away his jinx; she did something complex with her wrist, and he shot forward, skidding his heels against the stoop, until she caught him with her offhand by the hair.

"I have your poppet," she called, only she wasn't looking behind her, at her companions, nor at her enemies; she was gazing up at the dark windows of Number Twelve. With a slow, almost playful flourish of fingerwork, she rolled her wand through her fingers and directed it lazily at Harry's temple. "Another one, that is. What shall I do with it?"

The door was sealed and silent.

Tonks leapt into a duelist's stance, her wand high. "Lestrange!" she barked. "Formal challenge! I challenge you in the name of my mother, Andromeda Black!"

Foul idea. The witch standing before them would cut Tonks to ribbons. But it was a gamble to isolate Bellatrix — to hope that her traditionalism would blind her — to hope that Andromeda's name had purchase, even if only as a distraction or an irritant.

There was no such luck. Bellatrix paused, her lip curling; but she did not rise to it. "Dolohov," she spat.

The dark-haired wizard vanished into smoke. A moment later, Dolohov burst into existence over Tonks's head. She dove beneath him to avoid the *Bombarda* he lashed out of the air, which struck one of the cars. The engine exploded and set the alarms off up the street in a concert of lagging, eerie, echoing screams.

“The mongrel thinks it has a right to duel,” Bellatrix said casually over the pandemonium, waving her hand. “Enlighten it. If it survives you, I might try playing with it myself.”

Tonks threw a spell back at Dolohov. He parried, and they took up dueling furiously, driving Tonks back up the street. Bill tackled Mulciber, who snapped into existence in the street before them, with a spell that threw him into the square, and Fleur lunged for him with a searing barb of a spell that shattered and scorched the pavement black.

Bellatrix turned back to the door. Hermione shrank away in the corner of the stoop and pressed herself against the brick, chest heaving. Draco knelt beside her. His heart pounded.

She hadn’t seen him. Bellatrix hadn’t thought he would be here, so she hadn’t seen him. The Disillusionment had concealed it.

He cast the charm again, over himself and Hermione, and felt the cool ripple pass over them. Hermione’s figure blurred. Her hand brushed his shoulder in fleeting gratitude. Then she knelt and reached forward, moving slowly to avoid notice, until her fingers met a puddle of silk on the stoop.

“Prison has its uses,” said Bellatrix to the door, reflectively. Harry snarled as she jerked his head back, exposing the column of his throat. “It’s a handsome chance to think on one’s errors. Mine was being too submissive to orders. I *told* the Lord he was a fool to send me to the Longbottoms — it was the first thing I said to him, when he dropped the walls of Azkaban to stones, and pulled me from the rubble; the first thing I said, after I had thanked him for my salvation — he was a fool to send me there, and not to the Potters. I said, ‘Lord, what did Alice Longbottom know of blood magic? A blunt instrument, what curses could she have wrought? You might have killed all three with a snap of your fingers, and I would have left both Potters gibbering beside the dead infant.’”

Harry roared and thrashed against her. She tapped a *Petrificus* into his throat, and he froze.

Hermione snatched the Cloak back and whipped it around her shoulders.

“I would have died for him, too,” said Bellatrix, casually, “if the bitch had still managed the runes. I doubt she would have. I’m faster than my good Lord, even he admits. He said: ‘Indeed, Devotion, I was a fool; I should not have trusted my own right hand with what I could not trust in you. But I have suffered for it; I was dead ere I was with you.’ And then I said, ‘I suffered twice that, Lord, for you merely died; I had to live without you.’ And so we forgave each other.” She smiled sweetly. “But what of your dead Lord, cousin? When will James Potter raise you from the ruins?”

Fire ripped up the street in a gust from Mulciber’s wand. Tonks caught it and siphoned it, and Fleur leapt in front of her to deflect Dolohov’s spell, which ripped up the posts of the wrought-iron fence and sent them diving in a birdlike flock. Her Shield thundered under the effort, and Bill ducked beneath it, carving a gouge in the ground under Mulciber. The three of them moved in a dreadful synchrony, and the street warped under the haze of magic, the sirens blaring.

Bellatrix lifted Harry by the hair and examined him, admiring the scar like a piece of fine porcelain. “Do you know I worked out how she did it, in Azkaban? Cousin, I award her: it’s a *horrible* piece of magic. I never would have dreamed it of a mudblood. Did you teach it to her? Martyrdom was a hallmark of your style.”

A stirring in the air told him Hermione had stood. Draco’s heart kicked. A second later, he understood what she was doing. He shifted up and forward onto the balls of his feet.

“I hope you did,” said Bellatrix, and a smile crept up her face: it was the smile of his mother getting what she wanted. “I hope you taught her everything she knew of the Dark Arts. I like to imagine you had a hand in my Lord’s death, even at a distance; for one, it’ll please me

all more to kill you; and for two, it adds a charming symmetry to events, since my Lord cut down your heart's companion like a dog."

The door flew open. Draco's heart dropped. Tonks whirled and gave a roar of dismay, but Mulciber's bruising curse threw her off her feet before she could stop it.

Sirius emerged from the shadows of Grimmauld Place. His combat leathers sat loose on his shrunken frame, straps tightened into bruising cuffs to compensate, but his great height still imposed itself in an eerie way as he ducked through the door, and the blue robes of the Order of the Phoenix swept the ground behind him. His hair fell loose to his waist, black as a raven's wing, threaded with ice-grey streaks of age, and when he grinned there was a dark glitter of something hungry and listless behind his face. There was something almost like gratitude in it.

"There'll be a charming symmetry to your offal," he said, "when I slit you cunt to snout, good kinswoman."

Bellatrix's smile thickened into a grin. Commingled with the loathing there was an equal gratitude: she almost seemed genuinely pleased to see him.

She lunged, and dissolved into smoke. Sirius slashed his wand, and the stones at her feet leapt up to entomb her ankles, but the smoke foamed through them harmlessly. It concealed in the air, darted over Sirius's shoulder, and plunged into Grimmauld Place. Sirius snarled and ran after her, and a shivering explosion from inside bespoke the continuation of their duel.

Harry dropped down the stairs, petrified. Hermione dove for him, and they rolled together down the stairs, a blur of dark hair whirling together with the silken cloak.

Bill was crouched behind Fleur's shield, lobbing shots at Mulciber; Tonks and Dolohov were sparring around in a growing sinkhole in the middle of the street, which Dolohov appeared to be commanding,

as it chased Tonks wherever she moved over the asphalt. Sibelius and the other Death Eater had vanished — could have been anywhere, or fetching reinforcements. Draco lunged down the stairs and scrabbled to a halt at the bottom, where Hermione lay tangled together with Harry.

He dragged her up and she rocked upright, breathing hard, a bruise forming around her right eye. “Fine,” she rasped. “I’m fine. We have to get Harry out of here.”

“Bloody good time we’ll have with that. We can’t Apparate, and the city’s swarming with dementors.”

“Right, then. So. We’ll try something else,” she said. Her voice hardly trembled at all. Her hands were shaking, and there was blood smeared up her wrist — Bellatrix’s blood, where she’d cut her. She extended it to him. He caught it and let her pull him to his feet. There was no time to comfort each other. The street wavered and burned and warped under the hideous contortions of magical battle. Dolohov’s sinkhole widened, and there were flames in the trees. There was no time for anything at all.

Harry broke free of the petrification with a gasp. He grasped Hermione’s shoulder and heaved for breath. “What did she mean, about my mother?” he demanded. He stood up, swaying. “Do you know?”

“No idea,” Draco snapped. “Probably it was a lie to bait out Sirius, which, predictably, worked. Put the Cloak on— better yet, give it to Granger, I’ll Disillusion us—oh, *Merlin*, you shithead—”

Harry had twisted out of Hermione’s grasp and had raced up the steps, towards Sirius. The Cloak whipped around his shoulders, and he vanished.

“God damn it,” Hermione hissed. “I’m going to kill him. No! I’m going to let you kill him, first, to get the method right, and then I’m going to kill him, only slower, and differently — come on.”

It was bravado; she was palpably working herself up. Draco touched Hermione’s hand. She took his quickly, and tightly, and held on as if it were the only object gravity were still operating on.

She drew her wand, cast Disillusionment, and led them into the old townhouse.

Inside, the parlor had been shredded. With curtains drawn, it was so dark they had to find their way from the glittering embers scattered over the stairwell. Something had ripped up the stairwell like spines on a dorsal ridge and left gaping holes in its wake. The wallpaper peeled and wilted from panels of scarred wood and, in some places, scuffed stone; some of it smoked. The hallway to the kitchen was a bombed-out, smoky black, and the floor piled with rubble like a desert tundra. Under the hole of Walburga’s portrait there was a stain of something red and visceral. When they passed the burnt brass shell of the hallway mirror, glass crunched under Draco’s boot. Directly ahead, in the drawing-room, the shadows writhed together in a violent ballet of shade and light.

In the heart of the room stood a more violent dance still: Bellatrix Lestrange and Sirius Black, wayward daughter and prodigal son, dueling in a tiny supernova of light and holy fire.

Wherever Sirius wasn't, Bellatrix was. She cut a white rift in the air above her, and he shot a blue charm on the backhand, which exploded together under the chandelier in a fountain of splintered wood and glass. The shrapnel hit a Shield Charm balanced on his wand-tip, which swallowed three bolts of green light and then vanished as she shot something sinewy and red. Sirius swayed back in an elegant dodge and she slashed her wand into the opening — blood sprayed, it had nicked him — but Sirius had used the move to flick a curse sidelong under her guard, and though she counterspelled it, the recoil rocked her back, so she moved, too, shifting the curse, curling it around her waist like a physical liquid, flipping it back at him with a new thread of black spikes. Sirius spun his wand in a wide circle over their heads; the air shimmered as something blue and scaly came into being, forked tongue hissing —

and now his guard was down, so she ducked under his arm and slashed her wand again, and two Death Eaters who had been readying their wands fell in a blaze of green light — and the thing over their heads was sprouting wings, roaring — and Bellatrix was everywhere, all at once, shooting spells and deflecting curses, and Sirius at last with a gleeful howl released the ice dragon, and as its wings spread open it drove deep gouges into the wood of the rafters, like claw-marks. The house gave a whining groan, and the ceiling sagged.

“Where is it?”

That was Bellatrix, impatient and shrill. Draco stepped quickly behind the doorframe, hauling Hermione around and out of sight.

Bellatrix grunted and met the dragon with a sweeping fan of fire that forced Sirius to dive behind the sofa. It killed the creature, but it also snapped up and caught the tapestries on the wall. They kindled and burst into flame, casting the room in a hellish red.

“Where did you put it?” she shouted. “Where is it? *Where is it?* I know you have it!”

“Whatever it is, it’s at the bottom of a flea market in Knockturn Alley,” said Sirius savagely, “if Mundungus Fletcher is the man I hope he is — pawned for sickles to a mudblood beggar, or trickled down to a muggle charity shop—”

“Enough! *I know you stole it!* Where did you put it?”

“If I gave a fuck what you meant, I still wouldn’t tell you,” he spat, and jabbed his wand at the floorboards. They erupted underneath her in a trapjaw, snapping closed with deadly force around the space she was: Bellatrix slipped out of the way, executing what Draco identified as a truly beautiful sidestep, and the jaws closed on empty air. “Missing one of your trinkets? Fretting for your childhood thumbscrews?”

For some reason, this found purchase under her skin. Bellatrix scoffed in anger, and flung an armchair at him. It shattered in an explosion of upholstery and mahogany against the mantelpiece, and Sirius hardly had to duck. “The ring!” she cried. “The ring that bears the crest of Black! Where is it?”

Sirius gaped at her, and gave a harsh laugh. “Ask your lady sister,” he said. “Or your lord husband, maggots take him. Bella, baby, why the fuck did you think *I* had your ring?”

“The vault’s been emptied,” said Bellatrix thinly. “A *blood-sealed* vault. Did you really think you could lie to me? *Tell me where you put it.”*

“This is hilarious stuff,” gritted Sirius, throwing a Killing Curse. Carelessly, she kicked an ottoman at him, blocking it. “So your gaudy junk went missing. It’s not even the real ring! It’s your new-money knuckleduster replacement crap. The real one’s somewhere out there in Reg’s grave. I bet his ghost nurses it like a binky.”

“Tell me where it is.”

“No idea! Ask your lady sister, the *vault master,* you fucking moron —”

“Cissa wouldn’t *take it!* It was mine, she well knew!”

“Oh, well, if you told her to,” Sirius drawled, dancing back from her curse. “I’m sure she did it, then. Quite your whelp, wasn’t she? Small matter of killing her husband, water under the trollbridge, between chums — *hah!* I don’t suppose it occurred to you! Did it? That she wouldn’t forgive you?”

Bellatrix threw herself at him. In midair she became smoke again, like her body belonged only temporarily to the physical plane, dissolving and reforming — Draco’s heart jerked — *far too close,* on the inside of his guard, too close for him to party — and with a shout

that was more contempt than anger, she tore her wand diagonally across his chest.

Blood sprayed high and thick and dark over both of them. Threads of it draped their faces and soaked through the leather of Sirius's breastplate, pouring fast onto slick floorboards. A gouge opened in Sirius's chest so deep it flashed white bone.

Sirius dropped to his knees. One hand fumbled at his chest, and came away soaked. In the light of the burning tapestries the color hardly changed, but thick trails of it ran down his wrist when he lifted it, slowly, before his eyes. He listed and caught himself on his wand-hand; his aged, handsome face was slack with dazed surprise.

Bellatrix stood over him, her arm still extended in the finishing pose of her stroke. She could have finished him easily, then, with a Killing Curse or any other crowning blow, but she didn't.

Harry ripped off the Cloak and tore out of the shadows, dodging Draco's desperate grab at his arm.

"SIRIUS!" he screamed. It was an awful sound; an orphan's sound, Draco thought, with the part of his brain that wasn't dumb with dread. "SIRIUS!"

He threw himself over Sirius's body. His breath came in audible wet gasps. Sirius rocked back, blinking. His hand drifted lightly over Harry's shoulder. He sagged down and caught himself on one elbow.

"Run," he croaked. "Go, kid. Run… I can… get you time, buy you…"

It was not clear he knew what he was saying. His eyes were unfocused. Harry fumbled to heal him, but *Episkey* spluttered uselessly against the depth and breadth of the wound.

"James, you can still make it," said Sirius.

His arm went out from under him. His head knocked hard on the floor.

“SIRIUS!”

Hermione gave a muffled scream. Draco dragged her further in the shadows, ice-numb. Harry was there. Hermione was here. They were too far apart. Bellatrix could take all of them at once, it wouldn’t matter, she would kill them.

She *would* kill him. She’d killed his father, and she’d kill him. She’d kill both of them and she’d make him watch and then she’d make him die.

Bellatrix lowered her arm, flexing her wand-hand absently, and cast a glance around the room. She seemed disinterested in Harry, for the time being, likely more preoccupied with whatever it was she wanted — the ring. The ring for which Sirius Black had died.

Hermione was tearing through her pockets for something, whispering frantically to herself. Draco gripped his wand and tipped his head against the wall, trying to steady his heartbeat.

He risked another look into the drawing-room. Bellatrix had thrown back the Turkish rug — now so bloodstained as to obscure the print — and, swiping her fingers through the pool of Sirius’s blood, she had begun drawing a rune on the darkened floorboards. The reflected flames of the tapestries flickered over her dark brows, drawn intently in concentration. She worked steadily, adding each dot and mark with care; the lines of her pentagram were unblemished and crisply angled, no worse than Sinestra’s.

Harry was crying into Sirius’s chest. His hands were dark and shining with his godfather’s blood.

Hermione drew something from her pockets with a trembling exhale. It glinted silver in her hands. Phoenix tears.

“I need an opening,” she whispered, and her voice had never shaken more, but her hands were steady. “If we can get her away from Sirius —”

“How.”

“Distract her. I’ll get her attention—”

“No.”

“Then *hide me,”* she begged, “so I can heal him. Draco, he’s going to die, and Harry will never come back.”

It was true. Her face was furious, streaked with fire, gold where it wasn’t red or shade. He was angry at her for suggesting that either of them risk their lives for Sirius Black, only it was an imperfect anger, because he’d been thinking of the same thing.

“You do a better Disillusion.”

“Two charms,” she said. “Disillusionment and *Muffliato.* Then I’ll heal him, and we’ll all head for the Floo. Harry first, then you—”

“No.”

“Fine! We both go at once. But Harry first, with Sirius, then us. If we’re fast, we can do it.”

If they were fast, and lucky, and perfect, possibly. He didn’t say that, though. He nodded shortly. Hermione took a deep breath, wrapped her hands around the tiny vial of phoenix tears, and ducked into the room.

Bellatrix’s back was turned, working at a rune. Draco placed his foot on the seams of the boards and moved lightly, the shimmer of Hermione’s charm so strong he could hardly focus on his own boots. The nerves in his body were chattering with a blind and uniform panic. There was so much blood he had to take care not to trip.

Outside, the sounds of wizards dueling came in muffled thunder. The sirens carried on an endless lament. Bellatrix's hand slowed, and then finished the loop with a short stroke of her third finger.

Draco gestured with his head. Hermione slipped around the corner, darted along the wall, and dropped to her knees beside Sirius, shoving Harry off without preamble. Harry gave a gasp, and she clapped a hand over his mouth, her eyes wide and searing.

"I wouldn't," said Bellatrix.

She hadn't turned her head. His blood was ice. It did not move. Nothing moved, not even his heart. Hermione had frozen with her hand on Harry's mouth.

"It's a waste," she added. She wiped her hand on her prisoner's skirt and stood. "You're young wizards. Brave ones, if you saw that and didn't run."

Bellatrix turned. Draco felt it like a physical touch, a slap of cold water.

Her expression tightened, quizzical, and he saw the dark darts of her pupils flicker up to his hair.

"You love the boy," observed Bellatrix. Drained of contempt, her voice was an odd thing: low and hollow, hard-edged, and it might even have been compassionate. It was hard to reconcile with the reality, so recently demonstrated, of her enormous capacity for cruelty. "You would have run if you didn't. Well, it's no crime. If it is, it's not one my Lord won't forgive. Here is his mercy, and mine: Neither of you have to die here."

Harry pried himself free of Hermione. "Hermione," he gasped, and Draco was seized with an awful, choking premonition too late to stop the name from slipping out, in a desperate unthinking slur: "Draco, go, *run,* listen to her!"

He kept pleading, but Draco's hearing kindly winked him out. At the word *Draco,* Bellatrix's head cocked to one side, and her expression sharpened into fascination.

"Draco," she said softly. "Yes, I thought so. Your face resurrects him."

He found his voice, inconceivably, somewhere at the bottom of a cask of fury he'd kept on ice for a long, long eight years.

"I wouldn't know," he said coldly. "He died some time since."

Her expression was difficult to read. It was intrigued, faintly vulpine, equally devoid of guilt or blame. Bellatrix began to cross the room, picking gracefully around the broken furniture. There was something in the way she moved that was like an animal, a large one, moving with deceptive lightness. "You're my heir," she said. "I held you in my arms when you were a baby. I thought of you often, in Azkaban."

Of all the things he had thought she might say, this was so far beyond predictable that he struggled to pin the reality of it in place.

"You thought of me."

"Of course I did. You, and the Dark Lord. They were the two thoughts that kept me alive," she said, with bizarre simplicity. "Those, and your mother. How is she? Has she married again?"

"No."

"Good. More children would only be a danger. Their sire would breed them against you, and you'd war for the succession once she died." Her face twitched in a way that might have been a smile, or an effort at one, in a hideous way. "Under other circumstances, it could be quite fun."

"I don't understand." His head pulsed with the ache of trying to reconcile her with what he knew. She had killed his father. She had

tortured the Longbottoms to insanity. She had made Neville an orphan. She had probably made many orphans.

But she was a person, then, in front of him, with oily skin and prison greys, and greasy ringlets in her hair; and she had told them to run, so she wouldn't hurt them; and she had told what he was fairly sure was a joke. It was impossible. It couldn't fit, it would break, it would break anyone who tried to understand it.

"What don't you understand? Tell me. I will make it plain."

"You killed my father. You speak as if— you speak as if you didn't."

Her face cleared. "Oh," she said. "She didn't tell you. Of course she didn't; how cruel that lovely girl is. Draco, your father betrayed us. He sold himself to the Ministry for a short leash—"

"I know that."

"Then I mistake your question. I saved a thousand of our Lord's servants from your father's treason. I saved the Lord himself, in ways you are yet too young to understand. I speak to you as family."

"I speak to you as the son of a man you killed," he said, furious. It pitched him beyond fear. "You took my father and buried him. I don't care what he did."

Bellatrix blinked.

"You're older than I thought you would be," she said, after a moment. "The years pass differently inside. I hoped to return before you were a man. I don't know why I thought you would ever understand, growing up with your mother."

It was worse for the way she delivered it: without apology, which he would not have accepted, and without sympathy, which he dreaded to think he might have.

Hermione had been working while they spoke. Unstoppering the vial, she poured its contents in a thin stream over Sirius's wound. Pale steam guttered from the body, and tendrils of muscle reached for each other, replenishing the flesh that had been lost. A corded rope of scar tissue rose over the wound, cinching the cleaved folds of skin together. Hermione followed the path of the healing with her wand, bolts of sweat shining on her face, muttering spells. Harry cradled Sirius's head in his lap, watching her with an expression that would have over-honored Merlin himself. But Sirius did not stir.

Draco realized that Bellatrix was still looking at him. If she knew what Hermione was doing, she didn't care. Possibly she hadn't meant to kill Sirius, or hadn't cared to, or perhaps she merely knew she could again, once Hermione's efforts were finished.

"What do you want with Potter?" he said roughly.

"Do you care for him?" she wondered. "Is that why you're here?"

"I don't want him to die," he said, which was true, if incomplete. He shifted away from the others, subtly. If could keep her attention until Hermione had finished—

"The Lord doesn't want him dead. Potter has many uses to him yet. If he were meant to die here—" Suddenly, Bellatrix looked over his shoulder. "Rookwood, it's not here."

One of the Death Eaters stood in the door, his robes tattered and smoking, his brown curls hanging low over his eyes. He put out one of the flaming tapestries with a flick of his wand and braced himself against the wall.

"Then we should away," he said raggedly. "Before the others come. The auror child bested Dolohov."

"Good God, he's out of practice," Bellatrix said in dismay, stepping around Draco. Her hand brushed his shoulder, a fleeting and absent

gesture, as she moved around him; everything in him froze still. “Where’s Nott?”

“Commanding the dementors. He’s neutralized the red one and the blonde.”

“He’s done well, then.”

“He is a whinging dog.”

“Those are often competent,” said Bellatrix, “and I have uses for them. Augustus, meet my nephew: Draco Malfoy, this is Lord Rookwood, Death Eater.”

Rookwood focused on him intently. “Lord Malfoy,” he said, in glacial tones of respect, and extended his arm. “Good tidings.”

“I’m not Lord Malfoy,” he said, revulsed. It was the only thing he could think to say. The light was thick and red and nauseating. It made Rookwood’s face seem unearthly, swollen with malice, a demon-face.

“He’s sixteen,” said Bellatrix brusquely, and stepped between them to cross to the door. Rookwood withdrew his arm, his eyes glinting. “My lady sister is his regent. I’ll escort him back to her when we’re finished.”

“Be swift in it. We have a long journey ahead.”

Hermione drew back from Sirius, who still did not move. Harry shook his shoulder weakly, to no resolution. Draco’s stomach sank. If Sirius had died already, the healing wouldn’t matter. They were a powerful palliative, but they couldn’t bring someone back from the dead. Hermione watched Rookwood and Bellatrix move around the room with wide eyes.

The door to the house flew open with a scream of hinges. The figure that emerged into the firelight was sallow and thin, and wore high-

collared black robes.

Severus Snape stepped over the threshold, tossed ashes from his hems, and glanced down at the fallen body of his old school foe. Surprise registered in the briefest flare of his eyes. Draco could not help it: he was relieved to see him. He almost called out to him, but he clenched his jaw to stop it.

Then Snape stepped over the corpse, forcing Hermione to dive out of the way to avoid being trod on. Harry gave a wordless snarl at him, clutching Sirius's head to his chest.

Bellatrix watched him with a calculating expression. Snape glanced at Draco, and though his eyes narrowed, he said nothing to him.

"Hail the Lady Lestrange," he said. He swept into a bow so deep it seemed faintly mocking.

Bellatrix twitched in irritation. "Hail, Severus," she said. "The eternally turning worm."

"I hardly think I deserve that," said Snape, straightening. "I have served our Lord faithfully these many years."

"Faithfully! I should strike you down for saying the word."

"If you thought he would forgive you that, you would have," said Snape smoothly. He folded his hands behind his back. "So at least one of you is mistaken in me. Does the Lady doubt her Lord?"

Her lip curled, and she scoffed, turning her back on him. "It's not here," she muttered instead of answering, kicking a bit of rubble that had once been an armchair. "Black hid it from me."

"I see," agreed Snape, blank-faced. "And did killing him further your interrogation?"

"It furthered my pleasure," she said pointedly. "Which is the disposition I find myself in, at present, Severus."

“Could I request that you adopt a more productive disposition, at your convenience? Far be it for me to deny you sweets, but you were dispatched for a purpose, and you are not the only one whose displeasure has a body count.”

“We’ve laid hands on Potter,” Rookwood said. “He wants the boy. He’ll be pleased with us for that.”

“Leave him to me,” said Snape immediately. “I’ll see him to our Lord, and deal with the spares. You stay, and complete your purpose.”

“It isn’t here,” snapped Bellatrix.

“Have you searched thoroughly? I see you have attempted a heartsblood pentagram. You intended to scry the ring, I assume?”

“It wouldn’t have worked. You can’t scry that kind of artifact.”

“Certainly not with an unfinished pentagram,” he said.

“Maybe I shall use *your* heartsblood to finish it.”

“It could only improve your chances.”

Rookwood stepped over to Harry and tore him free of Sirius as casually as one lifting a dog. Hermione gave a cry, and Draco looked sharply at her. She was crouched by the hearth with her wand gripped close to her chest.

“Enough chinwag,” said Rookwood. “I’m taking him back.”

“No,” said Snape.

“Severus,” snapped Bellatrix. “Let him take the boy. You cannot possibly begrudge him this one pearl—”

“Potter is sly and cunning,” said Snape, “and I, knowing him better than either of you, am best suited to handle him.”

“You piece of shit,” Harry said raggedly. “Try it, Death Eater, see how you handle me.”

“Silencio.”

Snape’s wand moved so quickly Draco didn’t see it. The spell whiffed out Harry’s voice, though his mouth kept moving in savage shapes.

“You’re hardly one to fear a child’s cunning,” said Bellatrix.

“Potter has twice evaded our Lord. Your arrogance will make it thrice.”

Draco’s heart pounded. Snape had not holstered his wand after Silencing Harry.

“Rookwood,” said Bellatrix suddenly. “Take Potter. Go.”

Rookwood dragged Harry forward by the collar. Snape stepped into his path. She inhaled, and inclined her head with a knowing condescension.

“Severus,” she said, “in the name of our Lord, his right hand, and first knight, commands you to step aside.”

“The right hand may command all it likes,” said Severus softly, “but I take my orders from the mouth. Ones that even you are not privy to. Give Potter to me, and I will deliver him.”

“I have always loathed you,” Bellatrix said softly. “I have *always* mistrusted you. I never understood why the others didn’t! Whatever amusements Mulciber found in you… What in Merlin’s earth compelled Lucius to take a half-blood runt under his wing. He was never one for pity.”

“Much in this world can be laid at the feet of half-blood runts,” replied Snape. “Give me the boy, and I will relieve you of the burden of my presence.”

Bellatrix tilted her head almost indulgently. She drew back the sleeve of her left arm, revealing a swirling tattoo that swallowed the plane of skin from wrist to elbow: a skull and a snake, twined around each other in a black ouroboros. Her fingers skimmed low over the ink.

The curse flashed. A jerk of her wand deflected it, and it sizzled out at her feet. She stepped back and grinned at him.

Snape lowered his wand, his shoulders sinking.

“What a gift,” she breathed. “What a way to celebrate my liberation! Oh, I’ve wanted to do this for *years.* You didn’t even make me wait.”

“Bellatrix,” said Snape, and he stepped sideways, slowly, while she matched his steps in reverse. Draco realized what he was doing: turning the axis of the duel, opening a route to the hallway for Draco. “You were in prison this morning. You have fought one bout already. I have not. Consider carefully whether you can best me.”

Her smile vanished, and a snarl replaced it. “Best *you!”* she said. “There’s old audacity, with its blind eyes! Does a storm weigh its chance against the vane? Did I hesitate for Amory Bones? For Wulfred MacKinnon? For *Galatea Merrythought?* The last man to best me brought an army. And on your best day, you were nothing more than a bumbling alchemist, fretting at your notes and theories, studying the shadows of greater wizards on the wall.”

Snape struck on the word *shadows.* His first curse was a beauty, a swarm of white blades arcing out of the air, converging on her like a razored school of eels. Bellatrix raised her wand with a conductor’s poise, and she gave a delighted little laugh, as if she found nothing in the world so splendid as this effort to kill her.

Her wand glided gracefully down. The blades melted and swirled into liquid light on her wandtip. She rolled her shoulders with a dancer’s grace and whipped it back in a swarm of tentacles that swarmed across the floor, leaving bubbling ruts of acid in their wake. Snape conjured a lattice of spongiform black beneath them that drank them

up and gnawed at the floorboards. They dueled in a dreamy and grotesque style, less of the sparring stroke-and-parry of the classical duel, and more like a ritual showcase of horrible ways to die.

But Bellatrix was stronger. It was evident in three movements, and obvious in four: Spells that took Severus seconds to compose were shredded at her glance, and her movements were offensively lax, parsimonious, graceful, to the point it seemed effortless. There was an element of dance in them, of pleasure. She laughed when he slipped something deadly past her guard, as if it couldn't matter, and it didn't. She twisted his every spell into something more monstrous and lassoed it back at him. A noose of thorns sprouted at her touch into a bloom of poisonous flowers, which he siphoned from the air with a gust. A conjured snake she split open in midair, blood fountaining, and transfigured each shred of skin into a razor-toothed worm, which scurried towards Snape with terrible shrieking before they died in a blight of heat at his wand.

Reality bent and twisted at the flutter of her fingers; her offhand seeming to conduct the air around her wand as it jumped and darted. Magic hung thick in the air, static flints jumping from her fingers and hair. The air around them distorted in a fish-eye shape, which he recognized a second later as their wards.

The first six movements passed in a matter of seconds. A sideboard exploded under a redirected *Bombarda,* and Draco threw a Shield Charm to shield himself from shrapnel, the force of which drove him back on his heels. He slammed into something hard and tall and found himself staring down Rookwood.

Rookwood darted forward with his wand close to his body, arm bunched for a thrust — he was too fucking fast, unnaturally fast — tossed away Draco's probing strike, and knocked him on his back with an unusually blunt punch to the chest. It had enormous strength behind it, and threw him into the wall with a starry blot of pain when his head hit the wood. The killing blow didn't come: Rookwood hauled Harry into the hallway, backlit by the burning tapestries and

the exotic fireworks of the duel, and passed Draco by. Rookwood was too dangerous to think the mercy was incidental.

Small hands grabbed his collar. Hermione had screamed something; his head swam and he heard his name.

“Draco!”

She was panicking. Her eyes were glassy, tear-tracks of fear slitting open the grime on her cheeks, and she was wild in how she touched him, ungentle. Her bloodied hands flew to his neck, cheek, temple, leaving warm smears of something on his cheeks. He clasped her arm, blinking spots out of his eyes.

“Fine! *I’m fine! He’s got Potter!”*

“I KNOW! Catch— get to — more—”

He couldn’t hear her over the duel. Hermione seized his hand and tugged, and he ran with her around the corner, into the shattered hallway. Rookwood was almost through the door with Harry when Hermione pointed her wand and shouted: *“ULCERATIO!”*

Rookwood whirled and caught the curse on his forearm. Sores ripped up the skin, angry and red, ballooning the skin from wrist to arm. The man barked and barely clasped his wand, which was clutched in a growing mass of sores. It was not without pride that Draco noticed the blood that wept between sores, the yellow swell of infection peeling the skin. She had learned it beautifully. It was almost better than his.

Hermione panted, twitching her wand back into first position, and threw another curse at his ankles, which missed. Draco saw the twitch of Rookwood’s swollen wand-hand and threw his arm up to counterspell the curse that lashed back at her. Rookwood dropped Harry, who landed on his knees and gasped for breath, clutching his throat. His wand slid from his pocket and rolled, skittering out of reach.

“That was a poor idea, child,” said Rookwood. His pain showed in the whistle of breath through clenched teeth.

“Fuck you,” Hermione said, and she was so angry she was shaking. There were years of anger in the adrenaline gleam of her eyes. Too angry for a clever reproof, nothing witty in the risk of death. She cursed him again.

A net swirled from her wand. It was thin as gossamer, but it had weight, and snared Rookwood’s ankles. It caught him, and he severed it with a lash, then threw *Bombarda.* It detonated at their ankles. Draco swept the blast up and out of the way, shattering another chandelier, raining glass and wax against Hermione’s shield. Draco lobbed a curse low as she threw one high, and he understood as if he’d already seen it what she was going to do, where her body would move next; he moved to cover it, and found the hole in her guard, threaded a counterspell through it to block Rookwood’s curse, and when he lashed a charm overhand Hermione ducked to throw a *Stupefy* at his knees, forcing Rookwood to backstep.

Harry’s wand sat just to his right. As Rookwood lunged, Draco sidestepped off his line, and Hermione intercepted the curse that Rookwood shot into the opening. Draco kicked Harry’s wand back at him.

Harry snapped it out of the air, rolled on his back, and shot a spell that hit the guard at the same time as Hermione’s *Everte* and Draco’s *Vermicarnis.*

Rookwood blocked two with a neat zigzag movement: two, but not three. Draco’s spell hit him square in the sternum, and he staggered back, clutching his chest. The fabric of his shift started to ripple.

A hole peeled open in Rookwood’s chest, and a thin pink worm nosed out. Another one opened in his stomach, followed by a second worm, which wriggled out and then burrowed back into the skin.

Across the skin of his chest, dark holes sprouted and spawned a wriggling, fleshy mass of worms, which squirmed and chewed their way back into his body. Rookwood roared, and his hands spasmed, torn between the obvious desire to beat them off and not to touch them; he thrashed in pain. Blood beaded and wept from the holes as the worms feasted on his skin.

Harry barked an expletive and scrambled back from him, leaping to his feet. Hermione stepped back, uncertain, but in her horror there was a glint of hard, angry satisfaction. Rookwood staggered out of the house, into the smoky dusk, and Apparated with a *crack,* leaving a wriggling trail of worms in his wake. He was gone.

“Is it going to kill him?” said Harry hoarsely.

“I don’t know,” said Draco, feeling numb and cold, because he didn’t. “I’ve never used that spell before.”

“Holy *shit,* Draco.”

“I didn’t see you saving either of us,” Hermione snapped, and Harry flinched.

“I didn’t mean — I’m not saying it’s—”

“Good, I hoped you weren’t. I’m sure you weren’t going to say *anything* about his methods, Harry, when Draco fought a *Death Eater* for you, if it weren’t for his exceptional skill with a wand, you might be halfway to the North Sea—”

“Hermione, I wasn’t!”

She had stepped in front of Draco, her hackles high, as if he required guarding. It was deeply touching; also, vaguely discomfiting, since she was shouting at Harry as if she might curse him next. “And you know, I’m glad he *did* cast it,” she shouted. “I’m glad I watched that happen to him. I’m bloody glad Draco was here, so Rookwood didn’t kill me. I’m *glad* Draco made him suffer. I’m glad it wasn’t *peaceful* or

civilized, I'm glad that I got to watch someone do something *half* as bad to him as what he would've done to me. I'm not sorry. I'm *not* fucking sorry. I'm not going to roll over and die. Draco is the only one of us who can fight worth a damn, don't you dare tell him not to, don't you dare, *you're not allowed to—"*

"Hermione, I *didn't say that!* You're panicking, *listen* to yourself—"

"I'm fucking *terrified!"* she snarled. "There are Death Eaters and dementors here and Sirius is *dead,* and my *parents are out there,* and I'm about to die—"

"Hermione, please!"

"—and *you leave Draco alone,* he's the only reason I'm fucking *close* to safe, you're *certainly not—"*

"Granger," Draco said roughly, pulling her back from a stricken Harry. She snarled at him, but she stilled when he touched her, snapping her jaw closed around another invective, and breathed hard through her nose. "That's enough. I appreciate it. It's not the time."

"I can't," she said, breathing quickly, "I can't breathe, I'm going to—"

"You're not going to die. I won't let you."

"We're *all going to die,* there're *Death Eaters* — I'm not a duelist, I can't fight, Harry can't fight, the only one of us with any experience is you—"

"I'm good enough," said Draco intently, threading his hands in her hair. There was blood on them, now, Sirius's. He pushed it aside. Couldn't think about it. He could do that; doubtlessly Hermione understood the situation better than any of them, that was why she was terrified, but he could close down those thoughts, he could force himself to be steady and even and cool. "I can be good enough for the three of us. I can. I'll get us out of here."

“You can’t.”

“I can. Trust me. Tell me you trust me.”

Hermione gripped his wrists, and closed her eyes. With a shudder, as if some violent spirit were going out of her, she stopped shaking. She said: “I trust you.”

“There you are. Come on. I’ll get us out of here.”

He began turning to Harry, but a shadow darkened the doorway. His wand snapped up of its own accord.

The shadow sharpened as it stepped into the dull red light of Grimmauld Place. It was Narcissa.

A great swell carried him up and seemingly off his feet, a dizzy, free-falling delirium of relief. It was his mother.

“Mother,” he said, reaching for her. “Mum.”

She flew at him and caught him in a fierce embrace. Her arms crushed him to her chest. Her ring grazed over his skull, heavy and cold. Her breath shuddered out of her.

“Draco,” she whispered. “Draco, I’m sorry. Forgive me. I was awful. Mummy was selfish. I’m sorry.”

“Forgive you — yes, it’s fine, I don’t — we have to go. We have to go now.”

Narcissa laid a bruising kiss on his temple and withdrew. “The Order is coming,” she said briskly. “They’ve been delayed. The Floo network is policed, and many of the public grates are shut. Take Granger and Potter to the Manor. Stay there until you get word from Albus Dumbledore — from Albus Dumbledore, and *no one else.* Let no one through the wards. Not even those who wear familiar faces.”

“What about the others?” rasped Harry. “They were fighting outside — Tonks, and Bill, and Fleur—”

“Nymphadora Tonks incurred heavy injuries in her duel with Dolohov. She was lucky to survive, at that cost. Leave her: she will only slow you,” Narcissa said curtly. “The Weasley and the Frenchwoman I found swarmed by dementors; it took all I had to save them. You may tell Molly Prewett, that self-declared wardenness of other women’s sons, that my debts are paid.”

“Tell her yourself,” said Draco, his heart skittering. “Where are you going?”

Narcissa ignored him and clutched his arm. She gripped Hermione on the shoulder, so high her thumb almost dug into her throat. “Never leave him,” she hissed, and the firelight kindled her dark eyes with manic intensity. “Never. Kill anyone who tries to hurt him. I trust you to do it; you are a fierce creature, and you will fight like a demon. I see it in you. I bless it. It will take all the fire in your soul to survive what comes. They will rip your happiness from your arms and bleed it to death while you watch, if you let them. They will tear your heart’s treasure limb from limb and gnaw on his bones — if you let them. Girlchild, you must do anything but let them. Break every law. Defile all altars. Become any monster, before you let them.”

She jerked Hermione forward, and — Draco started — pressed her mouth to Hermione’s ear. Hermione’s eyes flared, and she made to shove Narcissa away, but she stopped as Narcissa whispered something to her. Her expression shuttered.

When she was finished, Hermione flinched away, and Narcissa released her, with a savage satisfaction in the twist of her mouth.

She kissed Draco on the forehead, and said: “From any distance, my darling.”

Then she pushed him away. He stumbled back. Narcissa turned and moved into the entrance of the parlor, and the wave of fresh light

washed her face red.

“What are you doing,” he said sharply, reaching for her. Hermione held him back. “What are you doing?”

“We have to go,” Hermione whispered unhappily. “I’m so sorry. Draco, we have to go.”

“Absolutely not. Absolutely not — what is she doing? Let go of me. Granger, *let go of me.”*

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, we have to get out—”

He pried free and ran into the parlor, ignoring Hermione’s cry.

Inside, the tapestries had guttered out, and the light was so dull it was almost night. From small smoking bundles on the floor the only light of the room dappled the walls, red and dreamy, like a vignette from Baudelaire. His gut twisted at the scene.

Snape lay at Bellatrix’s feet, bleeding profusely from a stump where his left arm had been. His face was a warped mask of bruising and scars, his nose collapsed and crooked sickeningly to one side, and when Draco saw him it pierced his chest with a cold certainty that he was dead. The tiniest lift of Snape’s chest proved it for a lie: but relief was not long, for Bellatrix paced the room nearby. The wrist of his severed arm, which bore the Dark Mark, she broke with a stamp of her boot.

“...emperor strung by his own phylacteries,” she spat. “Nothing less to expect from a half-blood worm… You ought to beg me to kill you; when I turn you over to the Dark Lord, you’ll long for the death I’d have given you. How many of our failures were brooked by your treason? How deep is the knife you laid in the spine of God? Why, Severus, you must weep for honor: he may even kill you himself.”

She did not notice that two people slipped into the room, the first smoothly, with a step that did not hesitate at the horrorshow that

awaited her; the other stumbling after her, and caught in disgust at the door.

Narcissa presented herself in the low kindling light, her spine straight, her shoulders thrown out and back to accentuate the proud shape of her carriage in her jade-green robes. Pieces of cornsilk hair fluttered around her face in a coy frame. She was splendid, beautiful as a bride, with and despite the deep lines in her face. After a moment, she smiled.

Bellatrix stared at her. The tremor in her face seemed torn hatefully from her, an unwilling concession to fear or fury or whatever it was. Then she lunged.

Draco's arm seized for a curse, but Bellatrix didn't attack Narcissa. She cleared Snape's body in a single leap and threw herself at Narcissa, and Narcissa stepped forward, with a broken sound, and buried her face in her sister's shoulder. Draco's hand twitched, and he lowered his wand, paralyzed.

The two women huddled together as if they were trying to enter each other's skin. Bellatrix gripped the back of Narcissa's head, her yellowed nails digging into her skull, and pressed her face into the crook of Narcissa's neck, nosing at it with terrible sounds; Narcissa laughed wetly at something. She clenched Bellatrix's shoulders and shook her, a bit, to dislodge her. Bellatrix went freely, and when her face lifted again it was wet and shining.

"Cissa," she said. "You came for me. You heard I was— you came."

"Yes," murmured Narcissa, and the lie jarred him in its ease, "yes, of course. Of course I came."

"You didn't *visit* me. Years and years, I waited for you, and you never came."

"How could I? How could I bear it, to see you brought so low?"

“Weakling,” said Bellatrix, and the spite was heady with affection. “You craven wretch, you’re not fit for use nor ornament. You abandoned me to that place because you couldn’t *stomach* it?”

“It’s what I am,” said Narcissa simply. “How could I help it? I’m sorry, Bella. I would have come if I could bear it.”

“I know,” she admitted. Her matted curls veiled half of her face, and the half that wasn’t shone. “I know you couldn’t come, poppet. I know. You’re only a fairy-girl. A cruel, shriveling, soft little fairy-girl, with hollow bones and knives for teeth.”

Narcissa said, “That’s a bit much.”

And Bellatrix said, “That hair is a bit much. Did your house-elf swap tar for soap?”

And they laughed together, a harmony of two notes, high and low. Bellatrix clasped her again to her chest, like a child pinning a squirming pet.

“Go now, with Mulciber,” she whispered giddily. “He’ll take you, and your boy — Draco — I met *Draco!* Cissa, he’s a fine thing, isn’t he? So proud, so angry — lost his way, of course, but you did the best you could, and I’m here now, there’s so much I can do with him.”

A whisper of fabric brushed Draco’s wrist. He jerked around. Hermione stood behind him, her finger pressed to her lips, the Cloak half-draped around her shoulders. She tugged on his arm insistently, and he knelt to let her draw the Cloak around them both, and pressing close to his side, so it would conceal them. Her arm lifted above them to hold the Cloak over their heads, and he could feel her heartbeat jumping against his arm. She exhaled, steadily, and a bead of sweat moved down her cheek. Unsteady, and unable to speak for fear of giving them away, he tapped her twice on the back of her wand-hand, and she gave an unsteady twitch of the mouth: *You’re welcome.*

Narcissa took Bellatrix's wrist and drew it away from her shoulder. "Bella," she said, in a honeyed trifle of a tone. "Run away and live in a Death Eater camp? Bunk with Mulciber and Dolohov, and ride out to hunt werewolves on thestralback, burning effigies to keep warm? Recall that you and I read very different kinds of novels."

"Don't be a priss. You'll have your silks and sweets. But—" She refocused, abruptly, on Narcissa's hand. The sentence died on her tongue.

"What?"

"You idiot," said Bellatrix, with awestruck woe. "You perfect stupid thing. You *wore* it?"

Snape had begun to stir. His right hand groped feebly along the baseboard for something. His wand rested a hairsbreadth from his bloodied fingers.

"Wore what? What are you talking about?" She followed Bellatrix's gaze to her hand, which bore a black diamond ring inset in a thick band of goblin silver. "This? It's your signet. It came with your effects."

"It's not yours!"

"It's the Black sigil. What on earth are you talking about? Do you want it back?"

"It isn't the Black *ring,"* said Bellatrix, on the edge of a hysterical laugh. "Cissa, that's mine. That is —it's not even mine, it's his."

"His? Whose? Roddy's?"

There was a beat. Smoke guttered from the embers of the tapestries. Narcissa whisked her hand out of Bellatrix's grasp, now very pale.

"No," she said. "What do you mean? No."

“Why did you wear it?” said Bellatrix incredulously. “Did you long so badly to be the heir, that you…? Surely you knew it wasn’t Orion’s.”

“I thought it was yours,” Narcissa exclaimed. “I thought it was given to you by Father, or Regulus, as a gift.”

“And you still wore it?”

“I thought it was yours.”

Snape’s hand closed around the wand. He dragged it along the floor, moving with a languor that could have been weakness or subterfuge, and pointed it weakly at his severed stump.

“You and your softness,” said Bellatrix, her dark eyes shining. Her fingers grazed Narcissa’s cheek. “My little tower princess. You don’t even know how you’ve saved us. He’ll love you as I do, after this.”

Narcissa flinched. “I don’t want that.”

“I know you don’t. Don’t worry, he knows you’re mine. Here, poppet. Give it to me.”

Snape had staunched the bleeding on his wound; the scorched reek of cauterized flesh joined the stench of smoke. He gripped the sideboard and gnashing his teeth, he dragged his body upright. The effort drained him, and he had to stop to gather breath.

“What happens if I do?” said Narcissa, her voice small.

“Everything goes back to the way it was. Only better. You come with me, and they never part us. No more fathers and teachers.”

“And Draco?”

Draco twitched. Hermione clenched his arm.

“Draco? He’ll come with us.”

Narcissa closed her eyes. The breath she drew seemed to break something in her throat on the way out. When she opened her eyes again, it dislodged a tear, which she removed with a calm and surgical daub of her knuckle.

She said, “Severus, I can give you seven minutes.”

“I could do it in four,” rasped Snape, “but I appreciate your vote of confidence.”

The look she flashed at him was not amused, but freighted in its place with a shocked, angry species of gratitude. She might have laughed at that, Draco thought. It was the kind of joke his mother would have liked. Someone who knew her would have known. Snape peered back at her through swollen eyes, with textbook impassiveness, and dipped his chin.

She pried the ring from her finger and passed it to her off-hand, where it vanished into her fist. Bellatrix moved to take it. Narcissa held her ground, and twisted her offhand behind her back. It had the effect of shifting her shoulders onto a duelist’s line.

“What are you doing?” said Bellatrix coldly. “Stop conspiring. Give it over.”

Snape braced himself upright against the sideboard, jerking the sallow hair from his eyes. His wand etched a complex pattern through the air, more script than gesture. As he muttered, a rosy gleam suffused through the air over his wand, as if someone in the next world over had turned a light on.

“I forgive you,” said Narcissa.

Bellatrix smiled quizzically. “For what?” she said.

“For Lucius.”

Bellatrix’s eyes sealed over with something flat and cold.

“For him?” she repeated. “You forgive… me… for *him?”*

“For killing my husband,” Narcissa said calmly. “Yes.”

“He betrayed you. He broke his oath,” she snapped. “He made fugitives and prisoners of us, our families—”

“You left him to rot in Azkaban.”

“And so he should have rotted in Azkaban,” snapped Bellatrix. “Did you think I would have left him there forever? I would have freed him. I would have fought to free him, for you, dull fool that he was. And if it were your life at stake, I would have felled the prison to do it, wandless I could have done it, with bloody hands — and what? He loved you so little he could not *sit in silence* for the same purpose?”

“He did it for me. And for Draco. He wanted to watch his son grow up.”

“And that was enough for you? You didn’t care, then, that he betrayed us — that he betrayed *me—”*

“I did care.”

“Not enough! If you forgave him that, it was because you never cared for me!”

Narcissa winced. “I do not grant that,” she said. “I say that I loved him. I would have died for him. I suppose you couldn’t countenance that, really,” she said, kindly enough. “You would never permit me to die unless it was for you.”

“Don’t say that like it makes you proud,” Bellatrix hissed, and her venom failed to disguise injury. “You insipid fool. Of course you’d die for him. You’d have died for anyone that gave the order, you were too fucking simple to do anything else. That’s why he married you.”

Narcissa shrugged.

“I loved you first,” she said simply. “I loved you the day I married Lucius, and I loved you the day I buried him. Strike me down, and you will cut down a creature that loves you.” She added, “Then again, you always did enjoy doing that.”

“Silencio!”

The curse flew high and wide of Narcissa, who did not move. It splashed harmlessly on the wall.

“I’m sorry we made you marry him,” she said, in even tones of sorrow. “It was a mistake. We should have rallied around you. We should have protected you. We were all you had, and we left you to die. I’m sorry.”

“You had nothing to do with my marriage. Don’t flatter yourself.”

Narcissa tilted her head. “No, I didn’t,” she said. “I should have. They should have had to pry me from you with an awl—”

“Be *silent,* Narcissa!”

“—should have cut my hands off at the wrists before they released you. If they had tried to marry me to a man I despised, you would have killed him before he touched me,” said Narcissa, lifting her voice. “You would have burned Witherfell before you let him take me from it. I should have done the same for you. I should have fought; I could have won. Not a day goes by where I do not wonder what would have happened if I had not betrayed you.”

“As if *you* had any power—”

“I could. With Andy and you together, we could. You were our courage. That’s why she left, I always knew it,” she said. “She loved you more than any man, but you were gone, and I was not enough.”

The curse slit the air between them with black lightning. Narcissa turned her chin and it sizzled past, inches from her cheek. Bellatrix

did not even speak, but kept her wand aloft in warning.

Narcissa lifted her own wand and shifted stances, her offhand rising to hover about the hip, her wand outstretched in the overhand grip. The old grip. The old way.

They dueled.

Her wand snapped up in a perfect parry. Perfect glide into a perfect riposte into a perfect counterstrike. And for every perfect deflection, Bellatrix hurled another perfect attack, a flawless curse, a ruthless thrust, coming down the piste like thundercloud unfurling, raw magic rippling the air around her in a dizzy storm of humid sparks. She feinted right and yet Narcissa stepped left, gracefully quick, without even a deferential glance at the feint, to parry the spell. A conjured whip of thorns was withered to ash in a single blast. Ice spikes ripped up from the floor and she dodged them a three-step so smooth it was almost a waltz. Jinxes shattered on her guard in a pepper of fire that her wand caught unerringly, as if magnetized.

Her cool dark eyes held unerringly on the point of Bellatrix's wand. Her body moved as if it knew what would happen three seconds ahead, as if she had done all this before, and had been doing it, without relief, for a hundred years.

"Prometheo," said Snape.

Fire poured from the air like a river of liquid sunlight. It coalesced into the shape of a beast, but it was unlike any beast Draco had ever seen in flesh or book: a bulbous arthropod with a sectioned carapace and an underbelly studded with long claws that propelled it through the air like fins, a forked tail that frothed and spit with tufts of flame. On its shoulders perched a skull and not a head, with four hollows instead of eyes where black coals guttered, with great serrated mandibles that dripped smoke. It snapped and swam through the room, leading a trail of fire that snapped up the walls in thick tongues.

Narcissa and Bellatrix were still dueling. There was no opening for anyone to intervene. The way they were moving, any curse stood equal chances of hitting Narcissa.

Hermione was hauling on his arm. The roar of Snape's conjuration drowned her voice, but he read the plea to run on her lips.

"My mother," he said numbly. "My mother—"

"Draco, please!" Hermione was pulling him. Her panicked eyes swam to him through the smoke. The fire left them the color of tarnished galleons. Her hands found his face and tried to pull him to look at her. Her hot trembling fingers were still sticky with blood.*"You have to leave!"*

The walls were burning. Smoke billowed from the walls, the floor, the ceiling. The roaring and spellfire congealed to a thunderous ringing in his ears. The house gave a groan.

A splintering CRACK was the only warning. A portion of the rafters collapsed. Hermione dove out of the way. They shattered around his head. The log that descended on him broke his Shield under a momentous blow, and he was knocked to the side. Hermione screamed his name and vanished behind a falling piece of the ceiling, guttering in flames.

Draco tore himself upright. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't see her. He shouted for her and didn't hear his own voice. His *Aguamenti* spluttered against the fire and merely added steam to the darkening veil of smoke. He shouted for her again the burn in his throat seemed to spread, down his chest into his lungs, into his bones, until his body was on fire, everything was on fire with panic.

And then there she was: caught under a piece of the wall that had collapse, her Shield glittering ferociously under the enormous bulk of the wood, and her teeth bared and face knit in effort and the relief was a single split second of cool.

He threw a Levitation Charm like a snare and it shoved the wall to one side. The wood leaned away from her and collapsed in an explosion of kindling and embers. Hermione's Shield vanished as she gasped for air. He seized her by the arm and dragged her up, and she clutched his forearms, coughing hard.

Hermione shoved herself upright, breathing raggedly, and pointed her wand. *"Ventus!"*

A gust of wind barrelled down the corridor of flame, splitting it open around the gleaming deer. It laced a narrow path through the burning wreckage to the door.

Snape's fire demon made another round of the room, letting out a screech that shook the foundations of the house. Spells flickered back and forth from the flames, but he couldn't see the casters. He shouted for his mother, but there was no answer. The silver deer stamped the ground in agitation, nosing at the path to the exit.

With his heart in his throat, he gave a snarl of wordless, hopeless frustration, and shoved Hermione in front of him. They staggered out of the burning parlor, through the collapsing entrance hall. The portraits had melted ghoulishly under the onslaught of flame, and the brass of the mirror had warped, dripping on the floor in a glowing molten pool. Turkish rugs lay in black spiderwebs of ashen thread. Embers rained from above as burning parts of the ceiling dropped like comets. All the ghostly splendor of Grimmauld Place howled in a cascade of fire and ash.

He grabbed Hermione's hand and ran to the door, her fingers sweat-slick and tight in his. They were so close; he could see the soft clear twilight of the night beyond, the clear purple, and he could almost taste the waft of fresh air from beyond the burning doorframe. Hermione cast another *Ventus* and it knocked the flames away in a billowing curtain around the door, and her foot had crossed the threshold when something snared the back of his shirt and wrenched him back, tearing his hand free of hers.

The flames snapped closed around her as she whirled around. They closed on her face in a rictus of horror. She screamed, *“DRACO!”*

A hand fisted his collar. The nails scraped the back of his neck.

He twisted and lashed out blindly behind him with all of his strength. Something connected — something cracked — there was a female cry of pain.

Draco landed with a hard dazzle of pain on his back and threw his hand up, with a wordless cry, to block a curse he could not stop, but it never came. Instead, Bellatrix swore and clutched her mouth, where blood beaded from the lip he’d split with his elbow. Embers guttered in her hair, and a cast of smoke and cinders paled her hair to a ghostly shade. She grimaced and spat blood beside him. Then she thrust out her hand, her palm streaked with an indistinguishable smear of ash and magical residue, her fingernails blacked with it.

“Take my hand.”

“Where’s my mother?”

“They seek to destroy the ring — he has seduced your mother to his treasons—”

“Let go of me—”

“She has condemned *us all—”*

“LET GO!”

Bellatrix screamed in anguish, threading her hands through her hair. “I cannot,” she cried, “it is too much, I cannot bear it, I will *not,* I can survive no more—”

The house fell above them, and she tore herself away with a cry that vanished into the scream of shattering wood.

The ceiling came down at once, a shower of black beams with an unfurling bloom of red behind it. Draco's Shield came too late.

A beam dropped on his head, and the world went out.

For a moment — it could have been minutes, it could have been hours — he floated in the world outside the world, blank and numb.

"DRACO! GET UP!"

He was flung off his stomach and dropped on his back. The house was still burning. He was caged between beams. His head seared; up and down rotated each other at a frenetic quickstep. He had no idea how long it had been, but Bellatrix was gone.

When the three sets of vision blurred together, Sirius Black stood over him, his bare chest corded with scars, wearing a shirt of his own blood, frail and wild and viciously alive.

"There you are," he shouted. He seized Draco by the collar and rattled him hard, loosing a raucous cough from Draco's chest. Sirius's face swam in and out of smoke and dizziness. "Get up! GET UP! Gotta get out of here!"

"I can't—" He could hardly breathe in the smoke. It hurt to talk. "Can't walk—"

"Then I've got you," Sirius said grimly, hauling him upright by his shoulders. "Hold on to me — HOLD ON! Up! UP! Attaboy, Draco — steady! Steady! Oh, you'll live, I tell you!" He gave an unnerving, hysterical cackle as Draco staggered upright, and they lurched together for the doors.

Sirius blasted *Bombarda* at the beams in their wake, shattering what remained of the walls, and charged through the wreckage with a warrior cry. The night swelled before them, still and cool. "That's

fucking RIGHT!” he roared. “You and me! Come on! *We’re not dying here!”*

He slung Draco’s arm around his back, and clutching him tightly, Sirius hurtled onto the stoop.

Fresh air filled his chest in a buoyant rush. Sirius staggered down the stoop and laid him carefully on the pavement. His lungs shuddered, seizing around the smoke.

“Alright,” muttered Sirius, shifting his wand-grip. “Think I remember this one. *Dispefumum.”*

The smoke slithered out of his throat in an eerie, sucking rush, and he snapped his head back as it poured from his mouth in a rippling snake. He gasped and dropped back down as his lungs drew full of clear, gorgeous air, and his blood sang with oxygen. His vision cleared. Sirius sat back on his haunches, grinning in exhausted satisfaction.

Seven days of bombing could not have done worse to the street. The magical battle had left it charred and distorted, the asphalt melted like butter and swirled in bizarre shapes, trees uprooted, cars smouldering. The dementors were gone. Draco tried to speak and found his voice a withered shell of itself.

“Where’s — Hermione? Where’s Potter?” He tried to sit up, and Sirius pushed him back down, gently.

“Rest a second,. You broke anything?”

“No — where are they? Get off me.”

“Order took 'em,” said Sirius, and jerked his head at the empty street. “Your bird fought like a hellion, by the way. Didn’t want to leave you, went a bit mad for it. Think she splinched Kingsley trying to stop him from Apparating her.”

“The Order came?”

“Yeah,” said Sirius, scratching his temple with his wand. “When I came to, I dropped the Apparation wards. Let them pop right in, instead of coming longways from the Floo at Arabella’s.” He paused. “Was I dead?”

“You were close,” he rasped.

“Huh,” said Sirius. Then: *“Am* I dead?”

“No. Hermione saved you. She had — phoenix tears.”

Sirius set his jaw. He sat back, elbows braced on his knees.

“Not sure I would’ve advised that,” he said, at length. “Those are pretty rare.”

“You weren’t available to consult,” Draco snarled, clambering upright. “Next time, don’t lose. Where did my mother go?”

Sirius blinked at him. “Your mum?”

“Yes. My mother.” His heart started running again, a slow, hard beat at the bottom of his ribs. “Did the Order take her?”

“I didn’t see her. You mean Narcissa was here?”

“You didn’t see her leave? She didn’t — Bellatrix didn’t take her, either?”

“Last I saw Bellatrix, half my guts were pouring out of me,” said Sirius. “What was Cissa—?”

“Thank you, Sirius.”

A shadow carved through the lamplight. It was Dumbledore. He wore robes of midnight blue that trailed, and his hair was bound back with

a piece of silver twine. He carried his wand: a long and knobbled thing, with a simple leather hilt.

“My mother,” said Draco unsteadily.

“Step back, please, Draco.”

“My mother was inside. With Snape. Her ring—”

“Draco, I must insist you step back.”

Dumbledore lifted his wand and flattened his offhand delicately against the air. He closed his eyes, and drew his wand slowly back.

A current of air rippled around the house. It raced up the walls in tight spirals of wine so strong they rattled the shutters of houses down the street.

The flames guttered as the air above them was ripped away. With the oxygen whisked up and away from the source of the fire, the glow faded from the windows. The remaining layers of coal-dark bricks, once so fine, slumped and skittered finally to the ground under twists of shriveled ivy. Smoke unfurled in a black sheet, billowing from the dead-eyed house.

Dumbledore, with a slight effort, bent his arm and conducted the air in a vast current that rippled off across the street, blowing the trees nearly flat to the ground. Cars skittered away from him. His robes thrashed, and his hair snapped in a long white tail.

Then he lowered his wand, and the street went still.

Draco shoved past him and raced up the stairs.

The parlor was a blackened ruin. Thin grey strains of twilight filtered through a hole in the roof that reached up through the successive floors, revealing a biopsy of carnage in the burnt house. Embers floated amongst drifts of smoke. A pair of figures huddled in the corner of the room, crouched against the mantel, shrouded in a cast

of thick ash. The shining remains of a runic circle lay on the floor around them, burned-out from use.

Bellatrix held Narcissa's head in her lap. The younger sister lay on her side, her body a slender stripe of fallen marble amidst the wreck. Snape was gone.

Bellatrix was crying. It was a surreal act; her face did not move, and the clamp of her mouth did not unseal, but her shoulders shook, and tears ran from wide, raw, red eyes.

Wood snapped under his feet when he knelt beside them. Bellatrix lifted her head.

"Draco," she said.

"Is she," said Draco. His head was a clean white slate across which a single thought raced in nauseating circles. "Is she? Mum."

Bellatrix moved Narcissa's head, tipping it towards Draco. Her hand spilled open, and the ring tumbled out of her fist.

The fire had melted the outer cast of goblin-silver, warping it open to reveal the ring beneath it. The original setting was a thin band of gold, and under the outer diamond sat a pyramid of black stone, which had split open at the base from the setting. It was weeping an oily black substance.

"Mother." He shoved her shoulder, roughly. "Mother? She's not conscious. Did you *Ennervate* her?"

"Draco."

"What did you do to her?"

"I didn't do this," said Bellatrix roughly. "The fiendfyre — she took it on herself to extinguish it."

"Where was *Snape?"*

“I don’t know. I would have killed him, if he were in sight. He poisoned her—”

“You’re lying.” His voice was calm. He did not know why it was so calm. “You dueled her. You killed her.”

“Not for her life. I would not.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

She thrust out her arm. “Bind me to the truth,” she rasped. “I will make the vow Unbreakable. I did not kill her.”

“But you survived,” he said. It was not calm, he found, so much as emptiness: something in his mind that was failing to spark, flint scraping fruitlessly against steel. “You did. And she—”

Bellatrix shook her head. She bent over Narcissa, pressing their foreheads together.

“Get off of her,” he said. The flint caught. “Get the fuck off of her. Get off—”

“Draco.”

“Don’t touch her. It’s your fault, you killed her—”

“I *did not!”*

“She wouldn’t have *been here* if not for you!”

“I never touched her,” Bellatrix rasped. “I never struck to kill—”

“If you hadn’t come, if you hadn’t told her what that fucking ring was, if you’d stayed the fuck away from us, if you’d *died—”*

If he’d never said *no,* if he’d never turned back, if he’d done as she asked. If Sirius Black had never been born. If the wind had changed, if the Hat had lied.

“Draco Malfoy, I own my share of your vengeance,” Bellatrix said. Her dark eyes radiated under a gnarled fringe of curls. “I owe you a father. I own it. But this—”

“Bellatrix.”

Dumbledore’s voice brooked a flutter of warm wind, stirring the cinders. Bellatrix jerked her head up, and scrambled back, still clutching Narcissa.

“Professor,” she spat. “Come to see all that you have made?”

“Let her go.”

“Do you really find nothing in yourself to blame for this?” It had all a teacher’s condescension without a teacher’s kindness. “No guilt, still? I suppose by now the remorse would have killed you. Perhaps it finally may.”

“Remorse is not a killing thing,” she said. “The weight is never quite enough to snap the neck.”

Dumbledore sighed. “We both know tonight is not the night you die,” he said. “Leave Narcissa, and take your leave. Your master calls.”

“I will bury her in the soil of Witherfell. She belongs there.”

“You lost a sister. There is a boy here who lost his mother. Leave her.”

“She is *mine!* She was *mine,* she was not yours!”

Dumbledore lifted his voice. “She belongs to the boy she chose,” he said. “Just once, can you try to see her for what she was, and honor it?”

Bellatrix stared at him, wide-eyed. “Strike me,” she said suddenly. “Strike me, old man. I know you want to do it.”

“Bellatrix, you tire me,” Dumbledore said contemptuously. “If you seek to suffer, ask your Lord. He will give it to you. But leave my sight. You are despicable, and you are not even opaque.”

She wailed, and pressed her head to Narcissa’s. Dumbledore’s wand twitched.

Crack. She disappeared.

With her gone, Narcissa slumped to the floor. Draco caught her and lowered her, trying to cushion the back of her head.

Her eyes were closed. That was good. She could be sleeping, with her eyes closed. An angry burn trailed down from her neck under her hemline, but when he pulled the flap of her robe closed he could only see the crown of it. That was also good. And her hair was spilling out of its knot, gathering dust, which she would hate, so he gathered it out of the way and tried to pool it on her shoulder. She had smudged her makeup and he rubbed it off her cheek with his sleeve, but that was dirty too, so he left it alone. And her hat was gone. Where was her hat? She would want it.

He reached for his magic, but it failed. The current that ran through him had been stoppered; he could not focus, he could not think. There was nothing in his head, and so the magic eddied fruitlessly around him, clenching his muscles in its longing to manifest.

“If you will permit me,” said Dumbledore, and sat down beside him. Watching the old man lower himself was a bizarre experience: the mundane resettling of robes, the way Dumbledore hitched his trousers back on his knees. He wasn’t supposed to do that. He was supposed to be above that. It made Draco furious.

“It’s a horcrux,” he said roughly. He picked up the ring and pitched it into Dumbledore’s lap. Dumbledore peered at it without touching it. “The ring. The fiendfyre was meant to destroy it.”

“It did.”

“Snape broke his cover to save Potter. My aunt cut off his Mark.”

“I can imagine.”

“Why was he alone?” he bit out. “Why didn’t the rest of the Order come with him?”

“Severus had heard of the Azkaban break before Nymphadora’s warning,” Dumbledore said calmly. “He had earlier notice, and a shorter distance to travel. He came from Little Hangleton.”

“I don’t know where that is.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

That was probably true.

“A child is not his mother’s keeper,” said Dumbledore, as if he knew the first thing or last thing about her, as if he knew everything and grieved it.

“My mother,” he said, as Narcissa continued not to move. There was something heavy bearing down on him. It was not yet painful, but it soon would be, and the dread of it was almost worse than the pressure it exerted now; soon he would wake up, though, and she would be alive again. He would wake up and he would be eleven. He would wake up and he would be eight, and both of his parents would be having breakfast in the drawing-room, murmuring to each other about unknowable grown-up things. He stopped. Started again. “My mother was.”

But there was no more. That was the end of the sentence. It was the end of everything: *my mother was.* The seconds that raced past carried him further and further away from her, into a black and monstrous *is;* but Narcissa Malfoy slipped inexorably into the past, still and quiet, like a figure on a receding train station.

Next chapter, 10/19/25: "The Princess's Tale."

The Princess's Tale

Chapter 81: The Princess's Tale

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The Manor’s shadow fell in a black crosspiece on the north lawn, a carveout on the green. Venetian windows burned with the hellish gilt of a red sunset between alternating ribs of brick and marble on the palladian facade. Wrought-iron gates sealed up the worn driveway, over which the beginnings of a gnarled overgrowth were moving in a slow vanguard of ivy and moss.

The guests were due at eight o’clock. Draco waited in the drawing-room until Briselda, who had been adding mourning sheets over the portraits, announced at seven that the stationmaster at the local train had signalled, and a half-hour later, a hesitant and respectful: “They’re at the gates, milord; shall I bring them in?”

Little point in correcting her form of address. He went himself to the portico and waited there for the thestral carriages to pull up the drive, their black bodies shining leathery and burnished under the setting sun.

It would be the first time since Grimmauld Place that he saw more than one person at once. For days he had lived in blindness, without knowing what the wizarding world was coming to, or if indeed it still existed. When word came, it came only by way of Fawkes, and it was spelled in Dumbledore’s spidery hand.

The Ministry had resumed function, under the leadership of Runcorn and a new cabinet. The Wizengamot had been dissolved, without a set date for its reformation, and many of the representatives from the Populares party were in hiding. Clemency had been declared for the prisoners recently escaped from Azkaban, and the prison itself had been shuttered, with remaining inmates moved to other facilities. The

auror force had been eradicated, though there were still sightings of people who *looked* like aurors throughout the countryside, apparently patrolling, though on what power or authority, no one quite knew. A state of emergency had been declared. There were lights on in the Ministry building, and none of the public had been inside since it reopened.

There were mass Obliviations of muggles taking place in and around Islington. What good it would do, Dumbledore was not certain, as no degree of Obliviations could overwrite public memory of such a hugely distressing event, especially one that had left visible evidence of damage at Grimmauld Place and King's Cross. The muggle government had to take notice, and it did; the Daily Mail called it a terrorist attack, and the reports of cloaked figures swarming in the sky were cabined as hallucinations, induced by distress. Dumbledore assumed that some journalists and representatives had been taken under the Imperius Curse, to abet the coverup. He doubted it was a genuine effort to maintain peace and order in the muggle world, but rather an attempt to repel international attention; breaching the Statute of Secrecy, at least without any good-faith effort at cleanup, brooked investigation from the International Board of Arbitration and, at worst, the European Confederation of Wizards. Not that help would be forthcoming from that square. Barring breaches of secrecy, the international wizarding community tried to leave nations to manage their own domestic affairs.

Dumbledore's letters discussed these realities with a frankness that surprised Draco. They did not seem calibrated to soothe or assure him; they were hard, clear, and direct. He was grateful, in some sense, for the absence of illusion, though it cast no great light on the dark corridor of his future. But then, he supposed that Dumbledore no longer had anything to gain from the pretense of calm.

The world was falling. Draco stayed at the Manor. He lived on coffee and toast points. He planned his mother's funeral.

The morning of the ceremony, he had watched the sun rise from his window. If he'd slept he didn't remember it. A stack of unopened

Christmas presents lay at the foot of his bed, tressed in satin paper and silk ribbon, with notes in a hand he recognized. He'd forgotten them over the winter holiday, but they'd remained there. Now they sat obdurately at the foot of his bed, wearing a thin cloak of dust.

He had tried to open them. He'd gone so far as to pick one out — a small one near the top of the pile, in green gilt wrapping-paper with a brocade of poinsettias. He'd brushed off the dust on it. Broke the seal on the wrapping.

As he did it went through him like a cold knife that he had undone something she did with her hands, and it would never be back to the way she put it.

He put it back where it had been. He nudged it to get the angle right, then again, though it still seemed different, somehow. Upon consideration, he threw a cloak over the pile. The unchanged silhouette quietly rejected the attempt.

Draco slammed the door on it, and went to tell Briselda to open one of the guest rooms for him.

Not that he'd used it. In the three days since he'd dozed, if at all, in armchairs in the library, or at his desk, or simply slipped out of consciousness for an hour or two while in the middle of some other task. It did not help abate the surreality of the occasion, when the day of the ceremony came.

The gates, which stood closed at most times of the year, had been thrown open, and up the mossy drive rattled just two carriages of mourners, most of whom had not known the deceased: Albus Dumbledore, who had left through the same gates only a few hours earlier, after helping finish the spellwork for the ceremony; then Arthur and Molly Weasley, both wearing gold-hemmed mourning robes and caps not out of place in a scullery; and with them, Harry, Ron, and Hermione, an assortment of people she would have been hard-pressed to tolerate at a garden party, much less the final celebration of her life.

Hermione jumped out first, forcing the footman to scuttle back, her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun. Catching sight of Draco, she broke into a run. Her hair twisted with visible strain into a chignon, and she wore her school uniform with a black shirt and gold earrings, all of which fell into disarray when she climbed the stairs two at a time and leapt at him.

Their bodies collided, and he grabbed her; her momentum threw her off her feet and swept her around. It shielded her a little from the others, who were disembarking at a courteously slow pace from the carriages. Her body was hard and heavy in his arms and some of her hair sprang free of its confines to greet him, too, showering around his face in a cascade of feathery touches. He wound his arms around her waist and held her tightly, and she kept gripping him tighter and tighter, too, as if it were not close enough, to be skin to skin, as if she intended to climb inside him and plant her flag in the war-ravaged territory inside his chest.

She was the first person he'd touched, since — well, since.

Hermione pulled back a few inches — he didn't let her go far — and her eyes skittered over him. "Draco," she said, and of all the ways she'd said his name, of the hundreds and thousands of variations, it had never been so heartbreakingly sad. His eyes burned at the way she said it, and so he kissed her, partly to hide them.

She made a muffled noise, pained, and kissed him back. Her lips parted around a sad gasp, and she was crying, a little bit, or he thought she was; it might have been him, probably was, didn't matter; the heat of her mouth was the only warm thing he could feel, and the rest of him gravitated to it in abject desperation. She cradled his jaw in her hands like a delicate object and kissed him with a soft, gentle movement of her lips, but he wanted more heat, and he pulled her tighter to him to try to get more of it, flattening her against him. He wanted to be warm again. This was the only thing that did it, it was the only thing that had the reach.

Her hands glided down his shoulders and stroked his arms, gripping the sleeves of his robes. A startled, hesitant noise tore out of her throat when he nipped her bottom lip, and she turned her head just far enough to break the kiss. “Sorry,” she said. Her breath was hot and rough against the underside of his jaw. “I wanted to say. I’m so sorry. I know she—”

He didn’t want to hear any of it. He’d reviled the approach of this evening because he knew he’d have to hear so much of it, and so he kissed her again, a selfish kiss, a hard fast clash of lips and tongue, which made her twitch in surprise. “Don’t say it,” he said. “Don’t. You don’t have to say it.”

She understood, or seemed to, and nodded. He was relieved and grateful. “I won’t apologize, then,” she murmured, “but I should have been with you. I didn’t want to leave. They took me. Kingsley Apparated me, I didn’t ask him, I told him not to.”

“I know.”

“I shouldn’t have let them. I won’t let them, again,” she said, with a flicker of bitterness. “I should have splinched him.”

“It’s better you didn’t,” he said, even as he imagined it: he nearly smiled. “It wouldn’t have helped.”

“I don’t give a shit if it wouldn’t have helped,” she said. Her strident voice wavered only slightly around the expletive. She was so young, and so old, and he noted that loved her, very abruptly and painfully. “You wouldn’t have been alone, when — anyway. You aren’t alone now. I won’t leave unless you tell me to.”

“You really don’t have to do this.”

“Please, just — I know it’s uncomfortable and you don’t want to hear it and this is the worst time. I know. And I wouldn’t want me to comfort me either. And all the things the books say to do are mawkish and banal and you’d hate them. So we don’t have to talk

about anything, we don’t have to talk about this ever again after today if you don’t want to, and God knows I wouldn’t want to,” she breathed, “but you don’t have to be alone here, after this. You do know that. You can come stay with me, or — if you want to be here, I’ll come and stay with you.”

“What about your parents?”

“I’ll sort that out,” she said, with a forceful indifference. “You shouldn’t have to worry about them.”

“No, but I suspect that one of us should.”

She twitched in the irritated way that meant he’d struck true. “If it really matters, you could come stay,” she muttered unhappily, “or, or get a hotel room in London, or something, or—”

It was a conversation they didn’t have the time or space for. Dumbledore was climbing the steps with a slow, ambling gait, his attention vested courteously on the trawling jasmine.“Later,” he said quietly, as the others crested the staircase, and she trailed off, uncharacteristically helpless. At Dumbledore’s approach she put her arm through his, almost warily, as if she might be taken away from him again.

Arthur touched him on the shoulder as he passed. After six months of recovery from his injuries at Christmas, he could speak only a few words at a time, and the cords of scarring on his throat meant they came out at a mere whisper. Nevertheless, he uttered none, for which Draco was grateful.

Molly had brought flowers. That was funny, for some reason.

“Briselda will take those,” he said. “Thank you.”

“My dear,” she whispered, and her lips wobbled; but Ron cleared his throat, and she moved along, briskly roping Briselda into a hunt for a vase.

“Sorry,” he muttered. He wore his school uniform with a gold tie instead of a red one, and the knot was tied properly, for once. It filled Draco with a complex resentment. “Told her not to start any productions. Dad’ll hustle her off, if she starts bawling.”

That was decent of him. Draco nodded.

“Anything for us to do?” said Harry. “I can help, if there’s something to set up, or carry, or…”

“It’s through this way.” Draco turned and led them into the foyer. Hermione went with him, casting a glance over her shoulder. Ron sucked his teeth and clapped Harry on the back as they went in.

White sheets flickered in the periphery of each room. The Manor had been shut up while Narcissa was traveling, and much of it remained closed, doors locked, sheets drawn over the furniture to preserve it from dust. The effect was a museum of unfinished marble statues, their half-chiseled shapes left by a wandering sculptor, their contours hinting only vaguely at the artist’s vision.

A set of marble stairs led them down from the upper gardens to the family mausoleum, which sat in a shaded grove of poplar trees some distance from the lake. Warm evening, bright scent of grass. The door to the mausoleum had been rolled open, and inside, torches lapped over two stories of elaborately decorated cells, ornamented with gargoyles of iron and stone, with names carved in the stone over each gated awning. Some sported two coffins, for couples who had been buried together, but not all. Each coffin bore an engraving of the birth signet of its occupant. The Lords Malfoy sported an additional engraving of a coronet of fleurs-de-lis.

He had to unlock his father’s cell for the occasion. It was the most lavish and most recent of the graves, on a sunken level of the mausoleum under the earth, and the stone interior was heaped high with treasures. Jewels and furs, chains of goblin-gold, braided tapestries of conquest and ancestors from the Dark Ages, a suit of dragon-hide armor, the nacreous pelt of a unicorn, a whole cask of

selkie pearls. In olden days the cell would have been filled with the wizard's own acquisitions, but those times were past, and it seemed undistinguished to burden an altar with deeds to investment properties. *Sic transit gloria mundi:* Paper and ink for emeralds and rubies. Leveraged bonds for pillaged gold.

Draco slit his thumb brusquely, with a jerk of his wand that made Hermione clench her teeth, and pressed it to the lock. The iron shuddered and the deadlock sprang free, letting the gate roll back with the shrill complaint of corroded metal. His father's coffin sat unchanged by the blink of eight years, though the spoils had started to decay. The flowers once heaped upon it had dried to strands. Like the one set to join it, it was carved entirely from statuario marble, a translucent white so fine it looked almost soft to touch.

The mausoleum wasn't the only place where they buried Malfoys. Outside, in the cooling shade of the poplars, tombstones rose from the earth like a carnival of stone ornaments: cousins, spinsters, second sons, and the few human servants whose service distinguished them so well their bones could be interred beside their masters'. In that little stone-walled graveyard the new coffin rested, brought there by Dumbledore. The Black insignia sat upon it in engraving so fine it was like a silver ink on the marble.

It was drawing closer to sunset, and the burning sky peered with beady eyes through the black walls of the poplar trees. Peacocks crooned distantly, their cries high and eerie on the silent lawns.

Dumbledore was the first to fold his robe and kneel before the coffin. Arthur and Molly followed him, arranging themselves carefully on the gold rug that had been unfurled for the occasion. Draco was about to join them when there was a creak at the graveyard gate, and a figure poked her head around the corner.

It was Andromeda. She wore a robe of exquisite gold brocade, her shoulders layered so thickly in thread it formed a sort of epaulette, with a headdress of jet and carved yellow leaves that pinned back

her curls. She held herself with a stiff formality, as if she were representing an ambassadorial delegation from a hostile country.

Behind her came, like attendants, her daughter, who balanced on crutches, and a gentleman with receding sandy hair and a long, thin face, a once-prominent jaw softened by the encroachment of age, and unfashionably large square glasses. At their heels trotted a black German Shepherd with tattered ears, which sat contritely at the edge of the graveyard, its tail wrapped over its feet with uncharacteristic poise. It dipped its head, and the transformation rippled across its fur.

A moment later, Sirius sat cross-legged on the grass, wearing a black high-collared coat, gold chains dripping down the front of his shirt. He dipped his head deeply to Draco when their eyes met.

Andromeda paused with her hand on the gate, as if seeking permission. Draco realized belatedly that the permission she sought was his. He nodded to her, and she let herself inside. The Tonks family took their seats on the far edge of the golden rug. Molly shuffled over to make room for them, shooting Andromeda a poorly concealed stare.

Ron muttered in Harry's ear. Hermione scowled at him, but they fell to whispering anyway. Draco tipped his head back and tried not to laugh. He evaded doing so only by a drowning wave of self-contempt. It shouldn't have been possible to laugh.

"Castle… not… asked Mad-Eye."

"Wasn't … Black?"

"Wouldn't… safe, or… I think."

Hermione snapped her fingers at both of them with furious emphasis. Draco's eyes burned. But that was the way of everything, after Grimmauld Place. Nothing was real, so anything could still be

funny. In fact, most things were funny, once nothing was real anymore.

It was tradition for the next of kin to speak first. He had ventured a few drafts of something to say — some drivel about duty, and bravery, and the things his mother had loved. But the lines turned to syrup and ash on the page, and it nauseated him, the idea of sending her away on the wings of such tepid prayers. He tried to think about her now, but she seemed so far away, and in that pitched surreality he was not certain he could remember anything about her except the color of the robes she had been wearing the day she died.

Dumbledore gestured subtly, asking to speak. Draco jerked his head at him, caring little, wishing only that the whole thing would be over and everyone would stop looking at him with their big piteous eyes.

The headmaster stood and placed his hand on the coffin.

“I will be brief,” he said, “as the departed, while she lived, often enjoined me to be. She made no secret of her opinion on my taste for digression, and I will not indulge when she has been deprived of the chance to object.

“Narcissa enrolled as a student of Slytherin House in 1966. For five years, I taught her Transfiguration, until I assumed the post of Headmaster and quit teaching. She did not enjoy my subject, or any subject, as far as I could glean. She believed, of course, that she would never undertake a career. I do not comment on that conviction except to espouse my belief — born far too late in her life for it to matter — that someone in her youth should have urged her to contemplate a broader universe of choices, even if she did not take them, even if only for his latter-day peace of mind.” He removed his glasses and gestured with them while he spoke, turning to address the congregation.

“She was not known for her interest in school rules. It was you, Auror Tonks, who broke her standing record for class absences. Unlike

you, I do not believe she ever served a detention, though she followed curfew only intermittently, and appeared to come and go from Hogsmeade as she pleased. Due to her family's influence, her teachers generally declined to impose consequences. I was the lone professor, I think, who persisted in the attempt… Not until I became headmaster did I grasp the scale of the Black family's power at the school. Cygnus Black, a generous benefactor and my first Chairman of the Board, left no doubt about the kind of treatment he expected for his little girl. I confess — and if she is listening, it will doubtless please her — that she frustrated me in the extreme.

"I believe she was well-liked in Slytherin. In truth, I do not know. I have, and always had, limited insight into the social mires of that house. But I perceived her a favored prefect among the younger Slytherins, whom she always attended with great care. Children and small animals brought out the best of her; they were the only affairs capable of coaxing out her true intellect and strength of character, which, it seemed, she did her best to conceal. In the castle flood of 1971, a pipe burst in the dungeons, and Slytherin House had to be evacuated while their commons were drained. In the mayhem, a kitten belonging to our caretaker unfortunately went missing, and while the rest of her house was at work drying its socks, she returned to search for it. She found the poor creature — I never discovered how — and restored it to its master, who in his emphatic gratitude, I believe, conferred on her the right-of-way of the castle, and would never again report to me a word of any wrong she had done." Dumbledore smiled. "Perhaps she had such a reward in mind when she embarked on the search. However, I like to think she did not. I like to think that she went out because she imagined a small, frightened creature alone in the darkness, with the torches extinguished, and decided to right a little wrong.

"She was also a woman of contemptible ideas," he added, his voice deepening with sudden sobriety. "She had, as did all members of her family, a fathomless vitriol for those who did not comply with the narrow standards of her upbringing. She rejected out of hand the idea that all wizards were equals, much less that all people might be.

She thought these were regrettable but necessary truths, undeniable, and essential to her way of life. One might distinguish between her prejudice, which was inculcated by indifference and habit, and the violent conviction with which prejudice is now enforced by some of her peers; but I do not. When we forgive cruelty on the excuse of habit, we cede our moral responsibility to the past. When we forgive cruelty on the excuse of civility — because it is expressed sweetly, because it is expressed politely, because it is defended with words instead of fists — we suggest that the scores of violent hateful act without invitation; we suggest that violence has no root, it has no seed, that it is not conceived in the silence of the acquiescent. Narcissa was not a soldier, but her hands were not clean.

“And yet she died,” he said, with gravity, “for a cause antithetical to her beliefs. Let us contemplate her actions: her sacrifice. Let us say she died for us. She died for our fight, that muggles and wizards might live together peaceably, that muggle-born children might grow up welcome and safe and free. Is that so?” He paused. “No. I do not think she would have said so. Let us not disrespect her sacrifice by removing it to an altar of our own choosing. It was *her* life, after all; given by her, freely, for her own purposes; let us seek to understand it, as every creature deserves to be understood.

“She died for a private cause. She had lately been challenged to reflect on her beliefs: not as a source of evil, in truth, but because they posed a personal danger.” He glanced at Draco, and his face tightened apologetically. “Her son, who survives her, was becoming even early in his adolescence a different and more thoughtful person than she had been — perhaps I should say, invited to be — in her youth. He had become a man committed, by his own private causes, to oppose what she believed. She died in order to conceive a world where he might be free to do so. I doubt she admired the aspect of such a world, in her own private considerations, but she pursued it anyway, because it was the only world where her son might both love her and be happy. The great work she did in service of that goal, we may lay at his feet. But we must lay the choice with her, because she could have chosen otherwise. To deny that she chose

her son freely — to suggest she was compelled by threat, or by the hopeless force of mother-love — is to deprive her of agency. I consider such an idea," said Dumbledore, looking intently at Draco, "greatly misguided. The children of loving mothers often harbor the fortunate misconception that their mothers care for them ineffably, involuntarily, as a reflex of nature; this is not so. A mother's love, like any love, is a series of choices. And to love something so well you wish it to be free, rather than to be with you, or to be as you desire it — this is the most difficult choice, and it takes the most towering strength. I beseech you all, I *beseech* you, to grant her in death the laurel she earned: remember her towering strength!"

His voice rebounded on the mausoleum. Molly was weeping, with a laudable effort at silence, into Arthur's shoulder.

"Given time," Dumbledore continued, "she might have rehabilitated her convictions to match her son's. But she also might not have. The answers to such questions will not come to us in this life. Even so, I am, you have learned, an unreservedly hopeful man. I would like to think that in years to come, she would have allowed her love for her son, that is, the best of her, to conquer the worst. Disagree with me if you wish. I am old — please, mask your surprise — and I have seen people more lost than she was come much farther than she had left to go. I have seen them do it with far less to live for."

He did seem old, then with the marks of time set deep in his face, and the rasp of it loud in his throat. "She was not a lost cause," he remarked. "I, for one, had great hopes for her. I wish that I had nurtured such hopes sooner. I wish I had expressed them to her when they would have meant more, and stood any chance of helping. Narcissa, I am sorry. It was my job to see in you something better than what you were, and I failed you. You would hate me for saying so, I know. But I did see it, eventually; and what I see survives you. He has your laugh precisely, and your mischief, and your wit. And if he spurns the path you would have chosen, then I charge you, Lady Malfoy, to remember your old teacher's lament: You always did like to break the rules."

And at last, Dumbledore withdrew, and took his seat.

Then they were looking at Draco again. But Dumbledore's eulogy had not inclined him to speak. If anything, the opposite. Dumbledore speaking for Narcissa had been bizarre enough: For Draco to say anything would trip the whole occasion into bleak absurdity. Anyway, he didn't know what he would say, and if he opened his mouth what came out might very well be offensive, or bitter, or cruel. Certainly it would be no consolation for Molly Weasley, who was weeping, he knew quite well, mostly for him.

He had very few warm words to say about his mother, in truth. She had gone. It seemed, in a childish way, unfair for him to have to praise her in recompense for it.

But then: What kind of son was that, who couldn't say a kind word for his mother at her own funeral? What kind of son could sink to such depths of failure in his duty? And it wasn't like he didn't *know* the kind things he could have said about her. He thought of them constantly. He thought of them every night instead of sleeping, all the parts of her that only he would ever know. He wanted other people to know them, to remember them, if only to take the unbearable weight of remembering off his shoulders. But it was impermissible to anoint her death by telling them. They were the things you could only tell people when you knew she was never coming back.

There was so much of him that she had understood that nobody else did, and now no one ever would.

Andromeda stood, with a rustle of skirts, and laid her fingers lightly on the coffin lid. Her frown knit her dark brows together.

"My sister," she said, faltering. She looked back at her husband, who nodded at her and smiled in a faint, anxious way. Andromeda's answering smile fought through a rictus of discomfort to reach him, and it was a hard thing to watch— that blinding axon-tip of love.

“My sister was the sweetest creature ever born in that house,” she said. Her voice was low and throaty, washed thin by tears.“Which, in truth, does not say much. She had a bitter palate. She loved our parents — that was an accomplishment. I think she even loved Aunt Wally, which ought to have earned her some kind of prize. I doubt anyone ever loved Bellatrix more than she did, and I daresay they never will. And she loved me, for a while.”

She peered down at a notecard hidden in her palm, and crumpled it.

“She resembled our mother,” she said. “Druella Rosier. Bella and I took after our father. We had the Black look, as it were. All of you know it; there’s enough of us. But Narcissa had the Rosier hair, and the Rosier… delicacy. I don’t know where she came from — you won’t find any aunts that look like her. But Mother loved it. She’d dress her up in little pinafores and parade her around at parties. It made me sick with envy. I never told her. I told her I thought it was stupid, and that Bella and I had spent the whole time playing without her, which made her cry.” Andromeda sniffled. “Later on she never cried like that. Something happened to her, the year I went to Hogwarts, when she was alone at home with Mummy and Daddy. When Bella and I came home the next summer she’d gone all cold, and she never cried at all. By the time she started at Hogwarts I’d come to see how we’d misjudged her, growing up; she was scary clever, though she never showed it off, and she had spent so much time watching us, I sometimes think she knew us better than we knew ourselves. I did try to know her, too. But I suppose it was too late, by then. She had locked something up, that year she was alone, and if she ever let it out it wasn’t for me. I doubt it was for Bella. Perhaps her husband managed it, I wouldn’t know.

“When I had Nymphadora,” she said, “I wrote letters to her and Sirius. Sirius wrote me back straightaway and came to see Nymphadora, and he brought all his friends, and it was very — well, it was a nice thing to do, and I wept buckets, even though the Potters got the sex wrong and bought her a lot of hideous boy clothes. I thought Narcissa might come too. I suppose that sounds silly of me. I

didn’t think it was. After her marriage, she outranked Mother and Father both. Did you know that?”

It was not clear who she was asking. “It’s true,” she said. “And Bella. As Lady Malfoy, she was very near Aunt Wally. I suppose — well, you’ll think this is silly. I thought that would make her more willing to bend the rules. ‘Who can hurt her now?’ I thought. ‘Who would dare? What a darling; she’s gone and made herself impervious, and now she’ll be my guardian and my protector, for she loves me so.’” She flashed her teeth in a smile. “How silly of me.”

Sirius made a sympathetic noise in his throat.

“I now believe,” she said, “that I lost her a long time ago. It wasn’t Ted that did it, or Nymphadora. And it wasn’t Lucius, truly. I don't believe it helped her personality one bit to marry him, but if she never did I'd still have lost her. It happened when I got on that train for Hogwarts, with Bellatrix, and left her all alone in a big house where nobody ever laughed — but we loved each other, once. When I was a child and she was a child, in a kingdom by the sea.”

She stumbled back, and sat down. Sirius shuffled over and offered her his hand, palm-up. She squeezed it and flashed him a bright, watery smile. He leaned around her back to salute Tonks. They were at ease with each other, their little triumvirate of the forgotten.

It would have been the ideal time for Draco to speak. His father’s funeral had lasted for three hours, between all the speeches. But by now the sun had set. It could be over, if he wanted it to be.

He stood up, drawing his wand. Dumbledore rose gracefully at his example, raised his wand, and helped walk it into the mausoleum, suspended between two Levitation Charms.

The coffin settled in the hollow left beside Lucius’s. The cell had been dressed in advance with her grave artifacts: the jewels she had liked to wear, her pearls and her emeralds — her diamond engagement ring, which he had placed carefully in a silver dish

beside Lucius's wedding band. A tin of her favorite caviar he located next to one of her good evening gowns, and one of Fortescue's ice cream. A taped cassette of the ballet she'd dragged him to, the summer he turned fourteen. A handkerchief adorned with the Black family crest.

When he was finished, he dragged the gate closed and pressed his bloodied thumb to the lock. The deadbolt sealed his mother's body in the crypt. The two coffins sat together. A stray thought wondered if the company would be consolation for his father's. Then he snorted, and turned away.

Outside, the mourners filed again into the glade. Draco pointed his wand up first, wanting only to get it over with, but Andromeda beat him to it.

"Narcissa," she said, lighting her wand. *Lumos* arrowed into the heathery darkness of the sky.

A scant collection of murmurs followed her, and beads of light darted up from the poplars. They scalded the branches with light as they passed, like a group of meteors reversing course, or angels retracing the fall.

Hermione drew her wand, briefly unclasping his hand to grasp it. *Lumos* bathed her face in sudden light. Her eyes were clear, but she was looking at him even as she sent the light up through the trees, her brows furrowed, her mouth a curlicue of worry. It was a breach of protocol, to do that, but he didn't care. She was the only one he didn't mind looking at him. It wasn't so much that he enjoyed it, but part of him sincerely worried if she stopped the rest of him might just dissolve away.

He lit his wand, and at the crucial moment, his tongue slipped. It ought to have been her given name, but he said, "Mum."

Stupid child. Stupid, mewling child to do that, like everyone wasn't watching.

A commotion by the graveyard's edge. Tonks had stumbled, and her crutch had collided with the relief on one of the tombstones. A moss-eaten dragon-head, probably a few centuries years old, peeled off and toppled into the dirt.

She whirled around in panic, but a harsh sound interrupted her apology. Draco was laughing.

It came up through his chest as a clean, purging burn, that laugh. The others gave him stares ranging from alarm to bemusement. None of them joined him, of course they didn't. But it was such a relief that he didn't care about the impropriety. He leaned back and laughed the laugh he would never have dared, if his mother was alive, because it was funny, and because there was no one to stop him. There was no one to stop him from doing anything. It was his house, his name, his title.

His mother, his tomb, his hole in the ground. His laughter, shattering the peacocks into a tempest of ghosts over the lake.

It was nearly ten o'clock before the light was entirely gone, and there was tea and firewhiskey served in crystal tulips in the drawing-room, although in that tall, cold, elegant chamber, with its massive hearth and high ceilings, the evident scarceness of guests chilled any embers of conversation. During Christmas, Draco remembered the vast pine tree that someone — had it been his mother? Or Dobby? Or a maid, or someone paid from the village to come, he didn't remember or he'd never asked — erected in the corner and dressed in tinsel, with baubles and ornaments.

Tonks and Dumbledore shared a private conversation behind a vase of white mourning roses, which Draco biopsied as he passed them.

"...emergency government in Cambridge," she was murmuring. "The rest of the Populares Party, or what's left of them. Half won't come because they're scared. They're choosing a Minister tomorrow, three guesses who."

“And what does Lord Shacklebolt intend to do, from Cambridge?”

“Give speeches? Take votes? Get himself killed? Merlin, I dunno. He says our military can’t be our government. Something about giving the Ministry a monopoly on public trust.”

“And this so-called military — will he be supplying it himself?”

“Yeah, I don’t know, boss. I don’t work for him, remember? This is his secretary after eight shots, not his deposition—”

“I simply find it very optimistic of Kingsley to start opposing someone with neither political nor military power, and our enemy has both.”

“Doesn’t sound like he’s opposing you.”

“Does he expect me to follow the laws he passes? By his one-party government, in Cambridge?”

A pause.

“You want someone in his office?” she murmured. “I can get people.”

“It would be nice to have some warning,” he sighed, “if he tries to interpose… but don’t threaten him. Kingsley is a good man, and a reasonable one. He knows politics far better than I. He may be right, in truth, about siloing the politicians from the warmakers.”

“...But?”

“But he believes quite strongly in transparency,” said Dumbledore. “And if I am going to produce this military miracle for him, I need a little shade to work in.”

Draco passed out of earshot, or perhaps Dumbledore had cast *Muffliato,* for their voices vanished into murmurs.

He found Sirius in the foyer, gazing up at one of the marble sculptures. It was an eight-foot Rhea Silvia, a twin nursing on her

breast, her palla pooled at her hips. The other twin clung to her knee, his face twisted up in eternal supplication.

Sirius was smoking a cigarette. When Draco emerged from the shadows, he subtly Vanished the ash at his feet.

“Bad habit,” he said. “You want me to put it out?”

Draco consulted himself for affront and found none. The irony helped ward off the pall.

“Give me one.”

Sirius shrugged and slipped one out of his coat. Draco lit it from his wand, and his mouth filled with the foul taste of smoke.

“Old acquaintance, that one,” said Sirius, tipping his head at the statue. “Used to haunt the ballroom at Witherfell. Dad must’ve shipped it off as a wedding present.”

He tried to recall the associated myth.

“What a foul present.”

“Yeah. Foul bloke.”

The taste of smoke filmed his teeth. Stinging heat flew in his throat with each drag, like the air at Grimmauld Place, foul and thick.

Draco considered him from the corner of his eye. Sirius regarded Rhea Silvia with forlorn respect, like two immortals, commiserating.

“Remus is on assignment,” said Sirius. “I got your invitation for him, and I asked Mad-Eye to pass it along, but he said it was no contact. So. Here’s what you missed: He’d tell you he’s sorry, and you’re a good kid and it’s not fair this happened to you, or some other thing that would help, I dunno. And then he’d hug you. Then he’d yell at me for smoking. Then he’d yell at you for smoking. Then he’d yell at me for letting you smoke. You get the picture.”

“Do you have,” he said, “a cell of self-respect in your body?”

“Used to. Left it with him. Along with most of my sense. Classic Remus, I tell you, hogging all the best bits of me. Suppose he made them, so they’re his by rights, but it’s frankly childish of him to play keep-away.”

Then Sirius spoke over Draco’s effort to interrupt him: “I’m sorry it was her.”

“What?”

“If one of us had to die,” he said. “You didn’t deserve that. I’m an old washed-up so-and-so, and she had a kid. And I’d have been done in, if not for you lot. Truth be told,” he added, with a brisk and unhappy gratitude, “I owe you the kind of debt I never wanted to owe anybody again. Sorry if I wasn’t gracious about it. Nobody likes to wake up on credit.”

“You pulled me from the burning building. Forget your debts.”

“That was a freebie,” said Sirius. “Didn’t know I owed you, then. Just seemed unsporting to let another decent little bloke die in that house.” He plucked the stub of his cigarette from his mouth. “Anyway,” he said, “I’d forgot what it felt like to save somebody.”

Draco dropped his own cigarette, half-smoked, to the tile. A twist of his heel snuffed it out.

“Why didn’t you speak?”

“At the ceremony? Didn’t know her,” said Sirius, in surprise. “Wouldn’t be right.”

“Then why did you come?”

“I dunno. Same as everybody,” he said. “You called.”

This pained him so acutely he lost his words. He thought of the distance it was to Hogwarts Castle, and the pain left him surprised that he was still breathing. There was only one thing for it.

He ground his teeth together and extended his hand. Sirius stared at it. Only when Draco began tapping his foot did he juggle his cigarette and clasp it.

“Black,” he said.

“Malfoy.”

Draco turned on his heel, and left.

Andromeda and her husband had occupied a corner to themselves, studying something that Draco recognized belatedly as his parents’ wedding portrait. Narcissa was wearing a high-collared gown of gold lace with lantern sleeves, and a thin circlet dripped a sapphire from the V of her hairline. Lucius condescended to the viewer in a round-collar suit of green-and-blue brocade. The clasp of his cloak was the twin to the jewel on his wife’s circlet. The engraving on the frame read MAY 9, 1974.

“I always wondered what she wore,” mused Andromeda. “Poor thing. She was much better in silver.”

She turned to Draco, her expression innocently curious. “Did she really ride in on a unicorn, like they said in *Witch Weekly?* I’ve heard mixed reports.” When he didn’t answer, she gave a tinkling laugh. “I’m sorry, I don’t know why I asked you. You weren’t there. Nymphadora was at mine, you see, but your mother would *never* permit that sort of scandal.”

He didn’t know how to answer that.

After a moment’s hesitation, she touched her husband’s shoulder. “He was there, too. At mine, I mean! Not hers. Edward Tonks — Draco Malfoy. My nephew.”

“I go by Ted.”

“Unfortunately,” she said.

His uncle had a firm handshake, and a surly manner that conveyed hostility until it was revealed for awkwardness. At first glance, it was hard to imagine him and Andromeda falling in love. It was hard to imagine them even having a conversation. Draco was reminded of Percy Weasley, which did not enable understanding on previous points.

He wondered what had happened to Percy, in the government reshuffle. It was one of a hundred uncertainties that yawned up from the shodden aftermath of his year.

“I was rude to you, last August,” said Andromeda. “Scampered off without a word. Not a handshake, even! Terrible work. But how was I to know you were there with Harry Potter? Nobody tells *me* anything. And of course I supposed you’d be there at your mother’s bidding, and that she might even be with you, and I daresay nobody wanted that to happen. I didn’t even *want* to come, only Nymphadora bullied me into it—”

“You could have written.” He was not angry at her, but he was tired. His tone was informative. “You could have come to Grimmauld Place.”

“Oh,” she said with a laugh, “if you think your mother would have forgiven that, I don’t know what to tell you.”

They lapsed into silence.

“Before she died,” he said, “my mother and Bellatrix spoke of you.”

Andromeda blanched. Ted coughed on his drink.

“She said you left because something had happened to Bellatrix. That she had been betrayed.”

“I left because I changed,” she said, strained. “It had nothing to do with Bella. She made her own decisions. Tell me, how much of Cissa’s life did she think was my fault?”

His expression must have made her reconsider; she winced, and said: “Bella chose to get married *before* I left. She wanted out of that house more than I did, and she took the first train leaving the station. Even if it was twice her age,” Andromeda said, unhappily. I couldn’t tell you why a woman I haven’t known in two decades said *anything* to *anyone.* It’s likely enough she’d blame me for Bella, or Bella for me, or anyone but herself for everything in the world.”

“You think she lied to Bellatrix, then?”

Andromeda shrugged, insouciant. “I think she probably believed something that wasn’t true. Perhaps she knew it wasn’t true, and still believed it. Narcissa was good at that. She could tell herself a story so sweet and sad she’d make herself cry, and all day nobody could coax her to be happy again.”

This was an unexpectedly deep cut. “That's my mother you're talking about.”

She snickered, then. It slipped through the mask of her contrition, and he understood in a flash how someone could hate her. The Black family charm, with none of the Black family gravitas; he’d thought Sirius was a bad case.

“She’d be fed up with me,” she said. “Complaining about her at her own funeral. The opprobrium! She’d eat me up. But Bella would think it was funny.” She glanced at the window, across the darkening grounds.

Ted wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Being here is difficult,” he murmured, formally. “I apologize.”

“It unmakes me,” announced Andromeda. “I’m not myself, when I’m here… or I’m more myself than ever. Which is it, do you think,

Edward?”

Her husband smiled at her. “That’s a riddle, not a question.”

“But you like riddles, don’t you? You were in Ravenclaw.” She turned back to Draco. “I hear you’re in Gryffindor,” she added. “That must have been an awful shock.”

Draco said that it was. Then he asked leave of her, and left the stranger to her husband, with strictly more courtesy than he thought she had earned.

His blood was high in his temples, and he pushed through the double-doors of the terrace to get some air. Anger at her presumptions faded quickly into irritation, and then into a dull, restless sort of itch. He could recognize the voice in Regulus’s letter. He recognized, too, why her memory would hurt his mother so much, so long after she had gone. Andromeda had a way of crawling under the skin.

Firelight guttered in the braziers. On the vine-tressed balustrade, a trio sat with their heads together, talking in low voices. Harry straddled the marble, while Ron leaned against it, with his arms folded; Hermione sat side-saddle on it, her robe spilling over the bustles of jasmine and bougainvillea.

Light spilled behind him from the drawing-room as he opened the doors. The three of them turned — a fleeting impression of deer, as the light reflected on their eyes — and Hermione sat up a little at the sight of him, her shoulders sinking. Her hands stilled around a twined piece of her hair.

“One almost feels neglected,” he drawled, although his heart wasn’t in it, the barb. “Did the reception bore you?”

“You were talking to Andromeda,” said Hermione, undeterred. “A bit loudly, to be honest. I didn’t want to get in the middle of it.”

“You should have.” He nudged the doors closed behind him. “It could only have improved the conversation.”

She frowned. Her gaze sharpened. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Will I step on the moment, joining you?”

Ron pushed off the balustrade. “Yeah, bit cramped, this pavilion,” he said, “it’ll be a squeeze, but if you sit on my lap—”

“Don’t get excited.”

Ron sniggered. Hermione relaxed, a little, though her eyes followed him anxiously in her periphery. Draco leaned his hip next to Hermione’s, the scent of crushed jasmines blooming through the smoke and the warm night air.

The coin of the moon lay flat on the lake. He thought of Daphne.

He’d thought of inviting her, but hadn’t. If her family knew, the world would know. They would anyway, once word went around.

Theo and Pansy had, but he couldn’t invite them, either. They were not friends and could not be, on this side of the war, or perhaps any other.

He regretted that quite a bit, in retrospect. Theodore should have been there. He had cared for Narcissa greatly, and Pansy, whatever her feelings, had somehow left Narcissa with the impression that she was a “lovely girl.” They should have had the chance to say goodbye. It was his fault they wouldn’t. There was another thing for him to carry.

These things had costs: the choices one made, the company one decided to keep. Draco had expensive tastes.

“We were talking about Snape,” said Ron. “They said he broke his cover to save Harry.” He shot Harry an unpleasant look. There lay some mire of argument that Draco hadn’t begun to uncover. He

found himself spitefully uninterested in them. He hoped it caused them problems; he hoped Ron had shouted himself hoarse, and it was some contentment that he trusted Ron to do it.

“So… sorry,” said Ron brusquely. “For thinking your godfather was trying to kill us all.” He glanced around. “Sort of thought he’d be here.”

He might have said *I told you so,* but his heart wasn’t in it; the angels of Snape’s better nature, skeletal and pallid things they were, did not make frequent appearances.

“My godfather is in hiding.”

“Yeah, so’s Sirius, but—”

“Sirius Black isn’t a target in the way Snape will be. Black is dangerous; Snape was essential. Arguably the reason they pursued Black in the first place was because Lestrange thought he’d taken possession of her ring. By her great fortune, and subsequent misfortune, my mother did instead.”

“What ring?” said Ron.

“I second that ‘what,’” said Hermione, frowning. “Why did she want the ring? And what was Snape trying to do with the spell? There’d be no possible reason to do something *that* destructive a closed space — unless he thought it was the only way to even the odds with Bellatrix, but the risks — well, the risks are evident, now. I thought perhaps he’d recalculated when he thought Harry was out of the room, but even then, I can’t believe a duelist of his skill would want to—”

“That’s not why.”

In for a knut, in for a galleon. It couldn’t possibly harm him now.

“The ring is a piece of the Dark Lord’s soul,” he said. “It kept him from dying when his body was killed. Presumably you can’t scry them, or else they would be significantly harder to find. That’s why Snape cast fiendfyre. It’s one of the only ways to destroy a horcrux.”

The others stared at him.

“She wore a bit of his *soul?”* Harry said, horrified.

“Not knowingly.”

“Have you checked yours?” said Ron, and Draco barked a laugh.

“No,” he said, “my father got a book, instead. Thank you for worrying.”

“How long have you known?” Hermione demanded. Her voice was edged with injury; she was angry, of course, he hadn’t told her.

“A year. My mother swore me to secrecy. It’s difficult to play a hand the other man can see.”

“And — and—” She was struggling not to blame him for not telling her; he watched her, tiredly, as she wrestled the feeling aside. “And so you can tell us only now, because the vow is gone?”

“Vows don’t work like that,” mumbled Ron.

“Quite right, they don’t. But since I swore on the dishonor and destruction of my house, I find myself curious what else the fates can possibly do to me.”

Hermione reached to touch him, but hesitated, fingers curling.

Draco drew his wand and re-lit one of the dying braziers. The flame jumped from his wand in a rippling arch.

“We should talk about it,” said Harry.

“I was under the impression we *were* talking about it.”

“Yeah, but not really.”

“Fine. I can think of no reason Harry Potter shouldn’t have his pleasure. What would he like to talk about?”

“Your mother.”

“My mother, yes. Go on. What about her?”

“She died—”

“You’ve concluded that, have you?”

“—and you blame me—”

“Do I? Why bother to think at all? Saint Potter will tell me—”

“—but you can’t blame me without blaming yourself,” said Harry, hard and flat, “because if you weren’t there, she wouldn’t have been, either. So if you’d like to hate me — and I reckon you would — you have to go through yourself to do it. Which I reckon isn’t gonna stop you. So do you want to talk about it?”

Draco threw his wand to the ground and punched him.

CRACK. The boy toppled back from the balustrade and landed in the hedges a few feet below. Hermione cried out more loudly than Harry did.

Draco rounded the post on the stairs and followed him down. Prying him from the hedges, it was easy enough to hit him, at point-blank range, and hit him again. Harry shouted and caught another blow to the face, throwing his glasses into the dirt.

The pain blossomed hot and immediate over his bruising knuckles. He didn’t throw punches often. Ron made it seem easier than it was.

“How fucking *dare* you?”

“Christ,” Hermione muttered, coming after him, but she didn’t stop him. She hung back, with Ron, while Harry tried to grapple free.

Their heads rolled over and over each other in the dirt, white and black, though the first was collecting enough dirt to grey it some. Draco got the upper hand and shoved him down, bracing him in the dirt with a knee on his chest.

“How fucking dare *you,”* he breathed, “speak to me of blame—”

“Go on,” Harry panted. “You’re right, go on.”

“How dare you speak to me of fault? If you had stayed—”

“I know—”

“Why couldn’t you stay put?”

Ron flinched. Hermione folded her arms, her expression stony, and looked at her shoes.

“Why was it so fucking hard? Why? They played you, and you knew it, and you *let* them, like a fucking idiot! She spent the last year of her life teaching you Occlumency for fucking *nothing!”*

“I don’t know. I’m sorry, I don’t know.”

“You ran *away!”*

“I didn’t know—”

“You didn’t know there would be fucking *consequences?”* he snarled. “As if you, of all people, have had a life with so few of them?”

Harry coiled into the ground, his fingers digging in the earth.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“You *should* be.”

“I killed her,” croaked Harry. “I was there, so you were there, so she was there, so she died. That’s what you want to say, isn’t it?”

Draco stared at him. His pulse throbbed.

“Fuck’s sake,” he bit out, and shoved off him. Harry sat up, blinking, as Draco turned his back and stalked off.

“Draco,” said Ron lowly, “what are you—”

“Formal challenge,” he said shortly, crossing ten paces. The space from Harry made it easier to think. “Wands. Heel to cranium, to w— to first blood.”

“No,” said Ron suddenly. The speed with which he moved in front of Harry was irritating, and, distantly, flattering. “No. Not with wands—”

“Ron, get away,” said Harry thickly, struggling up. “Let him. I can take it.”

“Are you *mad?* What does this fucking help? Letting him curse you?”

“Nothing,” said Draco, twirling his wand. “It doesn’t help anything at all.”

Ron shouldered Harry back. “Draco,” he said roughly. “You’re not thinking.”

“He is, though,” said Harry, in a hard voice. “Ron, get out of the way. You don’t understand.”

Ron staggered back.

It was perfectly sized to gut him: *Now run along, Ron, you don’t understand.* Harry could be cruel, when he wanted to be. And he could be careless, when he wanted to be. And he could be fretful,

and jealous, and spiteful, in all the ways apropos for something dropped on a doorstep and forgotten for eleven years.

How horrible to be like him. They were locked alone together in an empty room.

“My mother didn’t have to die,” said Draco. He became aware, with a terrible wonder, of the desire to hurt something.

Worse: He wanted to kill something. He wanted to watch its body stop moving under his boot. To feel as powerful as he had thirty seconds before he walked into the drawing room of Grimmauld Place.

He wanted death, destruction, armageddon. He wanted thousands to drown in blood, for the world to bear a scar — but that was not what he wanted, not at all.

“Hermione,” Ron exclaimed, appealing finally to the fourth of them, who had been silent. “Talk to them. They’ll listen to you, Merlin knows they never fucking listen to me—”

“I wouldn’t be offended, Ron, Harry doesn’t listen to anybody,” she said coldly.

All three of them looked at her. Harry said gutturally, “Hermione, if you want to step in after him, we can do that, too.”

“No,” she said, in the same tone, “I think this is all ridiculous posturing, candidly. I don’t like duels. You’d remember that, if you’d put to memory anything I’d ever said on the subject.”

“Oh, thanks,” said Ron, “that really helps—”

“I’m not his carer. What do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know! Damage control! You’re a prefect!”

“We’re not at school,” she said, watching Draco, who caught his wand and held it still.

“It could’ve been your brother,” called Draco, and took savage pleasure in how Ron whipped his head around. “Bill was there. My mother saved him. Not that it may matter, in the end; we’re going to lose the war.”

Ron faltered. “Shut up,” he snapped. “Don’t say that. Don’t say we’re going to lose.”

“We are. Do you know what happens in wars where one party can die, and the other can’t?” He twitched his wand at Harry. “Ask his parents. Ask mine.”

“Enough. You want a shot at me,” said Harry hoarsely. “I’m giving it to you.”

He almost laughed again, incredulous, because Harry was serious, and in his horrible, misbegotten way, he was trying to be kind.

The torchlight guttered on the boy’s glasses, paving the green in coins of fire, catching the veins of his scar, and in that light he was somber and angry, the calm clean anger that had stared down Umbridge and raised the Great Hall to fight at his back.

A pair of voices echoed in his head: *You wish the other kid left that graveyard? Not as much as I do.* And: *Strike me, old man. I know you want to do it.*

Here was a boy who had been punished for living, and asked for more. Who kept asking. As if he had been born with a debt in it, a bond of suffering that someone else had run up on his account. That explained his bravery — at least the deep end of it, the chemical insensate courage that Draco had never understood; the pain didn’t frighten him. Of course it didn’t. There was nothing left to be frightened of.

There was no joy in hitting a boy like that. He took it as his due. It was like kicking a dog; and really, it was worse than kicking a dog, because a dog would at least avoid someone after it was kicked.

Draco sheathed his wand. “I don’t need your largesse,” he said, dripping spite. “Save it for the next one.”

Ron sucked a breath through his teeth. Harry dropped his head, rolling his jaw through the hit.

Draco turned his back, and swept up the staircase. It was a few moments before Hermione’s footsteps followed him.

He wondered what had passed, unspoken, between her and the others such that they did not call out to her. Or perhaps she had followed without looking.

At the top of the stairs, he almost ran through Molly Weasley, who without preamble caught him and pressed him into her arms. He stood there woodenly in her embrace, his pulse running in his ears, as she refused even at some length to let him go.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

Draco thought of the blood running from Harry’s nose. He wondered if she would still embrace him when she saw it. That, too, made him want to laugh, horribly.

But when Harry came up, his bruises were healed, and the blood was gone. Ron subtly slipped his wand into his back pocket, darting a stiff nod at Draco.

“The carriages have come,” Molly whispered. “Won’t you come with us, dearie? We’re staying over with the Tonkses in Birmingham, and on to Hogwarts in the morning. I hate to think of you—” She made an awkward late-stage elision of the word *alone*— “out here in the countryside, so far away from us. Isn’t any adult staying with you?”

“Severus Snape is my legal guardian.”

“That is *not* an answer to my question.”

He stepped away from her, even as she kept wheedling. “There’s plenty of room at the Tonkses! And Arthur brought the tent, if it’s too tight a squeeze—”

“Mum,” muttered Ron.

“Safe travels, Mrs. Weasley,” said Draco. “Thank you for coming.”

The guests migrated out. Ron kept one hand on Harry’s shoulder as they left, as if wary of hostiles leaping at him from the trees. Harry turned as they left, and tried to say something; but nothing came up, and he closed his mouth miserably, his eyes burning into Draco from across the steps.

Sirius slunk past him. He had steered clear of Harry during the ceremony, and now he transformed again into his animagus form, which trotted up and jumped up to curl in the unoccupied driver’s box of Harry’s carriage. He would be returning to Hogwarts, with the rest of them. Of course, if he had not enough to resent, there was the revelation that Harry had gotten what he wanted

Molly and Arthur boarded their carriage, and the Tonkses glided down into the other, Andromeda lingering only for a somber, slightly regretful touch of his hand. When she opened her mouth, he was surprised to hear a string of French syllables tumble, somewhat rustily, out from between her painted lips.

“Au revoir, neveu. Ravi d’avoir fait votre connaissance.” She hesitated. “We are all each other has left, are we not?” She glanced at Hermione and tapped her nose. “Traitors must stick together.”

Draco stiffened, and did not reply. Andromeda, seeming to sense a misstep, pressed her lips closed — but no apology was forthcoming. At length, Draco stepped back. She gave her husband her arm, and

allowed herself to be steered like a golden barge into the glowing port of the carriage.

But Ted looked back at him. He seemed to flinch upon meeting Draco's stare. His hackles rose, and his hand stilled on the carriage-door.

Draco raised his hand. Ted relaxed and smiled at him, a bit uneasily. He raised his hand back, and then clambered into the carriage.

Tonks was one of the last out, with Dumbledore. She stopped to shake his hand, and leaned in to speak in his ear.

"Hey. Sorry about Mum," she muttered. "She means well, I swear."

"It's nothing."

"Well, no, it's your mum's funeral. It's not fine."

He jerked his head dismissively. "Perhaps. But as you say, it's my mother's funeral," he said. "If it's any consolation, she chose the one day it could have no appreciable effect on my mood."

She nodded. "You're tough," she said. "Don't be too tough, yeah?"

"I don't know what you mean," he said tonelessly.

Tonks kissed her teeth and turned her head. "At the Academy, the first thing they teach you is how to take a fall," she said. "They spend a week knocking you down a hundred different ways. In the mud, in the water, in a crowd, off a building. They teach it like an art form, knowing how to fall."

I am not falling, he might have said. *I am on the ground. There is nothing left to fret about breaking.*

He stepped aside to let her pass. She clipped him off a short salute, and then Tonks and Dumbledore joined her parents in the second

carriage. Before they left, Dumbledore offered him a small gold coin, with the emblem of a phoenix cast in silver.

“A ward key to Hogwarts,” he said. “If you change your mind. If not… I will expect you in September.”

The sentence canted upward at the end, open to interpretation as a question.

He pocketed the coin. Dumbledore nodded, tipped his golden cap, and descended from the Manor steps.

Hermione lingered on the stairs beside him. The wind stirred her hair, too, unfurling it curl by curl from her bun.

“Are you going to make me go?” she said. It was a quiet challenge.

He didn’t want to. The silence of the house at night had thorns.

He forced himself to say: “Do your parents expect you?”

“Eventually,” she said.

“Let’s try again. What did you tell them, exactly?”

“I told my mother I might stay over, and she said — well, she understood.”

“That’s a dextrous choice of verb.”

“I… Draco,” she said, and that was it, his name, her tone, one plea. Once the glimmer of uncertainty opened her face he wanted to recant any objection, tug her behind the doors, and lock them. If he’d ever had the ability to deny what he wanted, it wasn’t today. He wanted her here; she’d stay. He could have what he wanted.

It couldn’t possibly fall to him, today, to do anything else.

“Don’t leave,” he said. “Go back to your parents tomorrow.”

It was a weak thing to do; he was weak, and selfish. Taking her away from her parents. Weak and selfish, Draco Malfoy, but at least he could be honest with himself.

Hermione exhaled. The preparatory bristling for an argument dissolved in one breath. “Good,” she said fiercely. “I will. I’ll go tell them — I’ll be right back—”

She darted down the stairs and stuck her head into the Weasleys’ carriage, at which she had a short, intent conversation with someone inside. When she emerged, her expression was queasy, but relieved, and she shut the door behind her. The carriage wheels gave a creaking turn as she started back up the stairs, the lamplit interiors shrinking like yellow will-o-wisps up the drive.

Hermione crested the staircase again, breathing strained. He sought her hand again, idly, while she tried to salvage the remainder of her bun. “They said it was fine if my parents gave permission,” she said, “which I obviously said they did. It makes things easier at the Tonkses, anyway.”

“How so?”

“I’m not really talking to Harry at the moment,” she said. There was a pause.

“You don’t have to hold him to account for me,” he said stiffly. “I don’t intend to deprive him of his friends.”

“I understand that,” she said, after a moment, “but I’d also note that it isn’t — entirely — about what happened to you. Though it doesn’t… help.”

Draco said, “He broke your trust.”

“Not even that. I don’t care that he broke a promise. I could forgive him for that. But I spend so much time,” she said, her voice warbled, “thinking about him. For five years. I risked my life and my health,

and so much of my time, and — I left my parents over the holidays, to be with him. Fourth year summer, fourth year Christmas... Fifth year Christmas. Every time he called. And when Umbridge tried to take his broomstick," she said, her voice hardening, "I got *this.* On my hand. For him. And then I did what I did to Cho, and nobody looks at me the same anymore — for him. I did everything I thought he needed, before he needed it, because I knew he wouldn't ask for it. And I did it willingly! But when he had the chance, he didn't think about me. I wasn't a consideration. My parents weren't a consideration. None of the muggles on that platform were a consideration." She wrinkled her eyes shut. "I'm so *sick,"* she said, her voice no longer faint but furious, "of *wizards* who can't, who won't, think about anyone else."

Silently, Draco reached out and hitched their fingers together. She sniffed, and watched the carriages trundle out to the gates and turn onto the far road.

"Ron thinks I should try to forgive him. That's what he's trying to do," she added. "Ron."

"Is he making progress?"

"Oh, he says he isn't," she said tiredly, "but he will. It's Ron."

He had expected that much. Ron would shout at him, assuredly, and might give him the cold shoulder for a while, but it would not deter him. He knew how Ron fought. He would come running back as soon as he remembered he was needed, and at this juncture, there were plenty of things to remind him.

The will-o-wisps flitted through the trees beyond the gates and sank into the gloom.

"Do you want tea?" she said.

Briselda brought the tray up to his private sitting-room. He sent her to turn down a guest room of some size, and then locked the door and cast *Muffliato.* The maids like to talk to each other.

With the windows open, there was more than enough heat to manage without the fireplace, before which rested the camelback sofa where she'd slept, the night they got their prefect letters; she might have been recalling it, too, because her fingers drifted along the back. The lamps filled the room with low brassy light, and the moon pressed a pale glaze on the windowpane. On his desk by the window, Ulysses rattled the bars in greeting.

Hermione's tea preference divested him of a sugarbowl. She leaned against the arm of the sofa, her hands wrapped around the tiny porcelain cup, her legs folded over his lap. He pulled out a piece of her hair and threaded it through his fingers.

"Do you know if Dumbledore has a plan?" she said quietly.

"With respect to what?"

"With respect to anything. To finding the horcruxes. To winning the war, as he did the first time."

"Dumbledore didn't win the first Wizarding War." His index traced a circle lightly around her knee. "The Order was losing, and steadily, up until their immortal enemy committed suicide by infant."

"But there has to be a way," she persisted. "No one is actually immortal. Anyone can be killed."

"That's true. There was one way. It was Snape and my mother, and they're both gone."

By now the Dark Lord knew that Snape had betrayed him, he knew he had lost the secret of the horcruxes. A wizard with a tenth his intellect would have moved them by now. And there was no war to be fought against an enemy that could not die.

To kill a man, one had to find his body. The Dark Lord had many bodies, mostly hidden. Dumbledore didn't need soldiers half as much as he needed spies.

If there's no Harry Potter, there's nothing to fight for, Hermione had said. *People love you, Harry, you're a symbol of the Second Wizarding War.* And Ginny had said, hard and deadly with love, *With an army, they couldn't take you from us.* That was true. They'd walk over the bodies to get him, and send them into death together.

Ginny and Fred and George and Neville. Dean and Seamus. Katie and Angelina. Luna Lovegood and Lavender Brown, the Patil sisters, the Creevey brothers, Alfie Chrissenpoffer and Victoria Frobisher, and good Cedric Diggory, who had only ever tried to do what a prefect should. He knew now how their bodies would lie. How the weight of them would settle in his arms.

It had to be someone's responsibility. It wasn't fair, that they should all pay the price. It wasn't their war. It wasn't his, either. But in the registry of costs and faults and failures, he would not emerge with clean hands.

Bellatrix Lestrange had clutched his hand and asked him to run with her. *A fine thing,* she had called him. And somewhere in the world, at that moment, she would be suffering at her master's hand for what happened to the ring, but she would be forgiven. It wasn't her fault, after all, that Snape had betrayed her. The Dark Lord's right hand could not be dispensed with so easily.

And it would know, if anyone did, where the other horcruxes were.

He remembered something his mother had said, before she died. The day was vanishing into the blear of memory; he panicked, sometimes, at how little of it he remembered only a few days later. How little of what she said he could recall. But he remembered her saying, quite clearly, with annihilating regret: *I should have fought. I could have won.*

Hermione had set her lips against the teacup, thinking. She lifted them, curious.

“Why didn’t you tell me about them?” she said suddenly. “The horcruxes?”

He almost flinched at the uncanny feeling that she’d plucked the word from his thoughts. “I made a vow to my mother,” he said.

“Your mother asked a lot of you. Not all of it was fair.”

“And not all of it was done,” he said. “I tried to give her anything I could stand to.”

She frowned. The lamplight made her skin soft. “Did she ask you to stay away from me?”

His fingers stilled in her hair.

“Granger—”

“I’d like to know. Because I always knew you were giving something up,” she said stubbornly, “breaking with your upbringing. Being what you are. But I sometimes thought it wouldn’t have mattered to her, me being in your life, if I hadn’t had feelings for you.”

It would have. He didn't mention that. “Technically, your feelings weren’t the problem.”

“Ah, right,” she said. “You were supposed to fancy a genteel pureblooded girl who’d have your children.”

“Little chance of that, with you around.”

“There *might* have been. If you’d started seeing someone proper, then she mightn’t have cared—”

“I would have still wanted you.”

She said quietly, “You might have learned not to, after a while.”

He coiled the hair around his fist and closed it. She glanced at it, a fleeting movement of her eyes.

“That would have saved no one,” he said, “and certainly it would not have saved me.”

Hermione made a sharp noise and set down her teacup. She shifted, easing his hand out of her hair, and replaced it in a businesslike way on her waist. She sat up, drawing their faces closer together.

“Tell me something about your mother,” she said intently. “Something you’ve never told anyone.”

The pressure in his chest changed. He was tempted to laughter, again, although the itch crept up his throat in a suspicious way.

“I want it noted,” he said, “that your attempt at comfort began with an interrogation.”

“I append to the note that this was not the beginning of the attempt,” she said, with classic pedantry, “and it is not my fault you respond to some methods better than others.”

A smile tugged his mouth, although it hurt to swallow.

“She took her tea with lemon,” he said. “Just lemon. No cream, no sugar.”

Hermione nodded, politely.

“Don’t make that face. Not all of us want ten volts of sugar at eight in the morning. Anyway, that’s how she took it. She preferred darjeeling. First flush. When I started drinking tea, I copied her, only watered it down with cream.”

“Which you, not knowing better, thought was an acceptable way for tea to taste,” she agreed, and smiled when he flicked her ear. “Did

you often take it together?”

“Most days. When I was younger, she gave me cocoa. Or mint, if I’d behaved badly.”

“That’s more disciplined than I expected.”

“No, it isn’t. I always had cocoa. If I didn’t I’d cry, and she could never stand to see me unhappy.”

His eyes stung. He tipped his head back at the ceiling, trying to cool them.

And it was so much pain at once to think about it, to think about it for a fraction of a second, that it was better not to think at all. It was better to think of anything, to laugh or to bicker or to dream of other kinds of pain, than to permit for a fraction of a second the idea to cross his welted mind that she was dead.

Dead, and no longer employed in the business of being his mother. She had said her last words to him. She had touched him for the last time. That was the end of his allotment. There was no more of Mother left.

Moving swiftly, Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her head in his shoulder, which gave him privacy for the pressure to release, in his chest, in short breaks like the beats of a caged bird’s wings.

He couldn’t count in minutes or hours the length of time she held him there in silence. The teapot had ceased to steam. Maids’ footsteps no longer troubled the floors above them.

“What did she say to you?”

Hermione drew back, clearing her throat. “What?”

“At Grimmauld. My mother whispered something to you. What was it?”

“Oh,” she said thickly, rubbing the corner of her eye. “I'm really sorry. I don't know. It was loud, and I didn't hear her.”

He tilted his head. Hermione swallowed and flicked the sleep from her fingers.

“Was it unpleasant?” he asked her.

“No. I told you, I just didn't hear.”

He began to argue, but he considered then the stark and brutal content of what his mother *had* said to her; and, pursuantly, the circumstances under which she would say something she could not tolerate her son to hear, even knowing she was likely never to face the consequences for it.

“You can tell me, if it was cruel,” he said. “I heard the rest of what she said to you. She was — passionate. I hope she didn't try to hurt you.”

She laughed slightly to herself. “Yes,” she said. “She was passionate. I don't *think* she intended to hurt me. But to be honest, I don't think she cared about my feelings at all. It was a concession speech. She'd surrendered something very precious, and not quite willingly, and she was trying to do it with whatever grace her beliefs allowed her.”

He was about to reply when a queasy feeling passed through him, a ripple, like a comb being dragged along his ribs. In a single swift motion, he levered Hermione off his lap and stood, wand out.

“What is it?” She began to stand, her legs uncurling, and he stilled her with a touch to her shoulder.

“Someone’s come through the wards.”

She shot up and grabbed her wand from the table, diving for her shoes. He cast out his feeling for the wards, groping along the

contours of the estate — they were murky, still, since he wasn't seventeen; the best he could do was a watery sense of the house, its thick walls, the faint motions of Briselda and the maids in the kitchen below. Something else stirred weakly on the terrace, a presence so dim it could have been an animal, if it were not drifting towards the drawing-room.

The door to his bedroom snapped open before he touched it, responding to a premonitory thought.

"Downstairs," he said, sweeping out. Hermione followed him, her wand flaring with *Lumos.*

"How did they get through the wards? Did they break them?"

"They can't have, I would have felt it—"

"But then they *can't* get through without permissions, or—"

"Or I'd have to admit them myself." Another pair of doors burst open at his approach, and he stalked through. "Which I didn't. So unless it's Dumbledore—"

"It can't be, he just left with Harry."

"—and assuming we're not about to die horribly—"

"As I might have, up until you used the word 'assume'—"

"—then there's only one person who could enter the Manor without my permission, while I'm here."

The maids had put out the sconces. Shadows pooled around the corners and clung to the starless vault of the ceiling. In the drawing-room, the doors to the terrace hung open, and a warm wind stirred the drapes in flickering snaps, like the lashing tails of serpents pinned at the throat. In the awning of the doors stood a hunched figure in a traveling cloak, favoring its left side. When the wind

peeled back the lip of its cowl, it revealed a narrow, pallid face, rimmed by a tattered oilslick of hair.

Snape waded forward, silhouetted by the moonstruck lake. The fingers of his right hand were unnaturally thin and pointed, and when Draco focused on them he saw his phalanges terminated in points of bare bone. Black wires mimicked the structures of sinew and tendon, trawling from an ivory cuff at the wrist. Another flicker of wind revealed it for an ivory bracer, which curved over the pale helix of radius and ulna, fastened by leather straps at the elbow.

The wires seared gold whenever Snape twitched them, puppeting the skeletal architecture of Potions Master’s new forearm. As he watched, the bone-hand tucked his wand back into its sheath, and removed a brass chest from where it was tucked under his other arm.

“My apologies,” he rasped. “I came to pay my respects.”

With that, Draco’s godfather crumpled to the floor.

-Hey, guys. Going through it right now, so sorry if I can't reply to as many comments as I'd like to. You are the bright spot in my life; reading what you've written brings me nearly to tears.

-Andromeda’s reference is, of course, “Annabel Lee,” by Edgar Allen Poe. Shoutout to that person who pulled a Poe reference in the comments for the last chapter, I had to go through my notes frantically to make sure I hadn't mixed up the posting dates.

-Unless wizard cats, like wizards, have extended lifespans, I imagine that there have been many Mrs. Norrises through the years (possibly with different first names, or prefixes). I like to think that when one dies, it’s a student tradition to raise money and get Filch a new kitten.

-This chapter and the next were originally in the same document, but I broke them up out of sympathy for M&G, since suggesting that anyone record a chapter of that size might very seriously make me liable for injuries incurred due to vocal strain.

-This one goes out to the Poldark soundtrack, which was playing while I wrote most of this chapter. That’s a real “make the words go” OST.

-The two-part finale of Book 5 (and Volume II) will be posted two weeks from today: "The Princess's Tale, Part II" and "Toujours."

The Princess's Tale, Part II

Chapter 82: The Princess's Tale, Part II

By a combination of reflex and luck, respectively, they caught Snape before he hit the parquet. Some effort saw him leveraged into a wingbacked chair, where he sprawled and caught his breath.

“Did you come all the way from Hogwarts tonight?” said Draco.

Snape jerked his head.

“That was stupid,” he snapped. “Do you think they’re not watching the Floo? Or the trains? They’ll have men across the countryside searching for you. Could you even Apparate if you needed to? Merlin, look at the state of you. I doubt it.”

Hermione cleared her throat, faintly. Draco stepped back, radiating discontent, and Snape caught his breath.

“I came,” Snape rasped, “by coach.”

“Coach? What coach?”

“By *muggle* coach?” said Hermione, whose disbelief achieved insult. Snape flashed her a withering look.

“It is a serviceable method of transportation.”

“I know that, but — I mean, have you used it before?”

“Did you think Hogwarts pays its teachers enough to travel by sedan chair?”

Hermione blinked. “I didn’t think cost was the relevant obstacle to that,” she said. “It would be a lot slower. Professor, what happened to your arm?”

“Is your question rhetorical, or ironical?”

“I think it’s medical,” she said, eyeing it with conflicted curiosity. “Why… bones? I thought Pomfrey could regrow—”

“Poppy has left me fit to wield a wand,” said Snape grimly, rolling the skeletal fingers. “Further convalescence would have wasted essential time. Flesh is largely ornamental.”

“It’s not. Really. For a lot of things it’s quite essential.”

Snape ignored her. “I have something for you,” he said to Draco. “From your mother. A bequest.”

The word *bequest* left a stinging pain. “An owl wouldn’t have sufficed?” he said roughly. “What is it?”

Snape reached for the brass chest. Fumbling for want of dexterity in his right hand, he fished a key from a chain on his neck and unlocked it, revealing a set of thirteen vials set in a bed of purple silk. They held a swirling, mercurial liquid.

“You have a pensieve, I assume,” said Snape.

Draco picked up the chest. His mother’s memories lay in two shining rows between his hands.

“I was sorry,” Snape added, “to have missed the ceremony.”

It didn’t bear talking about. A person like Severus Snape did not attend funerals. Draco had always known that; he hadn’t been at his father’s funeral, either. That one had been a society event. Snape’s trial at the Wizengamot had been only four months concluded; he hadn’t gone.

Anyway, it was better, perhaps, that Snape hadn’t been there. Draco snapped the chest shut.

“Who don’t you trust?” said Hermione suddenly.

Snape raised his eyebrows at her to demonstrate the breadth of possible answers to the question.

“I’m talking about today. You didn’t come to the ceremony. It obviously wasn’t because you couldn’t make the journey, so who was there that couldn’t see you?”

“The question implies I have knowledge of who attended; which, as I did not, I do not.”

She didn’t even bother with that. “Was it Andromeda? Everyone else is Order.”

Snape’s face did something odd; he braced a thumb and fourth finger on either side of his brows. “You invited,” he said, “Andromeda Black.”

“She happens to have been related to her,” Draco said.

“And was it a pleasant reunion? Did she act with reverence and cordiality for the deceased?”

“No. In fact, it was greatly unpleasant, as a regrettably large share of decent things are. Severus, answer her question.”

Snape tilted his head at her slightly; his eyes glinted. “Nymphadora Tonks,” he said, “reports in the first instance to Alastor Moody. Who would not hesitate to throw me to what he regards as my former brothers-in-arms.”

“Dumbledore wouldn’t allow that,” she said.

“It is one of Albus’s more famous traits, that he is rarely around, and never more rarely than when one needs him. I try never to depend on it.” He tapped the box: *click-click,* bone on brass. “Hasten to those,” he added. “Memory is an unstable substance. It has a tendency to warp.”

Draco tightened his grip. “And you?” he said flatly. “Are you leaving?”

“I will lodge for the night, if you permit. I have business to attend in the morning.” He nodded at the box. “Speak to me. After.”

Draco set the box under his arm. Hermione said meaningfully: “Professor, have you eaten?”

“I can see myself to the kitchens,” he said, rising to his feet. “I have been here before.”

“Right. Of… course you have. I’ll go tell Briselda there’s another guest here,” she said briskly, dusting her hands, “so you don’t scare the daylights out of her—”

“Granger,” said Draco. She looked at him.

“Oh,” she said, in a different tone. “Oh. Yes. If you’re— sure.”

He tipped his head towards the door. Snape inspected the bookshelf, expressionless. Hermione threw a glance between them and followed Draco out.

His father’s study sat in the library wing. A surprisingly light room, it sported ample windows that in daylight exposed a full square of lavish green on the Manor grounds, and at night cut black quadrilaterals into the wooden walls. Between leatherbound shelves hung portraits of pale wizards with striking glares. In a glass case at the back of the room, set between a stuffed lion and a bust of Charlemagne, there stood a golden reliquary in the Gothic style, with rubies set into each of the ornamented spires.

When he closed the door, a candelabra burst to life at his elbow with unusual promptness, as if the Manor were apologizing for the unfortunate business with Snape.

“Was all of this your father’s?” Hermione murmured, caught evidently between her affection for the room’s style and her political distaste for its excess. She wandered down an aisle of artifacts, tapping on

the glass encasement of a set of jeweled ortolans. Her finger drifted over the lion's mane. He caught her hand.

"Museum rules," he said. "I don't know which are cursed."

She looked over her shoulder at him as if this might be a joke.

"It's true. The lawyers have it noted down in our asset portfolio, but it's longer than the tax code and even Gatz hasn't read the whole thing. Until I do, it's best not to take chances."

Her lips parted.

"My father collected some of it," he said, to ward off a probably salient criticism. "Not much. He preferred books and broomsticks. He inherited the collection from his father, and he from his, et cetera. It's not his anymore."

She blinked at him, and scanned again the jeweled birds, the lion, the portraits. Her face belied an uneasy cousin to wonder.

Unsettled, he pressed the small of her back, pulling her along. "The pensieve is here."

"I've never used one before. Is it difficult?"

"The hardest part is opening the pensieve."

He tried to remember how his father had done it.

The reliquary's front face bore a pair of little golden doors. He unlatched them, and when he pulled the ruby capstone from the top, the sides of the reliquary unsealed and unfolded neatly to hang down around the stem.

Inset in the velvet beneath was a round pool of misty fluid so still it might have been glass. Standing, it reached knee-height, so he set the box down and knelt. Hermione did, too, albeit with a pointed tug.

“About this,” she said suddenly. “Are you sure?”

“I never do anything except.”

“Yes, that’s — well. Bald lie, for one thing. For two: it’s Narcissa’s memories.” She watched him open the box and carefully remove the first vial, unstopper it, and empty it into the pensieve. Memory dribbled from its lip in a sluggish crawl, the wisps thin and yellowing; older ones, he suspected. Childhood. Perhaps infancy. The surface tension on the pensieve shattered, and it began to swirl.

“Both are true,” he said, unstoppering another. This one was cleaner, and poured faster. “What’s your point?”

“I don’t think she would have wanted me to see this.”

“You don’t even know what ‘this’ is.”

“I know she made it her last bequest to her only son. I don’t have to know what’s in it. I know she didn’t bequeath it to me.”

With a twist of his wrist, another vial slipped into the pensieve. “She’s not here,” he said cruelly. “So if the only thing stopping you is concern for her feelings, I have good news on that score.”

“Draco.”

The empty vial slipped and cracked on the floor. He closed his fingers too late around where it should have been.

“I can’t do this,” he said, clearly and carefully.

“You don’t have to.” Her hand closed over his, and steered it away from the vial. She brushed it aside with a businesslike flick of her hand. “Especially not tonight. My God. Or ever, if you don’t want to.”

“She wanted to tell me something.”

“Then she can wait for you to want to listen,” she said hotly. He listened to her with great tiredness. Everything was so simple, when Hermione spoke; everything was so clear, the world so bright, the sun so high and shining, even if only for a moment, through a winking cloud. “Putting aside your point about her feelings, even though, incidentally, it’s correct — I’m not certain you *are* obligated in the way you suggest. No one who loved you would have wanted you to use their memory to hurt yourself, and any rate, it’s certainly not something they could ask of you. The dead don’t have special entitlements because they’re dead. They play by the same rules as the rest of us, and when they want something, they have to give you a good reason to give it to them, and so I don’t see a good reason for you to put yourself through this, if you’re not ready, and you’ll forgive me for saying I don’t think any such reason *exists* in a formation I couldn’t beat stupid if it was put to me.”

He caught her by the chin and kissed her. She inhaled in surprise, but her mouth slackened into his, sliding together in an artless clash of mouths and teeth whose sensual element was nearly irrelevant. He made a hard sound, and she cupped his face a good deal more carefully than he touched hers. He pulled her forward, dragging her on her knees on the parquet until she had to catch herself on her shoulders with another hitch of breath.

“You have to breathe it,” he said. Their foreheads were braced together, so close his breath stirred her hair. “The memory. That’s how it works.”

Hermione sighed.

“Okay,” she said. “I don’t enjoy that, mechanically.”

“I thought you wouldn’t.”

“There is air in it, still, when you…? You’re still breathing? Never mind, don’t tell me.”

“We have to go at once. A deep breath, to get to the bottom.”

She sat up on her knees, peering doubtfully inside. The mist reflected on her drawn face.

“Latin,” she murmured. “Spirit. Breath. *Spirare.* It’s the same root, you know.”

“Who taught you that one?”

“It’s general knowledge,” she said, haughtily. “You don’t need citations for a morpheme.” She sniffed. “Tell me when. Actually, don’t tell me. Just do it, no warning. I’m going to lose my nerve, otherwise.”

“I was about to tell you the same thing.”

His mother’s memories ran in a clockwise current of braided mist, glowing.

“Alright,” announced Hermione. “One—”

He did as she asked; there was no warning. He pulled them under without a sound.

Once his ears slipped under the surface, all senses — the clench of her hand, the cold edge of the pensieve, the wood under his knees — faded together into the mist. He remembered the first breath of the pensieve, memory filling his lungs with dust-bitter not-quite-air.

Then he was loose in the current of time, cresting the edge of a waterfall, and descending.

She was falling, and then she was not: she was looking at the plasters on her fingers, which were pressed to one side of a locked door.

Grandpapa had whispered once that if she never slammed doors and cleaned her shoes before coming in, then Witherfell would do

her favors, when it could. She never knew if it was her magic or the house's, but when she tugged the doorknob, the lock clicked.

Coals guttered red in the hearth. Moonlight limned two girls in the windowsill, faces shrouded in dark hair. The bigger one was crying into her arms.

Andy had her arm stretched awkwardly around the bulk of Bella's shoulders. "It's alright! It's alright! Oh, Merlin, don't cry. She didn't mean it. It wouldn't even make any difference, if you were a boy."

She yelped. Bella had pinched her.

"What did you do that for? Now you've gone and made me cross," she snapped, reaching for her wand, and Bella raised her head, her expression glad and savage, when Narcissa closed the door behind her. The sound made them both turn.

"Go away," Bella spat. "I don't want you."

"You would if you knew what I've got. But you have to promise to smile when you get it."

"Give it first," Bella demanded.

"I shan't."

"I want it!"

"Then you must promise! I don't do anything for nothing."

Bella nodded shortly. Andy sighed, buffing her nails.

Narcissa drew back the fold of her robe. She slipped from the interior pocket a shabby and somewhat charred copy of *Secrets of the Darkest Arte, Vol. I.*

Bella's eyes widened. "You saved it," she murmured. "How?"

“I waited until Mummy took her potion, and Daddy went to the parlor with Lord Crabbe. I don’t suppose even Kreacher saw me do it. I beat most of the coals off with the poker — I couldn’t save the others, though, I’m sorry.”

Andromeda gasped. “Cissy! Your hands!”

Narcissa dropped the book on Bella’s lap and stuffed her hands under her arms. “You can still read it. I checked.”

Bella folded her hands around the book tenderly. Narcissa held her breath.

“Do you need burn cream?” muttered Andy.

“No. Hush.”

“Fine. Ruin your hands, see if I care.”

Bella tucked the book into her own robe without speaking. She bent down and pressed a long, soft kiss on Narcissa’s cheek, like she was made of glass.

“Thank you, princess,” she murmured. Narcissa smiled and kissed the nearest part of her she could reach, which was her knee. Andy scoffed.

“...believe what they say, she’ll be a Nott before the year’s out.”

The clocks were tolling eleven. The space was paneled in wood, personal, with wood rafters and the inevitable smell of must that clung to medieval buildings. Even in August, Knotscliff Peak held a chill.

By the hearth, Orion held court with Lord Rosier and Lord Lestrange and his younger brother, Rabastan. Narcissa feigned interest in an oil-portrait of Sibelius Nott’s grandfather.

“...lovely thing, the oldest, but headstrong. It’s a cold marriage bed he’s after.”

“Did you hear what she did to Macmillan’s girl?” said Orion, not unhappily. “Ghastly thing. Cygnus paid handsomely for it.”

“Perhaps she’ll do him a credit,” said Lord Lestrange. The firelight made gilt of the silver in his beard. “I daresay he would not be courting her if he did not see something in her to be admired.”

“Do *you* have an interest?”

Lord Lestrange shrugged. “She seems hearty,” he said. “My work takes me often from my home. It would behoove my wife to be independent. But while I thank you, Orion, I hope you will not interfere with Sibelius’s courtship. It is an inopportune time for him to resent me.”

“What ‘work’?”

“His little political group,” drawled Rosier. “The lad down south who’s always nattering about mudbloods.”

“I don’t see why you don’t join the Cavaliers,” Orion muttered, docking his pipe on the ottoman.

Lord Lestrange smiled. “I appreciate the suggestion,” he said. “I may return to it. In the meantime, I am satisfied with my little political group.”

“I didn’t mean to offend,” said Lord Rosier.

Rodolphus Lestrange’s smile did not waver, though it adopted a certain paternal chill. “My good lord,” he said, “I would never accuse you of meaning to do anything. Good night.”

Narcissa slipped away.

Across the room, Bellatrix leaned on the drinks table, and was drinking from an overfull crystal of firewhiskey. Andy leaned against a pillar beside her, watching the dancers mournfully.

Narcissa touched her elbow. Bellatrix acknowledged her with a glance.

“Tris says Sibelius is going to propose.”

“They were debating my dowry over the soup,” she said, “but it’s good of you to keep me informed.”

“Shall I poison him?”

Bella flashed a thin smile. “Now, silly,” she said. “How am I supposed to make poison look like an accident?”

“I heard he’s cruel,” said Andy, plucking a string of lace on her cuff. “That he hits his staff.”

“So? House-elves need whipping, it’s good for them.”

“No, the people.”

Bella paused. “Purebloods?”

“Half. It’s still in poor taste. Won’t you refuse him?”

“And then do what? Wait thirty years for my lord uncle to keel over, and pray my good cousin lets me sleep in the attic at Witherfell?” She threw back her firewhiskey and grimaced. “I suppose I should be grateful my lord husband’s arthritis will prevent him from often troubling my bedchamber.”

“Isn’t there *any* boy you like better?” wondered Andy. “I’m sure we could induce him to propose before Lord Nott does.”

“With my suite of charms, hm? Or have you been reading *Cyrano?”*

“Madame Bovary. Tell me, darling, do you want to live in Paris?”

Bella laughed. The nearest hemisphere of the room turned in a retinue of frightened enchantment. Andy met Narcissa’s eyes, and cast her wry smile down to the floor.

“You’d wrong any boy to mention me,” said Bella, into her glass. “I’d go through him like paper, and then you’d feel awfully guilty.”

“That’s rather an overstatement, don’t you think?” murmured Andy.

“The paper?” said Bella.

“The guilt,” she said, looking at Narcissa. Narcissa scowled back, pressing closer to Bellatrix’s arm.

Boots pounded out a reel on the dance floor. The light in the room was red and writhing.

“I overheard Orion talking to Lord Lestrange,” she whispered.

“...then he told me I was a brat. And I told him I could have him hauled out back and beaten for saying that to me, even if he weren’t a mudblood, and then he told *me* that my whole family were brats by birth, and if the Ministry taxed us out of existence within a generation it was only to spare us the effrontery of the guillotine.”

Slughorn had taken the common room for his party. Firelight sparkled on floating baubles of red and green. Wreaths piled high from the rafters, spotted with red berries and crusts of enchanted frost. Girls in heels and boys with pressed shirtfronts shuffled together to honeyed music. A redhead — one of Slughorn’s pet mudbloods, an indulgence — was whispering together with a dark-haired first year in the corner.

Narcissa wore a ballgown of powder-blue, with cap-sleeves and a jabot, and pearls on her wrists and in her ears. Andy wore a leather

miniskirt and a tartan scarf. Tris Avery had taken one look at her and walked into a wall.

“... and I worry, Cissa.”

She turned her head. Andy was studying the perfect 0-shapes of her nails like they were a scorecard for something important. “Don’t you? It’s not the politics — I don’t know any of that. But the squib riots aren’t a decade past, and so much has changed. Now Slughorn is saying the squibs were right all along, though I swore he didn’t like them, and everyone said Dumbledore was a radical but now he’s to be headmaster, and — don’t you think it’s odd? How the world changes its mind?”

“Stupid people believe what they’re told,” she said. “Powerful people fight each other, and the winner tells them. The Cavaliers lost, and now Jenkins is Minister. It’s all quite tedious.”

“You sound like the lovely Lady Lestrange.”

“I don’t think so,” Narcissa laughed. “I don’t think Bella’s said that many words about politics in her life. I doubt she could name five members of the Wizengamot she wasn’t related to.”

“In her defense, that excludes most of them. Cissa, don’t you ever worry?” She swept her hand, indicating with great theatricality a fairly mundane room full of people. “Don’t you think of what they’ll say about us in ten years? Or a hundred?”

“Gracious. A hundred years is a long time to talk about anything.”

“Not for our family.”

“Name your grandfather’s youngest sister.”

“I mean important things. Like truth and love. And choice. And courage.”

“None of those are names,” said Narcissa.

When she turned her head, he cut across her eyeline. Six feet of him in black tails, white hair curtaining the slender planes of a face like a desaturated Leyendecker. A sweet contempt in the tautness of his mouth. His eyes were so pale they seemed to glow.

Andy said, “What I want, really—”

“I’m going to get a drink,” she interrupted. She tugged out her handkerchief and sieved it through her fingers to the floor. “Don’t pick that up.”

Andromeda paused in reaching for it. “You slattern,” she said wryly. “Have oodles of fun. Don’t let him get to third without proposing.”

Narcissa rolled her eyes and detached decisively from their table.

“You can always break the engagement in the morning,” Andy called. Narcissa made a rude gesture guised by her sleeve, which cast her sister into giggling. She plucked a flute of champagne from the tower and located herself in one of the pockets of space between conversations so involved that no one would be tempted to recruit her.

In a few moments, a shadow dimmed the candlelight over her face. Lucius stood over her, the handkerchief notched between his outstretched third and forefinger.

“That’s a lovely object,” she said.

“You’re very kind,” he said, and inclined his head in a sardonic bow. “I’ve come by it recently. I think it suits you.”

“I shouldn’t accept,” she said. “I don’t take gifts from strangers.”

She picked it delicately from his upturned palm. His hand was warm, and clean, and smooth.

“It needn’t be a gift,” he said. “I could ask for something in return.”

“As you’ve already given it to me, you’re in a weak position to negotiate.”

“Shouldn’t that be an enticement to you? It leaves me quite pliable.”

“Why don’t I get the sense that’s true, Mr. Malfoy?”

Lucius smiled. It was a small movement, but it seemed to change the whole cast of his face, like wood transmuted into marble by a finger of sun.

“Perhaps,” he said, “it leaves *you* in a weaker position to have accepted without knowing the cost.”

“I know the cost.”

“Forgive me, but I doubt it. I haven’t even decided what to ask for.”

“Yes, you have,” she said.

The arch of his eyebrow nearly made her smile.

“This is an unorthodox negotiation. I say I don’t know what I want, and you offer to tell me.”

She settled her flute on a floating tray. “You knew what you wanted before you came over here.”

“Did you read that in my tea leaves, Miss Black?”

She drew a cigarette from a gold case in her purse, notched it between her fingers, and after a pause, she extended it for lighting. Lucius raised his eyebrows, but like a gentleman, he obliged.

His lighter was goblin-silver, so polished she could see her lipstick’s red reflection. It took a certain wizard to carry a goblin-silver lighter, when any first-year could conjure flames.

“Among other things,” she said, and put the cigarette to her lips.

Lucius smiled, and it revealed the earlier gesture for a counterfeit. Now she would know the difference.

“Do you have another one of those?” he said, glancing at her cigarette case.

Then it was her turn to grin.

“You resolved to marry a Black sister.”

“I resolved to marry one, in particular,” he said, striking something out. “The offer is non-fungible. Please make that clear to your family, if it isn’t.”

The Hogwarts library smelled of dust and leather. Red carpets muffled her footsteps as she moved around his table, her steps deft and idle. Lucius twitched his glasses up his nose and continued copying something from the textbook beside him.

“Bellatrix is stronger,” she said. “The better witch. And third in line to the lordship.”

“I do not seek a wife to duel my enemies,” he said, “and ‘third’ is hardly an improvement from ‘fifth.’ And she’s married.”

“She wasn’t always.”

“No,” he agreed, “and in many ways, I think she still isn’t, now. Cissa, your sister’s soul is cast from a hard metal. We would damage each other in the engagement.”

“Andromeda, then.”

Lucius grimaced.

“She’s more charming,” she added. “It would balance you, who are not.”

“I beg your pardon. I have, to date, charmed at least one woman.”

“I was *not* charmed.”

“But you performed it so beautifully,” said Lucius. When she turned, he still bent over the paper, examining it, but his eyes flickered up at her from under the sheaf of his hair. The lamplight turned it so dark it was silver. His cheek was suspiciously taut.

She cleared her throat.

“I was bewitched by your discussion of gilt-edged securities,” she said. “Your imitation of *rigor mortis* at Puddifoot’s subsumed me in lust. I should have rode you there on the table, if you permitted.”

Lucius made an ungraceful noise in his throat. His glare was adorably scandalized. She smiled at him.

“The question remains,” she said, rubbing the dust between her fingers. “You inherit a position with social responsibilities. Andy is sociable. I am — cold, by comparison.”

“Cold?”

“Reserved.”

He slipped his reading glasses off his nose and regarded her, blinking, through fresh grey eyes. “Being reserved is not a fault. Discretion is a virtue.”

“You’re not marrying me because I’m discreet.”

Lucius crossed his legs at the knee, dangling his glasses from one armrest. “Why do you think I’m marrying you?”

“Mother says I’m the loveliest,” she said blandly. “Perhaps you’re shallow.”

He smiled: a thin little cluster of lines at the corner of his mouth. “Perhaps I am.”

She perched on the table beside his work. When she grazed her fingers over his handwriting, her engagement flashed in the light. She had loved that ring from sight. Loved its weight. Loved the way it caught and held the room’s eye.

“That word is redundant,” she said, resting her forefinger on the page.

He didn’t look at it. He was still watching her. “Alright,” he said.

“And Bella’s asked to throw us an engagement party. Some of Roddy’s friends want to meet you.”

“Alright,” he said.

“And you should send my uncle some elf-wine for Christmas,” she said. “He prefers a bordeaux. Mention the name ‘Harold Minchum.’ They’re running him for Minister against Jenkins in the next cycle. My uncle will set a meeting.”

“You’ll choose the bottle?”

“Mm.”

He offered his palm. She laid her hand over it, lightly. The diamond winked out as his fingers closed over hers.

He touched his lips to her knuckle: warm and clean and smooth.

The doors were open onto the veranda, and the swans moved sluggishly through a late twilight on the gardens. Inside, the house was full of screaming. Aunt Wally’s voice drowned the rest, though Regulus piped through, reedy and shrill.

But it was all distant. Narcissa was running, her bare feet springing through the lawns, as Andy stalked up the drive with her trunk. She was wearing a traveling cloak and muggle clothes, one sleeve torn where Bella — well.

“Andy, listen—”

“Let go of me. I’ll jinx your arm off.”

“Stop! Listen! She didn’t mean it—”

“She did mean it,” Andy spat. She whirled around. “She always *means* it, Cissa, are you blind?”

“You told her in a bad way, it was artless, you didn’t have to start with —”

“Start with what? The truth? Wouldn’t want too much of that around here, would you?”

“You didn’t give her half a chance! She’s been off with Roddy and their coven half the year, trawling the country, and you didn’t give her a night’s sleep before proclaiming your mudblood lover at the dinner table—”

“He’s not just ‘my lover.’ I love Edward,” she said passionately. “I adore him. I’d die for him. He’s everything to me. And I don’t have to say it artfully, or delicately, and honestly, I can’t believe you’re such a fool you think it would make a difference *how* I said it when they all want him dead, anyway!”

“You’re ridiculous,” said Narcissa, trying not to laugh. “He’s everything to you? You met him last year!”

“You’re marrying someone you met last year!”

“That’s different. We’re equals. The mudblood can’t offer you a life!”

“I don’t want a life! I want Edward!”

She did laugh, then, and Andromeda's face darkened. "Listen to yourself! Are you going to run away? With *what,* stupid dear? You haven't any money; you didn't even take any N.E.W.T.s. Come back. You can keep your lover, I won't tell anyone. Plenty of people have odd tastes — everyone knows Uncle Alfie doesn't really have business in New York — but you just can't expect everyone to be so modern. The dinner table isn't any sort of place—"

"You're not listening," said Andromeda faintly. "You're pretending to listen, but you're not. I said I *love* him. I don't want to sneak him in the garden gate after midnight. I want to sit next to him at dinner—"

"You loved every boy that ever looked twice at you."

"—I want to feed him ice when he's feverish, I want to hear him tell me the weather—"

"You loved every boy that promised to take you to fairyland, and you cried like a baby every time they didn't. Don't you ever tire of it?" said Narcissa, and her sibilants whistled with scorn. "Aren't you ashamed to be some man's fool?"

"Better his fool than his concubine," she spat, brandishing her bare left hand. "Don't condescend to me, Cissa. Your fairyland might come with diamonds, but that doesn't make it better than mine."

Narcissa slapped her.

Tried to: Andy caught her wrist. She sneered between their crossed arms.

"There you are, Lady Malfoy," she said."I see you now."

She threw Narcissa's wrist back at her.

"I *will* be Lady Malfoy," said Narcissa. "And when you tire of lying there on your back beneath a brute, don't owl me for help getting up."

“I wouldn’t owl you for every goblin’s gold.”

“You think he’ll please you? He won’t. You’ll tire of him in a fortnight. You think a man can make you happy? You think anything can? Lord Merlin, Andy, if there was I would’ve found it! In a year’s time you’ll be lonely and poor, wondering why you thought what the castle lacked could be found in sty—”

“In a year’s time I’ll have a baby,” said Andy.

Narcissa stopped still. Her feet were shrouded in earth. The wind battered their skirts against their ankles, two black birds straining to fly.

“You’re lying.”

“I will.” Andy lifted her chin, and her voice nearly didn’t tremble. “Six weeks late. If it’s a boy, I’m naming it after him.”

“It’s anathema,” she said shrilly. “The bloodline—”

“Fuck the bloodline,” exclaimed Andy, with a trill of exhilaration. “Don’t you ever tire of cliché? None of you really *care,* you’re all spitting shit at each other over tea and trifle — you live without thinking! How can you bear it, waiting to breed and rot and die—”

Narcissa tried to take Andy’s hands, but she shook her off. “If you have— if you let him — I won’t — you’ll break Bella’s heart, you—”

“Bella! There’s one woman who’ll survive it,” she exclaimed, astonished. “She’s already doing what I am, just in the other direction. She’s in love with her husband’s blood zealot, did you know? You’d all see it if you only let yourselves. Some days I think I’m the only one who *looks* at her, the way you people act — like she’d care if that dry old cack you married her to keeled over and died on the mattress! All she really lives for are the days she leaves that castle. But you can’t understand it, because you don’t really

have the courage for love, do you, Cissa? In my shoes, you wouldn't make it past the front door."

Narcissa straightened. Her spine was a temple pillar, perpendicular to the ground.

"In your shoes, I would have cut that animal out of my body before I let it do to me what you're about to."

Andy closed her mouth. Her face slackened — not calm, merely dead.

"I'd rather do that to mine than what you'll do to yours," she said. "You're going to raise a monster. And I hope, Cissa, I *really* hope you enjoy it. You've been waiting long enough for one to love you back."

Narcissa's wand whispered out of its sheath. She pointed it at her, palm-down, forefinger laid straight along the wood. At her side, Andy was holding hers in the same way.

A door slammed in the house, and light spilled over the lawns. Andy whirled and ran, her back retreating over the trembling end of Narcissa's wandpoint, until she slipped into the trees, and was gone.

Fuming noon. Cooling Charms trembled vainly against the shimmer of a heatwave. Narcissa, faintly shining in a gown of thick lace, sat under a vast tent of cloth-of-gold, while a quartet of selkies performed Pachelbel. Dancers moved up and down the shaded pavilion, their robes a glittering braid, studded with gilt in the ladies' hair.

At the children's table, Sirius had shucked his tie and jacket; he was refilling his third firewhiskey. Regulus made a quartet with Crabbe, Avery, and Dolohov, who dwarfed him comically in height. Their periodic waves of laughter failed to move him. Heat melted an older wizard's dress robes over his scrawny shoulders. He was calm and miserable.

Walburga and Orion had a table with Rodolphus Lestrange, who said something that made Orion laugh. Cygnus had sequestered himself under one of the flower arches with the Carrows' girl. Down by the lake, Druella had taken a few of the younger Rosiers to examine the peacocks, whose feathers were the same color as their hair.

Bellatrix had come in a gold shirtwaist and black skirt. Her left hand sported a thick gold band; on the other, a black diamond signet spotted her forefinger, which she rolled around and around with her thumb. Her dark eyes sifted restlessly through the crowd, gravitating to the exit.

Narcissa leaned over to her ear. "Did you invite a paramour?"

Bellatrix recoiled. "My husband's at that table," she hissed. "Are you mad?"

"It was a joke. You seemed restless, dear."

"Strange joke to tell at your wedding," said Bellatrix, but it mollified her. She leaned over, and spoke in a low voice. "The Lord wants me to go with him to Romania. Alone."

"It's an odd thing to call him, isn't it? There isn't any House Voldemort."

"He's not a lord in the traditional sense. Listen — Cissy, I'm learning things. Magic they didn't teach at Hogwarts. If we go to Romania, I could learn more."

"If you go to Romania, your husband will notice," muttered Narcissa, reaching for her wine.

"'Notice' isn't 'mind.' And he's too frightened of the Lord for it to matter. He's weak."

"What do you need me to say? You've already worked it out."

“Don’t sound so judgmental,” said Bellatrix, frowning. “I’m not going to do anything *iniquitous.* The Lord isn’t like that. He doesn’t want—”

Narcissa’s face pinched in acute, frustrated pity. Bellatrix faltered.

“All men want that, dear.”

“He doesn’t,” she said venomously. “There are no other men like him.”

“What is not like other men is not a man.”

“Then he isn’t. He doesn’t deal in the chattels of desire,” she said, and her voice became distant, dreamy. “All he wants is power. It’s more honest, you know; he never lies. And what is desire if not power, recognized? You would understand it, if you met him. The things he can do—”

Narcissa sat up. Lucius had come back from the crowd of dancers. Against the gold of his cloak, his long hair was so white it shone.

By the arm he held a shabby teenager, with oily hair brushed forward to hide his spots. He wore trousers that showed his ankles, and a Slytherin tie, and the Malfoy crest on his tie pin suggested to whom it belonged.

“Cissa,” said Lucius, “you remember Severus.”

“I do. You’re in Sirius’s year,” she said indulgently. “What does Slughorn have you doing?”

He spoke from the corner of his mouth, with his hands in his pockets. “Amortentia. And Dreamless Sleep. Wolfsbane, sometimes.”

“Gracious. In fourth year?” She smiled. “I’m not sure I’d pass it, now.”

“I work from the N.E.W.T. book,” said Snape. His voice was flat and smug. “If it comforts you, I’m not sure he’d pass it, either.”

“Risked expulsion last year,” said Lucius. “Slughorn had to pull him out of an incident with Meadowes. He calls him the dungeon’s resident genius.”

“How did this genius get himself caught?” said Bellatrix coldly. Snape curled his lip, but it was Narcissa who spoke.

“Meadowes called Cadmus a name,” she said. “He retaliated. I saw it.”

Snape smirked, an acrid expression of embarrassed pride; but Bella’s lips thinned.

“The Dark Lord isn’t on the market for a dog,” she said. “Bring him back in two years, when he’s less green.”

“In two years, I’ll be past the Hogwarts curriculum,” Snape complained. His voice cracked. “Slughorn won’t have anything to teach me. He barely does now.”

“Then find a way to make yourself of use.” She threw back her chair and dropped her napkin. “The Dark Lord’s service is not a Potions mastery. If you want to be a technician, go to Cambridge.”

Narcissa opened her mouth, but Bella stalked down the dais, cutting a path to her husband’s table.

“I wouldn’t rend your shirt over it,” murmured Narcissa, in tones of hesitant sweetness. “She’s slow to warm. And you *are* young.”

He bristled. “I wasn’t going to rend anything—”

“I should say not,” said Lucius, “it’s my shirt you’re wearing—”

“—and I resent you, Malfoy, for conceding to her metaphor,” said Snape bitterly, shrugging him off. “I’m not your lord’s dog. Nor, for that matter, am I Mulciber’s, though I thank you for that implication—”

“That’ll do,” said Lucius, and Snape fell silent. “Show Cissa your wedding present.”

Narcissa raised her eyebrows and crooked two fingers. With ill grace, Snape stepped up and placed before her a trifolded parchment sheaf, sealed with crestless black wax.

She slit it open and unfolded it. On the parchment there was written in difficult scrawl:

ELECTROSEMPRA

Verbal — 5th parry into classic riposte — focus

Wear rubber soles

Narcissa lifted the paper delicately between forefinger and thumb. “You wrote this?”

“Writing it wasn’t the hard part,” muttered Snape.

“One would be forgiven for considering it extraordinary,” said Lucius. “At the age of fourteen. It’s distinctly unique.”

Snape threw him another furtive look; it was shuttered and irritable, but even so, it glowed with obvious, thirsty pleasure.

Narcissa handed it back. “The Latin is evocative,” she agreed. “A bit dramatic. The Greek would have been subtler.”

“It works,” said Snape intently. “I’ll teach you. It takes some doing, but—”

“Show Lucius,” she said firmly. “It’s very nice. But I don’t suppose I’ll have much use for it.”

To her surprise, Snape edged it back at her. He said: “Keep it. You’d be surprised what you can find a use for.”

Thunder broke overhead, but the air was full of fire instead of rain.

The ward-alarm screamed. Footsteps pounded down the hallways, and men in bone-white masks flurried through the house, swarming at the exits. The aftertaste of Disapparation made the air taste of ozone. Smoke cloaked the Manor windows, billowing from the lawns, which glowed like a field of coals.

Narcissa stumbled down the marble stairs and dropped hard to her knees at the bottom, clutching the full round of her belly. She cried out.

“Lucius!”

One of the masked wizards Apparated into being at her elbow, and knelt to help her up. “He’s at the vanguard.” The voice was Snape’s. “Where’s your rendezvous? I’ll take you.”

“Forget the rendezvous. Take me to St. Mungo’s.”

“Lord fucking Merlin. Now?”

“It doesn’t happen *on command,* you cestode. Take me to Mungo’s.”

He scoffed, but it had an edge of panic. “I can’t Apparate you to London, Lady Malfoy. If you hadn’t noticed, the Order of the Phoenix —”

“Hang the Order. Take me, now.”

“I am not your seneschal,” he said tightly. “I have other responsibilities. If Lucius fails, neither you nor I will be free.”

“He won’t fail. He never does. He’s a legion unto himself, you know it, he never needed either of us, he— *ah!”*

She gave another cry, and almost fell, but he caught her. When it ebbed, she tilted her head up, flushed and shaking. “Severus,” she

rasped, “help me. Please. Trust Lucius — he has your spells, and his cunning. He doesn’t need you as I do.”

A group of soldiers ran past and almost knocked her to her feet; she clutched his shoulders. Thunder crashed, and a whorl of green flame rolled up from the lawns. Another alarm began screaming.

“I can take you to a country hospital,” Snape ground out. “In the village.”

“No.”

“Narcissa, be reasonable.”

“I won’t have some filthy muggle put his paws on me. I’d rather die —”

“I was born in such a place. It may not suit. But it will serve.”

“I don’t— I *can’t,* Severus, I—”

“Stand back from her.”

At the top of the staircase, Bellatrix stood, her cowl thrown back, the hair unfurling like a second cloak over the black gleam of her armoring. The armageddon-light from the windows bathed her in red, and her gloved right hand closed around a hilt of lacquered vinewood. The other clutched a white mask.

“Lucius called you to the vanguard,” said Snape. “He’s marshalled your division. They await orders.”

“Convey them to his control.” She swept down the stairs. “Mulciber’s cavalry is ten miles distant. He brings the giants under Karkus. Tell Lucius he holds the line.”

“When can I tell him to expect you?”

“Once he wins, Severus.” She lifted Narcissa in her arms, bracing her arm under her knees. Narcissa latched her arms around her neck. “And tell my sister’s lord husband that he can come meet our heir on the morrow.”

Scrambling soldiers surged clear around the path of Lady Lestrange as she carried Lady Malfoy through the corridors. Shouts to hail her met no answer. House-elves flitted ahead to mind the doors, and one hauled open the double-door to the master bedroom barely in time to avoid a blow from Bellatrix’s boot. Narcissa pressed her face to Bellatrix’s shoulder, moaning, as her body seized again.

In the master bedroom, where only a red seam glowed behind the drapes. Bellatrix settled her onto the bed — moving with stiff, ungraceful care, by turns too gentle and not enough — and the candles in the room burst to life with a wide sweep of her wand.

Narcissa screamed again. Her hands scrabbled on the coverlet. Bellatrix vaulted onto the bed beside her, grabbing her head before she slammed it against the headboard. She shoved her back down. Her ring dug cold into Narcissa’s fevered temple.

In the shadows of the room, a dark-haired figure swam through the smoke and haze, her curls tied with ribbons. A girl was singing in the distance, over the sound of thunder.

“Andy?”

Bellatrix recoiled. “She’s gone,” she snapped. “There’s no such thing as *Andy.* She never was. She wasn’t one of us, in the end, she wasn’t strong enough—”

“Andy — where’s Andy? It hurts—”

The figure moved into the firelight. It was not Andy, but Walburga, her skin hollowed around the starveling contours of her skeleton. She turned and slipped soundlessly through the window.

“She’s not here,” said Bellatrix, furious. “I’m here. Look at *me.”*

“Please, make it stop — make it stop.”

“You have to push.”

“No, I can’t. I’m going t-to die.”

Bellatrix pulled her wand and lit a flame at the end of it.

“Push,” she said, “or I’ll give you something to really scream about.”

Narcissa clenched Bellatrix’s hand. “Aide-moi,” she rasped. Her body rolled with the next contraction. “Bien-aimée, aide-moi.”

“Toujours,” she murmured. “Push or die, princess.”

A contraction seized her; she screamed, and blood poured over the silk sheets. Bellatrix pressed their foreheads together, and the scream reverberated through the walls, while the house shook to its foundations with lightless thunder.

It was dawn; the smoke was still rising from the grounds. Narcissa sat against the headboard, her hair ragged and loose around her bare shoulders. Draco nestled against her breast, making tepid noises of discomfort. She gazed at him rapturously, cradling his tiny head in her palm. Hesitantly, she leaned forward and touched her lips to the tiny bulb of his nose.

He squawked and groaned. She giggled, tapping his nose, and then his ears, his cheeks, the little bow of his philtrum. When she nosed into his neck, he gave a loud whine, and it made her cackle madly to herself. The light filtered through the smoke on the window, an artificial midwinter.

Footsteps rapped out on the corridor. When the door flew open, she had to drag her eyes away from the baby.

Steam rose from Lucius's armor; ash filmed his gauntlets and his hair. The smell of magic clung to him, and the blood on his boots did not seem his own.

Her blood had soaked through to the mattress. She sat in the ring of it like a pearl in a clamshell.

"I won," she said. Her voice was hoarse. She lifted the baby in the cradle of her arms.

Lucius let out a laugh.

Narcissa held a swaddled infant to her chest in the sitting-room. It was dark. A draft hung about the Manor still, and orange leaves clustered on the sills.

Draco was sleeping, his face burrowed comfortably into her neck. She hummed to herself while he dozed, smoothing down the tufts of white hair. He still had the sickly-sweet infant smell about him.

The Floo burst green. Lucius staggered over the hearth, bracing Snape over his shoulder. Blood streaked the front of Snape's robes.

"Dead," Lucius barked. He threw Snape down on one of the sofas. "The Dark Lord's dead."

Narcissa froze. She looked at Snape, but he did not appear to hear them. He had fallen with his face down, and he was making a horrible sound between a sob and a wail. It ricocheted down the halls, twin to Draco's.

"I warned him," Lucius snarled. "Potter sent a distress call. The Order were coming. There wasn't *time.* But he wanted to make the cursed thing *there,* with the boy's soul, he said, it was *fitting* — when he finished preparing, we went upstairs, and found the wife in a pool of her own blood. She made a heartsblood pentagram. A shielding rune."

Snape’s howl tapered off, and he fell to trembling, silently.

“On the child,” said Narcissa quietly.

“That was not the Dark Lord’s conclusion,” said Lucius grimly. “He took the spell to be for herself.”

“And now he’s dead?”

“Or gone to test the power of his horcruxes — Merlin’s sake, Severus pull yourself together.”

“Did the child survive it?” said Narcissa stiffly. Draco wailed into her shoulder, and she rubbed his back in fruitless consolation. “Or did it perish, too?”

“He’s alive,” said Snape throatily. “She did it right. A perfect circle — heartsblood pentagram, witch’s blood, midnight on Samhain. Of course it worked. The Dark Lord went to kill the child— he stepped over her— over her b—”

He pitched down to his knees at the hearth, and threw up in it. Narcissa curled her lip and held Draco away from him.

“What happened to the child?” she said.

“Presumably the Order has it,” Lucius said, stripping off his gloves. “It was an expeditious retreat. Your cousin was at the gates. I had to pull this one out by the hair—”

“You should have left me,” Snape rasped doggedly, still wiping spittle from his mouth. “I should have died.”

“That would have helped no one,” said Lucius, “least of all the mudblood.”

“Don’t *call her that.”*

Lucius rolled his eyes, gesturing boredly with his glove. “Your prize, then. She won’t like you any better in the afterlife, I assure you, and especially not after this.”

“Don’t!”

“Turned Pettigrew into a pavement stain,” Lucius added. “Black. Plain sight of twelve muggles, not that they saw much — if your aunt had seen it, she might have restored him.

“What of my sister?”

“She and Roddy fled north. The second of tonight’s failures: She spent so long playing with her food she forgot to eat it.”

“Don’t speak that way of her,” Narcissa said faintly. “So — he’s gone. What happens now?”

Draco burst into tears. Dobby appeared with a *crack* at her elbow to take him. He bowed deeply to both Malfoys, and vanished again, severing Draco’s cry with a ghostly echo.

“We call counsel with Bellatrix,” said Lucius. “I doubt she will hear of surrender.”

“But she won’t pursue — with the Lord gone, it would be foolish, to— she wants only freedom. She doesn’t wish to die. I can convince her —”

“I have always wondered what it is you think you love, in Bellatrix,” said Snape. His head still hung low. “Did it never strike you odd that no one else recognizes in her the graces you do?”

“Does it never strike you that you are a half-blood abomination?” she snapped. “Does it never strike you as audacious to speak to me that way, though you stand here alive by my husband’s generosity? Does it *strike* you, Severus, that you know nothing of us, of our families, or of the ways we love?”

“It strikes me daily,” he said, turning, and the look of him made her step back. His face was a dull, vacant object, hollowed by the gnawing woodrot of grief. “It strikes me often, nowadays, that I am not loved by you, nor by anyone else. That either of you would throw me to the dogs, if it suited you — and I think it will suit you, one day, I am not so naive as to think myself endeared — and that when it happens, I will be buried wordless and lightless in a pauper’s tomb. I have only the right to dream otherwise, and even that I do not do, these days. Lady Malfoy, all I ever knew of love I learned by watching. But I am glad to say I did not learn by watching you.”

Lightning bathed a writhing sky. Rain churned up the Manor grounds, tar-slick mud underfoot, as the storm cast ghoulish bars of light and shade over the mausoleum.

Four figures stood together under the poplars. Spells flickered back and forth through the churning wheel of lightning-flashes, colors lurid in the darkness. Lucius Malfoy and Rodolphus Lestrange dueled with the relentless focus of artisans, their movements perfectly mirrored across the ten-pace distance between them. White hair whirled through the darkness, matched by sabled crag-dark gray. Bellatrix clutched Narcissa to her chest while she thrashed, screaming.

“Let me go, please— stop him, *stop* him—”

“It’ll be fast,” said Bellatrix softly. “Roddy will be quick.”

“I’ll give you anything — I’ll do anything — take me instead, please, *Bella!”*

Bellatrix hugged her tightly and pressed her lips to her ear, ignoring her thrashing. “Hush, pet. It’ll be over soon.”

Rodolphus Lestrange thrust his wand down. A roiling ridge of spikes erupted from the earth and undulated like the tail of a great beast, throwing Lucius from his feet. Narcissa screamed raggedly.

Lucius caught himself and rolled, flipping upright on one knee. Rodolphus crossed the piste, a serrated blade sprouting from his wand. Lucius snapped his head up and lunged.

The spikes melted into a wave of tar that drenched Rodolphus's boots. A whisk of his wand froze it to stone. Lucius pulled, and Rodolphus lurched, catching himself at the last moment with a blast of *Bombarda.* The stone shattered, and the rain turned the dust to grime. Lucius threw three blasts up the piste and began sparring again, boots darting back and forth across the mud like dancers in a reel.

Rodolphus drew his wand up, and the earth beneath them began to writhe. A black dart flashed out of the woods.

A spell flickered across the lawn. Rodolphus dropped his wand, clutching his throat.

Blood bubbled through his fingers. Wounds peeled open across his chest, soaking through his shirtfront, as if the skin had unsealed in a dozen places at once. Rodolphus lifted his head, and lightning flushed the color from his weathered face. Red flecks pebbled the short crop of his beard.

He stared at Bellatrix, reaching for her. She stiffened, and her breath caught, but she did not cry out for him. Her arms remained firm around Narcissa.

Rodolphus collapsed to the ground. Snape stood behind him, his wand still suspended in the last position of the curse.

"Release your sister," he called. His voice rippled in between peals of thunder.

"You killed my lord husband," said Bellatrix softly. "And Lord Malfoy forfeits the duel by dishonorable conduct. The law accords me the honor of revenge upon you both."

“Between your husband and your honor, I question which you care for less,” called Lucius. “Flee now. Mourn your lord’s ghost. I imagine you will prefer its company to any other.”

“He is not dead! The lord lives! You *know* he does, you knew it, and you betrayed him anyway — I called on you to seek his resurrection with me, and you *denied* it! As we speak he walks the veil alone, waiting in vain for the fulfillment of your vows, while those who swore to serve him glut themselves on a coward’s prizes — mourn him? I never mourned him, for he never died! I *mourn* that my sister ever touched you, feculent liar. I mourn that your name stains the title of my heir. I mourn all blood of yours in his sacred veins, would that I could bleed it out of him—”

“The aurors are coming,” called Snape. “In the time it takes you to kill both of us, they will be here.”

Bellatrix made a cross between a snarl and a whine.

“Death first to cowards and traitors,” she hissed. She threw Narcissa aside and vanished into smoke.

She appeared again on the lawn, drawing her wand, and Lucius raised his only in time to catch a brilliant, shuddering thunderclap, shattering sparks across the green. Narcissa scrambled to her feet and screamed again, but Snape had darted forth and caught her, bracing around the waist, hauling her back from the fight, as waves of magic bloomed from the lawns in oscillating pendulums of light, flushing the night as bright as dawn. Snape shoved her down to the earth and threw a shield over their heads, rippling blue; Narcissa clung to his robes, screaming again, as the dueling figures coalesced and vanished into the nova.

The vision cleared.

Draco stood before her. He could not have been fourteen. He had Lucius’s eyes, pale and bright, but his hair was short and combed, and he held himself differently. It was in the casual cant to his hip,

the leonine deliberation of where he placed his feet — for Lucius moved like a colonel inspecting his regiment, the thoughtless bravery of one who never looked where his feet would fall; but when Draco stepped forward to catch her, and he put himself exactly where he had to, to catch her fall.

“Darling,” she murmured. Her face was filmed with sweat. She touched his cheek, smiling, but he did not return it. He had inherited such a furious little scowl.

“Mother, come down from there,” he said. His voice had yet to drop; he had to lower it to trembling, to get the tenor of command.

Behind her, wind trailed through the yawning square of the window. The sill bent under her feet. She stroked her thumb up the line of his jaw. He flickered, and there was Lucius, cold and sightless: another flicker, and he was young and furious.

“Come down from there at once,” he said sternly.

There were voices behind her: Girls were singing in the fields. She turned, and Draco caught her elbow.

“Do you hear that?” she said.

“Hear what? Mother, get *down.”*

My heart is pierced by Cupid… I disdain all glittering gold…

“Nothing,” she said. When she brushed her cheek, the black diamond dragged a cold line across the skin. “Help Mummy, sweetling.”

She wrapped her arm around his shoulders, and he helped her down on trembling feet.

“I have you,” Draco said, strained with the effort of bracing her up. “Come this way. You’ll be alright. Watch there, for the glass.”

“I never worry,” she whispered, and kissed his temple. Lucius turned and smiled thinly at her, shifting his arm around waist, and she tilted her head against his shoulder.

They were in the Manor again, her and Snape. She sat in a chair by the hearth, her sleeve rolled back, while he stitched together a blackened gash on her arm.

“You were a fool to try it alone.”

“A fool, or sick of caves,” she said tonelessly, watching him sew. Snape bit off the end and laid it aside. “Dumbledore doesn’t want to admit it, because it’ll mean hell to get the wretched thing out, but if it’s anywhere in the world, it’s Witherfell Abbey. Regulus wouldn’t have put it anywhere he needed to reach by going outdoors. Anyway, I grew up there. I suppose I thought it would welcome me.”

“You did not think to ask for help?”

“Would you have come?” she countered. “You’re supposed to be playing the pageboy. You’ve no time to rescue a wandering madwoman.”

“Neglecting that oafish play for sympathy,” said Snape, “which, for pity, I will not touch — you might recall that you have a son.”

She hummed. He tugged the stitching, making her hiss.

“We fought before he left. Badly.”

“And you thought to punish yourself by dying?”

“Lord, no. Not all of us are as melodramatic as you,” she said crossly. “He went to be with his half-breed brood in London, and — ow. That hurts.”

“It certainly does.”

“Why are you punishing me?” she hissed. “I have allowed it, have I not? I have allowed him more than my mother ever would have. My *father*— don’t make me laugh. Do you know, the girl—”

“Careful.”

“The *muggle-born,* Severus, I wasn’t going to — she slept under this roof. Can you imagine what Lucius would have said?”

“No, but I doubt I would enjoy it.” Snape snapped the surgical kit closed. Narcissa frowned.

“You think he’d be wrong to say it,” she said. Her expression grew chilly, and then mocking. “Why, thou bleeding heart. After all this time, Severus, have you become a believer? Has Dumbledore sold you a bridge?”

“You say that like a childish thing. I do not know why. You and I both obey him; to believe what he does is at least to give it a varnish of choice. Do you really wish to die at the hands of a master?”

Narcissa rolled her arm, testing the stitches. “I have no master,” she said. “I have a son.”

“I am aware of your fanatical devotion. It does not answer my question.”

“Well, it was my turn for one,” she said curtly. “Fanatical devotion. Both of my sisters had their vainglorious obsessions with men who annihilated them. I always get everything last.”

One of the pipes dripped. In the old kitchen, the burnished copper caught any scrap of light from the windows.

“Draco,” said Snape, in tutorial tones, “is hardly annihilatory. He is caught between the river and the deeps. And he fights the current for your sake.”

“Why, how good of him. It’s hard to do the unprecedented, isn’t it? Most people give up on me well before the fifteen-year-mark. Why trouble over the little wallflower, when there are so many blooms in distant gardens, and this one is so *difficult* to deal with—”

“It is a peculiar vice in your family to regard oneself as the still point around which the world turns,” said Snape dryly. “Andromeda did not marry with the object of scorning you—”

“Don’t say that name to me.”

“—and your husband, as I recall, made great sacrifices to avoid parting from you — seems cruel to blame him, under the circumstances — and I will use the names that please me. I’ve dealt enough in my life with taboos.”

“Kindly remove my neck from between your teeth,” she said dully. “Why my beliefs are suddenly important to anyone, I’d love to know. Only one man ever loved me for what I think, and I buried him.”

He tucked the surgical kit into his knapsack, wedged between a set of knives and vials. “If that’s a complaint, it’s hypocrisy,” he said, “as you don’t love Draco for what he thinks, either.”

She massaged her wrist, glaring at him. He gestured indulgently for her to speak.

“That shows your ignorance. Motherlove is the conquest of reason. Your girl understood that,” she said, with silken cruelty. “Between her son’s life and a knife in her chest, it would not have required a second’s thought. There is no space between the love and its object for thought to pass.”

“No,” said Snape, and his voice was almost soft. “For her, there never was.”

The wax pooled beneath the candles in thick white coils. The clocks tolled three.

“You love her still,” she said. “Lily.”

Snape did not reply, but the set of his face made her nod.

“Do you?” he said.

“Him? Yes.”

“And her,” he said, watching.

Through her sleeve, her finger traced the path of her scar. “Oh, darling,” she said lightly. *“Toujours.”*

“You would have done better,” she said.

They were in the mausoleum, the door slitted open over a triangle of moonlight. Narcissa sat with her knees drawn close to her chest. Her back pressed to the bars of her husband’s tomb.

“Andy once said I’d raise a monster.” The stone caught her voice and threw it back at her, accusingly. She listened to it calmly, without complaint, and replied: “For the pleasure of having it love me. — Forgive me the anathema. I only do it once a year.”

The ghosts obeyed her. She pressed her knuckles to her mouth.

“He isn’t a monster,” she said worriedly. “I don’t think he is. I would know. I could — tell.”

The tomb said nothing to her.

“My father would have adored him. He would have made Regulus laugh. Mare that it was. And Bella never wanted children. But she swore she’d love mine.”

An owl cried out from the distant trees.

“Some days I forget you,” she said. “I think I made you up. I worry that the best I remember of you is only what I’ve learned by watching him.”

She paused, and reached through the bar. Her finger traced the edge of the place left for her own coffin.

“Exit seraphim, and Satan’s men,” she murmured. She giggled to herself. It skittered around the Malfoy crypts, ghoulish and indulgent. “Isn’t it funny, darling? I’ve known him as long as I knew you.”

Yellow windows hung like lanterns from the silhouette of a twilit street. The houses were brick and square, perched close to the pavements, with flat facades and first stories made from white plaster. Narcissa stood at the gate, a green velvet cloak drawn low over her face.

Voices rippled from the open kitchen window.

“Darling? I’m getting a takeaway curry.”

“Oh, good. Can’t be arsed to cook. Can I have a vindaloo?”

A vague hum. “Samosa?”

“Mm. I shouldn’t.”

“I’ll get two.”

“Oh, don’t, darling, I’ll feel obligated.”

A shadow passed over the window, and Narcissa drew back behind the gatepost.

Andromeda turned on the faucet. She wore her hair back, and a pale brown blouse, with hoop earrings and little makeup. The lines around her eyes and mouth showed the beginning of a great descent in her

face, but the ethereal beauty lingered in the shape of her mouth and the haughty, aquiline arch of her nose.

“...should call Melissa tomorrow,” she was saying, “it’s been ages, she’s going to think you’re dead.”

“Dastardly thought. She’d have to find some other way to get you over for Christmas.”

“The love between me and your mother will long outlive you, dear. Never worry.”

A man stepped into the square of the window and kissed her on the neck. She shrieked, slapping him with a soapy hand.

“Off! Off! I’m going to bite you. Go put the bins out, make yourself useful.”

Narcissa closed her eyes. There were diamonds on the tips of her lashes.

“I’m sorry about that.”

Dumbledore stood under the streetlamp. He wore a three-piece muggle suit of brown tartan, and a soft cap. “I thought you might like to see it,” he said, in tones of not-apology. “But I did not think you could bear to come yourself. You are entitled to resent me for the deception.”

Narcissa lifted her eyes, a faint smile upon her lips. “An apology, for what must seem to you such a trifling indignity,” she murmured. “How you spoil me. My son cannot abide the sight of me because of you. And you apologize for this?”

“It is not you he cannot abide.”

She turned. Her eyes burned bright with loathing. “In my life, I have lost all my battles but one,” she said softly. “One triumph. And you would take him, too, from me.”

“I would save him for you. I would keep him from the Dark Lord. I only wanted to spare him.”

“Nothing will keep him from the Dark Lord,” she said. “Nothing. You have made him too brave, Albus. He thinks he can fight.”

“Perhaps he can,” said Dumbledore intently. “Perhaps he can win.”

“And perhaps he will be killed,” she said, “prosecuting the third generation of your war against the inevitable. Perhaps my boy will rest beside the Potters in the bodies at your feet. And only then, in your arrogance, will it occur to you that he would have lived longer, whatever his *beliefs,* if you had not made him an enemy to himself. Perhaps, finally—”

“Narcissa—”

“—finally, you will question,” she said, her voice thick with rage, “if your dreams of justice are worth what you did to my child. What you will do to him, every day of his life, while darkness walks this world. I know what happens to brave boys, Albus, I mourned my share of them.”

“Why did you throw in with me at all, if you did not rate our chances?”

A coach glided past with a whistle of exhaust.

“Because he is the only thing that matters,” she said softly. “All I ever did well, I did for his sake.”

“Never your own?” he said sadly. “Truly? Have you never thought for a moment, in all your suffering, that the world for which you have suffered and denied yourself, the world for which you sacrificed the greater part of your family — you never questioned the value of a devotion it has never seen fit to reward?”

Narcissa smiled at him suddenly, and her eyes shone like asphalt under frost.

“My family names its sons after stars,” she said. “I had one for a father, and one for a child. Their light takes us lesser creatures through the darkness. That path is mine by right; I am the last of the great astronomers.”

“It is hard going, by starlight,” said Dumbledore, melancholy.

“That may be,” she said. “But it is the only way I know.”

She walked up the street, instead of Apparating. Her cloak swept the gleaming pavement as the sky turned from blue to black.

Toujours

Chapter 83: Toujours

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Emerging from the pensieve, he found the study drenched in dawn's soggy blues. Waking brought a moment of bewilderment as he struggled to place himself in space and time. It helped when Hermione stirred beside him, groaning. By appearance, she might have slept for two weeks or not at all; a coronet of bristling curls hung shaggy in her face, and the bruises under eyes had grown fresh rings of ash. She looked completely terrible. Tenderness cut him in the ribs. He sat up, and caught his reflection in the blown mirrors of her pupils: hair mussed, collar askew, but sixteen and recognizably himself.

It was a relief. For a moment he'd doubted what he would see.

"Hey," she said hoarsely.

She made a bleary grab for him before remembering, apparently, what had happened to them, and then she mastered herself and sat on her knees and simply looked at him. "My head's killing me," she said. "I feel — hungover, rather, but without any of the fun."

The voice that came out of him was dry and rusted. "How would you know what that feels like?"

"I have a concept," she said. "Lavender's had one, and she's a devoted imagist. Are you alright?"

"Not very." He closed his eyes and braced his forehead on his knuckles, waiting for the headache to abate. His synapses felt overheated. He had overtaxed the system, and the alarms drummed insistently on his skull. Somehow he found the wits to say, "I'm sorry I made you do that." In the double scrutiny of daylight and retrospect

the decision seemed far more unconscionably selfish; not with respect to his mother, but to Hermione, about whom his mother's life had reported nothing kind.

"Don't be stupid, you didn't make me do anything," she said immediately. "You asked me, and I agreed. You didn't know what was in her memories."

"I knew it wouldn't be pleasant."

"Yes, hence the point of me coming," she said, and her irritation helped his headache by spawning a second, smaller headache to duel it. "I knew it wouldn't be pleasant, either, I'd met the woman before. And having done it I can't say it was, but Draco — she wasn't my mother."

"You—" He winced around the snag in his throat, and exhaled until the air flowed relatively clean. His tongue throbbed dry and fat between his teeth and he could not fathom how pathetic it was to ask her for anything, after that, having had the audacity to ask at all. "You're alright, then?"

Hermione gave a high, uneasy laugh, and he watched in a pained daze as she crawled over and kissed him, quite businesslike, on the cheek. It had the quality of someone trying to stamp her opinion through the skin. "Of course I'm alright," she said. "I could have lived quite happily without seeing Snape as a teenager. And I found your teenaged father uncanny, in an uncomfortable way, he does look rather like you, only with the wrong smile, and gestures, and posture, and— anyway. But I'm going to be fine. I have a hundred questions about what happened, and in a moment I'm going to run and get a pen to write them all down, and then I'm going to have a fairly good time badgering you about it."

It had every appearance of honesty. She could not, in truth, be trusted to foreclose any statement for tact. He took comfort in this, and kissed her. She said: "Mm," and let him, a bit, before pulling

back and wobbling to her feet. She extended her hand, and he used it to pull himself up.

“You should rest,” she said. “I doubt skimming forty years of memory constitutes adequate sleep hygiene.”

Exhaustion reared up to affirm that she was correct. He suppressed it and smoothed his hair back from his face. “The guest room should be ready for you,” he said. “You can take my bed, if it isn’t. I have to speak to Snape.”

She opened her mouth to ask about what, but thought better of it. “Yes,” she said, “of course,” and: “Come find me. After.”

The servants pointed him in the direction of the dining-room. Snape hunched at the right hand of the table’s head. He was dissembling a plate of toast and sausages with the swift carelessness of the starving.

Draco sat down opposite and reached for the coffee. Snape watched him over the surgical decapitation of a toast point.

On the distant trees, a yellow luster spread, filming the pale green leaves at the top. Sweet green air whispered through the high windows. The drapes bucked gently, like breaking crests of seafoam.

Snape’s jaw worked ruthlessly on a bit of fat. Recognizable in his homely, bone-gaunt stare were all the ingredients of his adolescent face, veined with more creases of age than his years would rightly give him, a long jaw, a crooked slash of a nose that, with hindsight’s knowledge, must have been broken at some point after his fourteenth birthday. Even staring, his eyes twitched iterantly to the exits, neither of which Snape had placed behind his back.

Draco sipped his coffee. Snape waited.

“Will you go back to the school?” said Draco. His voice was still rough from the pensieve.

“For a time.”

“And then?”

“I will go where I am needed,” he said. “I have a few talents left besides spycraft.”

“I assume that means hunting horcruxes.”

“The Dark Lord will begin moving them, soon,” agreed Snape, reaching for the coffee. “The ones he can locate. It will be hard for him to judge what I knew of their whereabouts, and safest to insure them all against me. If so, perhaps my years of labor will not have been entirely laid to waste.”

“You might take care, with that,” said Draco flatly. “He’ll be seeking to punish you. My aunt implied death was preferable to his methods.”

Snape kindly ignored his sentimentality. “I have some experience moving without notice,” he said, “and I have my headings. Albus tells me that Potter has at least a rudimentary sense of the Dark Lord’s location, which, if exploited, may help him atone for the consequences of his recklessness.”

“I thought he wanted Potter to Occlude.”

“That was his strategy a year ago. Your mother volunteered to me her opinion that the channel between Potter’s mind and the Dark Lord’s may not operate at a conscious level.”

“Why?” said Draco sharply. He settled his cup in his saucer. “What is it that *happened* to him, that night at the Potters’? My mother showed me the memory of her death. Father said that Lily Evans drew a pentagram—”

Snape sat back in his chair, stone-faced.

“—used her own heartsblood, completely anathema, midnight on Samhain. I understand the mechanics. But runes can’t hold detailed

enchantments. Even an Oxford master couldn't draw a pentagram that would sever someone's soul."

"It was a simple inscription," he said, toneless. "Protection. *Elhaz.* A rune can do anything, theoretically, that its maker can; the chief limit is resources. 'A rune's energy field scales exponentially with its complexity.' The Poisson-Bernadine equations. You should know them by heart, given your marks on the O.W.L."

"I understand that she killed him," he said. "I struggle to grasp what happened after."

Snape swept his wrist over his mouth and pushed aside his plate. "The process for making a horcrux requires a physical sacrifice from the host," he said. "You may imagine — electricity is an imperfect metaphor, it will serve here — to cleave the soul requires an enormous infusion of energy. It requires a jumpstart — a death — a murder, in practice, but I do not know that it must be — and uses the dead soul as grist for the cleaving. Then one binds the severed piece to an object, to prevent it from reunifying with the whole. A part of the host's person must be severed also. When the spell destroyed the Dark Lord's body, it completed the ceremony. The piece of his soul he had meant for the horcrux entered the body of the creature he had attempted to kill."

"But Potter survived."

"So he did. I theorize that the Dark Lord's own death fulfilled the spell, and his soul cannibalized itself. It would explain why his resurrection was imperfect — though that may also be attributable to flaws in the ceremony — I do not think he did it right, but that can be of no substance to us now. Albus has another theory, but our best arguments are still venturesome. These matters are at the far edge of experimental magic, beyond anathema, and no one has written even speculatively on the subject."

"What does Dumbledore think?" said Draco, wary.

Snape's cheek twitched in a shadow of a grimace. "He believes there were two horcruxes made that night," he said. "The first, using her death, to sever the soul of the Dark Lord. And the second — using the Dark Lord's death—"

"To sever Harry's." Draco set down his cup. The coffee burned in his stomach. "Why do you find that tenuous?"

"Because, as noted previously, the host requires his own sacrifice," said Snape briskly, "and Potter's scar does not strike me as sufficient injury, even for an infant. The Dark Lord's sacrifices were considerably more dramatic, by comparison. Also, I have been in the company of a horcrux-host far more often than Albus, and I do not detect the signs. His faults, generous though they are in number, strike me as typical for a tender young moron."

Draco tapped his finger on the white tablecloth. The door creaked, and they both fell silent as Briselda came in to take Snape's tray. She cast a Warming Charm on the coffee pot, replaced the sugarbowl, and left.

"Did you try to save her?" he said quietly. "Or did you let it happen? For your cover?"

There was a palpable ripple of emotion that Snape suppressed under a flat stare. "I was too late," he said, toneless. "She cut out her own heart."

"I don't follow," said Draco, his eyes narrow. "James died first. *Then* the Dark Lord prepared the horcrux. She had time to draw a full pentagram. You had time—"

"We would never have made it."

"Do you tell yourself that?"

It was cruel. Well, so it was: he felt cruel today. It was his house. There was no one to chastise him for being cruel at the breakfast

table.

Snape spoke in a voice so hollow it had no capacity for feeling. “The Dark Lord wanted only the child. And he favored me, in his way. He would have made me a Knight of Walpurgis if I had not volunteered to spy for him in the Order. I think he regretted that he did not.”

Draco’s laugh was a sharp, bitter sound. “You asked him to spare her?”

“I did.”

“And you believed he would?”

“I believe to this day that he would have,” he replied. “It is the prerogative of the king to indulge hypocrisies his inferiors cannot be seen to tolerate — indeed, it helps him to be the only creature above reproach. It was not unknown for Death Eaters to have paramours, or kept women, of questionable blood. The Dark Lord would not be the force that he is if he did not understand, in his way, the things that love demands.”

“A *kept woman—”*

“I had no such aim.” Snape cut over him. “That night should have marked my disappearance. I intended to end my career as a soldier, one way or another, the moment Lily Evans was safe.”

“So why didn’t you?”

“Because she died,” he said, and the flint in his voice chipped. “And she left her world in my keeping.”

He thought of the sound that had come out of his godfather’s body after seeing Lily Evans dead. He would have preferred to have never heard it. It was haunting.

“You’re not the world’s keeper,” said Draco.

“If I believed that, I would not have labored so long to stay alive,” said Snape, with a cool and disorienting forthrightness. “Draco, this pretense is beneath you. You have no interest in the death of Lily Evans. You are angry at me for your mother.”

Draco’s finger stilled on the tablecloth. He turned his head away.

“You wonder that I did not rescue her; you do not believe that I could not. I had lost my strength and wand-arm; I could die or flee. Nothing that I say will satisfy your suspicion, and perhaps it never will. I will carry that weight. Worse still, I seem unfeeling. My habits do not accord with the common language of grief. I have no recompense for that except to say that I have a soldier’s habits, and I grieve her in our way. If it matters, she would not expect me to do anything else.”

“I don’t want to talk about my mother.”

“Understood,” said Snape, and mercifully said no more.

It was true, he didn’t. He wanted to know everything she had ever said to Snape without talking about her, or acknowledging in any way the fact that she was dead.

He wanted to know enough that he could imagine what she would say now, if she were at the table. He imagined her sitting between them, at the head, but in his mind’s eye she was silent. It made part of him trill in panic. He wondered if he had ever known her at all.

“Bellatrix Lestrange offered to make me a Death Eater,” he said.

Snape said nothing, waiting.

He cleared a hard snag in his throat. “She’s arrogant.”

“Yes.”

“Arrogant and vulnerable, where I’m concerned. It makes her a poor judge of character. My mother could manipulate her. To a point.”

“Your mother knew Bellatrix from infancy. I caution you against analogies.”

“I don’t want advice. I want to know if she’s going to kill me if I try to speak to her.”

“One is rarely sure,” said Snape thinly. “If she believed you regarded her in sincerity as friend and kin, she might be moved by sentiment to help you. The Blacks have long memories. Note that I dislike what you are contemplating.”

“Not half as much as I do,” he said, over-elocuting around the tightness in his throat. “But that’s neither here nor there. She’s in the inner circle, isn’t she? She has the Dark Lord’s favor.”

“I would not underestimate her. You have spent half a decade in the public company of Harry Potter. She is not a fool.”

“You’re right. Half a decade with the Boy Who Lived; he doesn’t have a secret I don’t know. What fool would be interested in that?”

Snape’s stare grew an edge.

The attack came presently: a searing pinpoint of pain at the surface of his mind. Draco threw down the black glass of Occlusion barely in time to prevent a burning claw of fire from tearing through his thoughts. Snape’s mind scrabbled over the shield, a dull wave of pressure on his skull, and then receded.

Draco winced, glowering at him. “Satisfied?” he snapped.

“Not remotely,” Snape said coldly. He stood up. “That is a candle beside what the Dark Lord can do. You are unwise to consider this. Your mother would not have permitted you to speak of it.”

“Well, I have terribly convenient news.”

“Don’t be insipid. It would have destroyed her to imagine you doing this. She would have bled to keep you from it.”

“Fancy that.”

“Listen to me. This is not an atonement,” Snape hissed, leaning over the table. Draco tipped his head back, watching him warily. “You will not find penance in this. You will not find peace. You *will* destroy everything that is left to you. You would ruin your life, barely begun, in one reckless act of spite for a dead woman.”

“And you’re a hypocrite. It’s your job I’m considering.”

Snape stepped back. His nostrils flared.

“There was a man named Severus Snape, once,” he said, at length. “That man gave himself over, twice, on different altars. I bear his name; but I do not know if the man remains.”

Draco pushed his chair back and stood. “I’m not you,” he said, with all the disdain that could fit in three words. “I don’t know where you find the audacity to imply it. If I was all that was left between the Dark Lord and Hermione, she mightn’t live, but at the very least she would outlive me.”

He turned and swept out of the dining room, his footsteps rapping sharply on the wood.

Someone had drawn the drapes in his bedroom; dust spun in the needles of sunlight between. A lump in the coverlet sported a mane of hair, and when he shut the door behind him, it stirred and made an inarticulate demand of inquest. He toed off his shoes and sat on the bed beside her.

Hermione nosed out of the sheets and scrubbed her eyes open. “God,” she mumbled, “tell me it’s not tomorrow already.”

“No. It’s the first of September. You’ve missed the train.”

“Fine,” she muttered, drawing one of the pillows over her head. “Tell Draco I’ll miss Potions.”

The corner of his lip twisted so far it hurt his cheek. “The prefect? He’s got a reputation. I wouldn’t like to disappoint him.”

“It’s good for him,” said the pillow, drowsily. “Usually he gets whatever he wants because he’s cocky and handsome. It’s horrendous.”

He stripped away the pillow, and she made an anguished noise. Her clumsy grab to recover it probably would have failed even if his reflexes were not considerably better than hers. He tossed it aside and, in recompense, allowed her to wriggle over and perch her head on his shoulder as a replacement.

“What did Snape say?” she yawned, scrubbing her eyes. He moved one of the curls out of her face, pinning it uselessly behind her ear. The ragged spill of them was thick and soft over his throat, and her body was curled up around him, heavy and warm, and when he ran his hand through her hair she sighed hot into his neck.

An imprint of the sheet’s wrinkles lay in pink on her cheek. Sleep clung to the corner of her eye. Looking at her he felt everything so acutely it hurt him, like a hot iron to a raw nerve.

“We spoke about the horcruxes. Things that are going to happen next year.”

“What about next year?” She lifted her head. He nudged her back down.

“I don’t know yet. I have to speak to Dumbledore.”

That cast off the dregs of sleep. She pushed off him and sat up, alert. “About what?” she demanded. “What don’t you want to tell me?”

“There’s nothing I don’t want to tell you.” That was true.

Hermione’s face wrinkled deeper every time he spoke. “Well, good thing that’s not at all a suspicious answer to that question,” she said. “I’m wholly satisfied and definitely reassured. Don’t worry about explaining further, I’m actually a colossal moron.”

“I’ll tell you.” His heart beat hard against his chest. “I need to have a think first. I’ll tell you before I do anything.”

Hermione searched his eyes, her brows folded tightly. He watched the problem play out in micro-gestures on her face, and all at once he felt so stricken with tenderness it left him in pain. It was completely inconceivable that anything should ever hurt her. It was equally inconceivable that nothing would. There was a world outside his room. It was dreadful and inevitable.

And there were other people. There were children in Hogwarts Castle and they were full of rage and magic, and he himself had taught a dozen of them to duel, showed them where to put their feet, how to hold their hands. When they fought, they would make his mistakes, because he had shown them how.

He’d learned to duel from his mother. His father had been a soldier, but every move Draco knew he’d learned from Narcissa Black.

“Granger?”

She hummed, tilting her head at him.

He twisted his signet around his finger, biting a line into the skin beneath. “What would it take for your parents to leave the country?”

“I don’t know,” she said, belated. “Their lives are here. Their families are here, their jobs… And I would have to go with them. They would never leave without me.”

“What if you did?”

“I wouldn’t,” she said immediately.

“Even for your parents?”

Her head gave a stubborn, reflexive little shake. “Not even for them. No.”

He didn’t ask the corollary question, which would have been: *Even for me?*

When she spoke, the hoarse edge implied she’d heard it anyway. “I’ve been fighting with my mum,” she said. “She doesn’t believe me, when I tell her what’s happening. It’s not on the muggle news. All they’re reporting is terrorism. And the thing is, the *Prophet’s* not reporting it either, so I can’t even show her a wizarding paper to prove it. She thinks I’m a bit mad, and when I’m thinking rationally, I don’t blame her.”

It had occurred to him, over the last twenty-four hours, that among her reasons for staying at the Manor there might be something she was running away from.

“If my daughter was a witch, and I wasn’t,” he said, “I would treat her as an authority on what is happening in the magical world.”

“You have to think of it the other way,” she said unhappily. “If a muggle came to you and tried to tell you something really dangerous was happening in their world, and you had to leave your home because of it, would you take it seriously?”

He wouldn’t, of course.

“No, of course you wouldn’t,” she said, after his silence. “Because they don’t know anything about how you live. Because they’re gone nine months of the year, and also most vacations, and they barely know you, and you’ve never seen a muggle do anything so dangerous you have to be afraid of it. That’s my mother. That’s the position she’s in, which *I’ve* put her in, and I haven’t helped her one

bit by telling her so little about it, because if it was really dangerous, all those years, why wouldn't her daughter tell her? And I *know* that," she said, her voice cracking, "I know exactly why it's difficult for her. So then I try to talk to her, thinking this is it, this is the time I'm going to get through: I'm going to be *patient* with her, this time, I'm going to be *reasonable* and *persuasive* and *calm.* And then something happens and we're screaming at each other. I don't know why. I'm right, and I can prove it. It's that she's so incredibly stubborn, and she doesn't listen to me, really, I mean she listens *enough,* but she clearly doesn't care to be convinced, so it's like she's just tolerating whatever I say until it's her turn to talk and she gets to explain how I'm wrong. She's so stubborn I'm amazed she doesn't try to drive through red lights. I don't know how my dad stands it, some days, I really don't."

Draco, tactfully, said nothing. She glared at him.

"Shut up," she said.

"I said nothing," he said, tactfully.

"That's the least tactful way of saying nothing I've ever heard!"

"Take notes. You've already found the least tactful way of saying everything else."

"You should meet my mother," she said, her throat tight. She cleared it. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'm not leaving Britain, so it's not a question with teeth. And I have until September to figure out what… to do with them. When I'm away."

"When do you intend to go back to them?" He tried to sound indifferent.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Not immediately," she said. "If you'll have me. Not to impose. Sorry. I didn't just assume that you would __"

“Lord Merlin. Had my tongue down her throat twice in twenty-four hours and she’s worried about ‘imposing.’”

“You can’t just swan up to someone’s house and snog them and expect them to put you up,” said Hermione, with the firm indignation of a person with baffling psychologies. “It’s bad form, and worse, it’s unreliable. But. I don’t want to go home until I have a plan, and I don’t have a plan, so… I’ll go back once I have one. I just don’t. Yet.”

He looked at her with wary intrigue. “You know, I’m not altogether persuaded you’re not running away from them.”

Hermione curled into herself, slightly sulkish. “I’m not,” she said. “I’m going back. Just.” Her face crumpled. “I’m so tired of fighting. I’m so tired. I’ve been fighting all year. I fought to come here, I’ll fight to go back to school. I'll have to fight when I’m there, too, and it might very well be real fighting — we don’t really know how to do that, I’m realizing, and that’s also terrifying. Most times we’ve actually fought people it’s been other students, or we’ve had the element of surprise, or there have been so many of us it doesn’t matter. When Rookwood pointed his wand at me,” she said, with strangled laughter, “I thought — God help me — the first thing I thought was, ‘I hope Draco does something,’ because if I’d been alone I don’t know what I’d have done. Throw a Shield Charm, maybe.”

“You underrate yourself,” he said distantly. He didn’t like to remember those moments; he had to keep tearing back the cassette of his memory to keep it from rolling into the next scene. “You had an excellent curse. And for what it’s worth, the Shield Charm would have worked.”

“Right,” she said doubtfully. “Yeah, it would’ve.”

She turned her head into his chest, her cheek pillowed on his collar. He closed his eyes and lifted his foot from the neck of exhaustion; it roared up to meet him, hungry and waiting. A warm breeze marched through the still, dusty air.

The city of Salisbury had an old-fashioned squat brick train station, a wide parking lot, and rows of cottages in brick and white plaster suspended colorful pennants, curving away along the winding country lanes. At four thousand people, it was not a city by size; the Crown had conferred the title with letters patent in acknowledgement of “ancient prescriptive right,” which, by Hermione’s account, essentially meant that people persisted in calling it a city for long enough that the statisticians gave up and went home. Their ensuing argument, which carried them through breakfast, lunch, and up to the very Manor gates, debated whether this constituted a win for linguistic descriptivism.

She talked when she was nervous. She’d been in a talkative mood when he left.

The London train arrived at five o’clock, though he never saw Dumbledore himself disembark. Instead, he emerged from the thronging crowd, wearing an unusually drab and donnish set of master’s robes, with a blue tie and soft cap hiding his long white hair. The gold crescent on his earring matched his pince-nez.

He approached Draco with his hands behind his back and stood politely, as if waiting for instruction. Draco jerked his head outside the station, and he smiled in understanding.

“I have always wished to visit the cathedral in this city,” he said. “It is astonishing how even the truly decrepit can put things off. Will you permit me?”

The cathedral sat cushioned by a lush setting of green, its facade an ornamented braid of glass and chiseled stone. The spire perched high on a series of ascending roofs, like steps for a giant to come and claim his spear. Inside, cloisters of smooth sandstone ensconced shining pews of dark wood, and the stained-glass clerestory strained afternoon light through the scalloped ceiling.

Draco hung back by the door as Dumbledore made a showy, delighted examination of the ceiling, and exclaimed appreciatively at

the windows, though both were smaller than those in the Great Hall. He inspected the pews and read the inscriptions on the stone tombs. He followed patiently in the wake of a walking tour, and returned to Draco after an inspection that lasted, by his lights, far too long.

“Remarkable,” he said. “Built without magic. Can you imagine?”

Draco glanced at the group of muggles who had come in. They wore loose jeans and large plastic jewelry, and they spoke in loud, turbulent Essex.

“I shouldn’t worry,” said Dumbledore. “Most people know better than to concern themselves with the mutterings of strange old men. Moreover, my countrymen are dispositionally averse to oddity. Whenever I am in London, a few full-throated remarks about unicorns will cure me of virtually all eye contact.”

“Remarkable,” he repeated. “Have you finished?”

“Have we another appointment?” Dumbledore inquired. “I do apologize; I thought we were meandering. By all means, lead on.”

There was a bench under an ash tree beside the cathedral, with a view of the spire and the street beyond. Draco cast up a set of preemptive wards. Dumbledore sat and watched him, twiddling his thumbs. Draco wondered more than once if he was the subject of an unspoken joke.

The last *Muffliato* settled with a ripple over the tree. Draco sat down, slipping his wand up its sheath in his sleeve. Dumbledore crossed his legs, humming.

“Severus Snape is burned,” Draco said, attempting a tone of disinterest. His heart twitched, anyway. He felt as if he had approached a steep cliff and leaned over it, and as he spoke, his balance was slowly shifting. “The Ministry fell. You don’t have power. You don’t have an army. And you don’t have eyes on the Dark Lord.”

“For preference, I use ‘He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named,’” he said. “I assume the Ministry will reinstate the taboo, if it has not already, but I do not use tyrants’ chosen epithets. Politics aside, they are usually quite silly.”

“And a bound relative clause sounds better to you?”

“It gets us nowhere, vis-a-vis: silliness,” admitted Dumbledore, “but it takes us away from ‘Lord,’ which, I think, is good practice. Draco, forgive me my presumptions, and I will hear from you whatever you wish, but I fear I know what you intend to say.”

“Do you? Good,” he said, clipped. “Saves me time.”

“Yes. I also fear that I cannot conscience it.”

Draco nodded. He had expected that. It was necessary; in negotiation, the first answer was generally for appearances.

“You are sixteen,” said Dumbledore, like it was news. “You have recently buried your mother. You want to do something. Of course you do. You are a brave young man, and you care for your friends. You want to do what you can. But you are sixteen, and your mother is dead, and you are not prepared to undertake a decision of any gravity.”

“Lily Evans was sixteen when Alastor Moody admitted her into the Order of the Phoenix.”

“She was a tall sixteen,” said Dumbledore blithely, and when Draco began to speak, he sighed. “No. We are not negotiating. I question, in truth, whether I should have let you bring it up to begin with. I suspected from your letter that this was your goal; I came here in the hopes that it would be more effective to dissuade you with a firm and direct negative answer.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Why?”

“You didn’t come from Scotland to tell me *no.”*

“I did,” said Dumbledore mildly, turning. “Apparently, I came to do it twice. You are not adequately educated to undertake a decision of this gravity. You are uniquely unprepared in this moment, when you have more anger than prudence, and more fear than sense.” He shook his head. “Wait a few years, Draco. Prove to me you will still want it when you are old enough to know what it means.”

“Some of my friends are going to die in the next few years, Professor.”

Dumbledore blinked at him, his expression even.

He added, a touch vicious: “I’m old enough to know what that means. How many would you like me to watch? At what number of bodies do I become an adult, in your eyes? My parents aren’t enough, I take it. What will be? And how many years will I have to wait, then, to have thoughts you won’t dismiss as the fruit of juvenile grief?”

“The last, I could not say,” said Dumbledore. “Perhaps I will know when I am older.”

Draco curled his lip and turned away. Dumbledore watched him intently.

“How did you imagine it would work?” he said gently. “Did you expect a hero’s welcome? The childhood friend of Harry Potter? Who came with him, for his protection, to Grimmauld Place?”

“Where my mother died,” he spat, and used the bleary pain of it to ground him. “Where she was killed for boy Potter’s hopeless cause. Where my family tore itself apart over a worthless outcast’s dying dream. How better to teach someone the lesson of loyalty? What else could be enough?”

It was easy to say the words, because he almost believed them. “Harry Potter is the reason my mother is dead,” he added bitterly. “And with her, all schoolyard dreams of glory. There's nothing noble in death, nothing worthy. Let someone else catch Potter's curses for him. I'm ready to grow up, *my lord.”*

Dumbledore winced. Draco was glad.

“And I’m Draco Malfoy, by the way,” he said, “in case you’d forgotten. He won’t have, I assure you.”

“I never do.”

“The lord of House Malfoy, and the last male heir of Black. Two of the Twenty-Eight. Two of them. Dead, but for me. You think he wouldn’t take me? You don’t know purebloods like I do.”

“Nor do I know Hermione Granger, as you do,” said Dumbledore, effortlessly gentle, which was — not unfair, considering, but still — spectacularly vicious, really quite something. If he weren’t furious he might have been impressed.

He said harshly, “I can Occlude.”

“I’m sure you can.”

“I don’t have to hide everything. Snape didn’t. The Dark Lord knew his feelings for Lily, he didn’t care about them.”

“Severus’s feelings for Lily did not bear great inspection,” said Dumbledore, “being that their friendship ended before he took up the service. I do not take this as the case for you.”

“I could pretend, to the extent I had to. I’m sure Snape did his share of that.”

“Pretend what?” Dumbledore inquired. “Pretend to quit her company? Pretend not to know her, nor desire to know her, except

as an inferior object for which you experience the occasional wayward tenderness?”

“Don’t.”

“I marvel that you rebuke me; it’s your own suggestion. You will have to say much worse than that of her, if you do as you intend. And what would your aunt think of your predilections, if she discovered them?”

“Nothing I can tell her will be worse than the truth,” he said shortly. “She would be far less dangerous to Hermione if she thought I didn’t care about her.”

“Does Hermione agree?”

“That’s between her and me,” he said tightly, “and not you, and if it was somehow, conceivably, your business to ask, I would assure you that Hermione would do whatever it took to win the war, including what I’m offering. If this were possible for her to do, she would have done it already. She might consult me. If I asked her not to, she wouldn’t listen.”

“I grant you that the situation, reversed, bears little doubt,” he agreed. “As it is: I am not certain your logic holds.”

“I am.”

“You think she would sacrifice you?”

“I think she would sacrifice herself. Which is functionally the same thing.”

“In many relevant ways it is not.”

“It’s the same thing *to me.* You understand? If she did, it would be the same as — what would happen — it would be the same.”

He found himself stumbling, and shut his mouth, loathing himself. Dumbledore tilted his head sadly.

“Your mother was very dear to you, wasn’t she?” he said, apropos of nothing. Draco gave him a scathing look.

“Must you?”

“I apologize,” he said. “I forget myself. This is not the first time I have had this conversation.”

The tone evoked his sparring with Umbridge under the Entrance Hall: *My justice has been much delayed.*

He was sick of that, too. Relentless nostalgizing, naval-gazing, soliloquies about the first war. He had heard enough of them. He had long since ceased to find anything romantic in the idea of being anyone’s resurrection.

Draco said, “If you don’t want me to do this, then tell me how you’re going to win the war.”

Dumbledore clasped his hands over his knee. “I wish I could. I wish I had a great and secret plan to play upon the world’s many threads. I wish I lived in Pushkin, and could ‘sing Freedom to the world, and strike vice upon thrones.’ But I fear Tolstoy had the better argument, and I have always been at heart a Pierre.”

“Well, then.”

“Well, then,” he agreed. “You know the number of the beast. The horcruxes must be found, and destroyed. An army must be raised, trained, and sent to die. The Order numbers between twenty and a hundred, depending on how you count its membership, and I do not know who else will answer the call. The enemy rallies the oldest and richest families in the Wizarding World against us, and adds to their number the dementors, the werewolves under Greyback, and most of the giant clans… Still, all is not lost. I have a general. I have a Minister. I have a castle.”

“But you have no spymaster.”

Dumbledore shrugged. “One manages.”

“One doesn’t. In fact. Rather, one doesn’t have to.”

“Explain this to me,” he remarked. “Why do you want to spy? It is not a glorious species of heroism. It would ask for all of you, ceaselessly. It would be cruel. It would be cruel to everyone you love.”

Because there was nothing left of him. Because his father had died and his mother had died and the only people left to him would die, too, if something did not happen, if someone didn’t do something. Because Harry and Ron would die, if something did not happen. Because Hermione would die, and if he stopped long enough to think about what he was without them the answer yawned ragged and bottomless.

No one had saved his father. No one had saved his mother. No one would save anything loved by Draco Malfoy except himself, and it was a hard lesson, but he had learned eventually. If he wanted the world to stop killing things he loved, it had to be fought. It had to be beaten. Well, he was good enough. He was the last of his house, and the best. He was the last best thing between her life and the fire.

He looked at Dumbledore. He knew how to make his voice sound like his mother’s. It was a certain texture in the drawl, a crispness in the consonants, an arid aspiration in the vowels.

It was his same accent, though, and the same cadence. His mother’s voice was the spine of his own.

“Because they’re the only thing that matters,” he said.

His reward for the performance was the closest Dumbledore ever came to a flinch: a flicker in his composure, a shift of the eyebrow, a shadow in the eyes. It was thrilling and unnerving to have that ability.

“Deeply noble,” remarked Dumbledore. Then: “Serve them, then, by keeping yourself alive. None of them will thank you for what you are

suggesting.”

Draco smoothed his trousers and stood. “It occurs to me that I don’t actually require your permission,” he said. “I could do this, and you wouldn’t stop me. My legal guardian is in hiding. You’re acquainted, of course, with my next of kin. If I went to Theo Nott and told him to take me with him the next time he saw his father, what would you do about it? Would you bar me from Hogwarts? No, you wouldn’t.”

“I categorically rebuke that idea,” he said, frowning, and leaning forward on his knees. “I disavow it. Draco, if I thought it would make a difference, I would beg you not to do it.”

“I’m not asking you to beg,” he said, struck by the thrill of having the upper hand. It was so nice to have any sort of power, at all, that it was difficult not to lean towards it. “Technically, I’m asking you to threaten. What would you do?”

“I would mourn,” said Dumbledore tiredly, “if you want my honest answer. And I would do everything in my power to save you from yourself, however difficult you endeavored to make it for me.”

Draco considered this, and nodded.

“I understand.”

“You do not,” he pleaded. “You do not know. It may be years before you understand what you are doing to yourself.”

Draco drew the wand from his sleeve and cut down the wards. Birdsong swelled lush and loud as Vivaldi. The road burbled from across the green, chattering tourists, muttering cars.

“If I live that long, I’ll remember you told me so,” he said acidly. “If I don’t, I’ll try to remember to be relieved.”

When the carriage deposited him back at the Manor, the sun sat almost level with the earth. He found Hermione reading in the garden, a stack of books from the Manor library piled beside her lawn chair, one of them supporting a porcelain tea set. She had filched one of his shirts, dark blue with a wide lapel, and mended a pair of his old school trousers to sit properly on her waist. The sleeves kept slipping off her elbow and down her arms, and she fidgeted them back up absently while reading.

He arrived at her back and watched, for a while, as the wind tossed the jasmine behind her like snowflakes. Some of them caught in her hair. Most things did, at some point.

She turned a page. “You’re going to give me a complex,” she said. “Staring.”

“Suppose I want your other ones to have a friend.” He came up behind her, his hands in his pockets, and read over her shoulder. He reached over to take it from her. “Is that the dueling manual?”

She snapped it closed and held it away. “You are *so annoying,”* she said, craning her neck to scowl, but her voice glowed with how pleased she was to see him. He smiled at her. “I’m sitting here reading this, minding my business, and you think, ‘oh, I wonder what that is, how should I find out? *Take* it from her without warning, or, more radically, asking—’”

“It’s my book.”

“You think that means you can just take it whenever you want, do you?”

“That would be the legal understanding of ‘mine.’” He leaned down and spoke in her ear. “That’s also my shirt.”

She dropped the book in his waiting hand and said, declaratively: “Well. That’s. And I mean. It would be. In one sense, even so.”

“Even so,” he agreed, leaning on the chair. Her eyes made a desperate appeal for him to forget her tragic and sudden aphasia. He denied it with a sad shake of his head.

“Starting over,” she said. “Hello, Draco. It’s lovely to see you. This is your book; I borrowed it. Thank you terribly. Tea?”

“I liked your first try better. But I’ll have some.”

He drew the other wand chair over with a swish of his wand. She followed it curiously. “Trace?” she murmured.

“Difficult to tell, in a house like this, and I doubt the Ministry can be arsed. None of the purebloods will be keeping that custom, especially if they don’t go back to Hogwarts.”

“Yet another advantage,” she remarked, handing over his tea.

“Hardly bears thinking about.”

“On that idea,” she said, and reached for the book again. “I’ve been reading the dueling manual. I want to make a go at learning, if you’ll teach me. I think if I had some sort of system, or knowledge — I thought it was specious, trying to make fighting into a precision exercise, but I’m reading this, and at least it gives you some sense of what to do.”

“I’ll teach you,” he said, and as if it was the same thought: “I went to see Dumbledore.”

Hermione paused, waiting. By and by, she set the book down.

“I’m going to—” He tested the words out, but the words were clumsy and didn’t say what he wanted them to. Instead, he said: “I offered to spy for him.”

“Did he accept?” she said calmly.

“No.”

“Oh,” she said. “Good.”

They waited for each other. Her silence had a brittle, interrogatory quality.

“I don’t know that it matters,” he said. “I don’t need his permission.”

“His opinion might be valuable, though. Among others.”

“That’s why I’m asking for yours.”

She nodded, tongue probing her cheek. “Alright,” she said. “Tell me what you’re thinking. I’m not sure how this would work. Would you still be at Hogwarts? Would you leave, to go — spy, and come back?”

“In principle.”

“And you would pretend to be—”

“Yes. I could explain more of my thinking, or we could acknowledge the fact that if I’ve thought of this, it’s already occurred to you twice.”

Hermione stood up, her arms folded, and began walking a slow circuit of the garden. The seconds ticked past, and she did not reply; he began to tap his foot. Her expression was pensive. It was not immediately furious. This could be read as more alarming.

Abruptly, Hermione drew her wand. She pointed it at the ground. *“Expecto Patronum.”*

The silver otter appeared in a fission of starlight. It frolicked across the rosebushes, carried through an invisible stream. Her hand gripped her wand like the hilt of a knife.

“That was my letter,” she said. “Eleventh birthday. September nineteenth, 1990. I kept the letter under my pillow for a year.”

She swished her wand and cast another. The first otter disappeared, and a second swam out over the fleet.

“That was my Sorting. I was only the third or fourth Gryffindor, after Lavender and Seamus. *Expecto Patronum.* That’s the mountain troll in the girls’ bathroom. You brought me a sandwich. It was,” she said, “a terrible sandwich.”

“I beg your pardon. I’m sorry the lady’s *bathroom sandwich* inexplicably failed quality control.”

“It was *so* bad,” she said tenderly. “I saved the crusts until they went stale.”

She swished her wand again. A fourth patronus hopped out and curled around her feet, subdued.

“I don’t suppose you’d ever have heard about a book named *Peter and Wendy,”* she said. “It’s a muggle book. I wouldn’t have told you about it, it’s for children. It’s about a girl named Wendy, who’s quite bossy and patronizing and takes care of her two brothers; and there’s a magical boy named Peter who comes to her window one night, and teaches her to fly. He takes her away to Neverland, which is a magical island where no one ever has to grow up, and the four children have adventures.

“But she goes back to London at the end of the book,” she said. “Because she can’t stay there forever. She misses her parents. And she needs to grow up.”

The otter drifted into dust and floated away.

“‘You need not be sorry for her,’” she said absently. “‘She was one of the kind that likes to grow up. In the end she grew up of her own free will a day quicker than the other girls.’”

A hollow yawned in his abdomen. Cold poured from it like oil from a well.

“We could run away,” she said, looking at him. Her eyes were bright and fervid.

He almost laughed. “No, we can’t.”

“We can do anything we want,” she said intently. “You taught me that.”

“Yes, but you don’t mean it,” he said, strained with the unfairness of having to say so.

Hermione didn’t allow herself to want things she couldn’t have. That was why her plans worked. It was why they’d wasted months of skittish dancing around each other, while time sieved like Floo powder through their fingers.

“I do mean it.” She moved so fast she tripped, and caught herself on the arms of his chair, bending to speak quickly and earnestly in his face. “I mean it. Run away now. We don’t have to go back to school. We don’t have to tell anybody. We could go, now, and we would make it. You and me. You *know* we would.”

“But you don’t want to,” he said tiredly, aching. “Do you?”

She faltered.

The rest of the world reintroduced itself with a thatch of starlings shooting into the evening sky. Facing defeat, she slackened her grip.

Hermione eased upright to stand on her feet again. In her gaze was a guarded mingling of reprimand and longing, her pupils blown wide, her cheeks flushed. His heart was going as if he’d done a lap around the castle and he was struck low again by the sight of her, how badly he wanted her, how much he would have been willing to do for her to just kiss him.

“We’re not running away,” she said, as if she’d just realized it herself. “I can’t leave Harry. Even if he makes me furious. Even when I hate

him. I won’t leave him, I never could.”

Somehow, inconceivably, this still managed to surprise him. In her voice were long, deep strains of the love she bore for Harry Potter — strains that welled from the very root of her, a promise they would find filigreed in her heart on the mortician’s table. From the moment they’d met, she’d been sewn to Harry’s side by a tether of material Draco had never seen clearly, and she’d always had half a mind to hang herself with it.

“It was a silly idea,” she said. She glanced at him, checking. “Wasn’t it?”

“The queen and the rook don’t run off together,” he said. “It’s a nice thought, but it’s not what they’re for.”

Hermione nodded, biting her lip. She lowered her head and started to cry.

The color of the sky at dusk was a drowning, pelagic blue. The rhythm of his heart collapsed from looking at her.

“You promised,” she said. “And I’m furious at how dumb it is to care, given everything else. It’s the least of all the things I could possibly cry about. But you promised you would stay. Because I asked. Do you remember?”

He caught her hand in a tight grip. “I’m not leaving.”

“I know you’re not. I know it’s not real. I’m not mad at you.”

“You could ask me not to do it.”

“You know I won’t do that,” she snapped, “that’s why you told me, isn’t it, you knew I’d listen and a part of me would think, ‘That would be really useful for a lot of reasons, if he doesn’t get himself killed.’ You knew I’d thought about it, and I did. And I thought, ‘God, I hope

he never thinks of that, what a fucking horrible thing to think about your boyfriend.'"

He stood up, and took her arms at the elbows. "From a different vantage," he said, aware it did not remotely suffice for comfort, "all it expresses is a certain faith that I won't get myself killed."

"It *was* a horrible thing," she said. "It still is. It's worse to hear it, because I trust you, and I think you're right." Her nails bit into the skin of his neck and bound themselves in his shoulder, so tightly he'd have new creases in his shirtfront. "You can't. You can't leave. You just can't. You — I — please. You can't."

"I won't. I'm not. I won't." Her fear dislodged his agitation and cast him into anxious disquiet. He looped his arm around her waist and held her there, her heartbeat rabbiting against his chest like an accusation. "I'm not going anywhere. You have me. While you want me, you have me. I promised you that, and I meant it."

"Promise again."

"I promise."

"Promise again," she said, hard-edged.

"I promise. And I promise."

He slid his hand into her hair and she shuddered, burying herself in him.

"You can't leave," she whispered, nearly inaudible. "Don't leave me here. Not when it's like this."

"I wouldn't." He meant it as much as he had ever meant anything. He meant as he meant *my name is Draco,* and much as he'd ever meant *my name is Malfoy,* perhaps more.

"Don't be ridiculous," he added. "Where would I go without you?"

She gave a little laugh and drew back, searching his eyes. Hers were bloodshot and rimmed in pink.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I wouldn’t be there, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Nor I.” He kissed her forehead, and then her mouth, gently, because it hadn’t been kissed in a while, and needed to be. She relaxed in his arms when he kissed her. It slightly amazed him.

“You’re still unforgivably stupid,” she whispered against his mouth. “I hate this. I *hate* this. No one should ever feel this way about anyone. Least of all anyone noble.”

“It’s not my fault you have a type.”

She throttled her own laugh into a throaty noise of warning, and then she was laughing and crying and kissing him, roughly. It had the hard, unsophisticated pressure of someone still learning how, a young girl’s clumsy kiss, and thought how odd it felt that they should be so young still. That he should be standing in his mother’s gardens, his heart beating quick, and have under all that a thrumming layer of grief that seemed older than he was.

He was sixteen. The sun was setting fast and low.

When he reached the gates of Knotscliff Peak, the air thundered from the ocean beating the cliffs. The road to the gates led through the forest, and obscured the entrance until the last possible moment, at which point it whisked away a curtain of shrubs to unveil the file of wrought-iron that enclosed the green. On the hilltop, silhouetted with eerie contrast against a featureless sky, sat three squat turrets of rain-washed stone.

Theo didn’t open the gates. He stood behind them, his arms folded, his weight on one hip, bearing the expression of one debating whether to call the aurors or the hounds. He had slept since he’d

seen him last, and seemed less jittery, which made a dire improvement on his usual mode of asylum chic.

“Hark at you,” he called. “You don’t look like you’re having a psychotic break.”

“Contain your disappointment,” said Draco. “The day is young.”

“But I so looked forward to you going mad,” said Theo mildly. “I’ve always said you’d make a fine nutter. In some respects, you’re already one of the greats.” He lifted his chin, and his voice hardened. “I heard about Narcissa.”

“Did you,” said Draco, toneless.

“Yeah,” he said. “I suppose you buried her.”

“Generally happens.”

Theo set his jaw. Draco slipped a bit of metal out of his pocket, turning it over in his hands. Theo watched it.

“Pansy says I’m a fool for inviting you,” he said. “I’m open to that possibility. But I told her I wouldn’t let you in unless I had a bloody good reason, and then, I’d still make you ask me nicely.”

He fell silent and waited, with furtive expectation, framed by the towers of Knotscliff. Draco recalled something Daphne had told him once, about Theodore and Pansy, running wild in a house with no adults to notice it, or care.

Theodore Nott had disarmed Barty Crouch in the moments before his death, and he had broken a boy’s memory to pieces for the crime of knowing something he shouldn’t. He could be violent and supercilious and brash. He also had a soft streak for things he’d known as a child.

How deep the streak cut, it was difficult to say. It was at least deep enough to make it to the front gate.

Draco tossed him the bit of metal. The snitch flipped through the bars of the gate, and Theo caught it. Freed, the wings peeled from the sides and buzzed, straining against his grasp.

“I’m thinking of selling the house in France,” said Draco.

Theo raised his eyebrows. “It’s not a bad little property,” he said. “Good for a getaway, if you want one. You might want to wait for a good offer.”

“You wouldn’t be interested in it, of course.”

His eyebrows twitched together faintly. “I’m not on the market,” he said. “No capital, old boy. My father sees to all that.”

“I imagine he gives you a wide latitude to negotiate.”

“Couldn’t say,” said Theo thoughtfully, thumbing the snitch. “Wouldn’t help my position, you understand. Draco, I hate to kill a good rhythm, but I’m drawing a blank on how to translate ‘I don’t know what you fucking want from me’ into a real estate metaphor.”

That would have to suffice, as a move to sentiment. “I know what you did to Cassius Warrington,” he said, and Theo’s face gave a half-wry, half-angry twitch. “I want you to do something for me.”

“Ah. Blackmail! Here I was being cute, thinking I’d get something out of this.”

“What you get is the confidence that I won’t tell anyone that Warrington’s hippocampus is going supernova. That’s something.”

“How do you know he’s not dead yet?”

“Please. It would’ve been announced, and Parkinson would have to go into mourning.”

“So they *do* get newspapers in England.”

“Maybe they do. I don’t read the gossip section. I get enough from Meadowridge.”

Theo’s composure visibly calcified. “What did you tell Daphne?”

“Nothing, yet.”

“I should trust you?”

“I mean, you could always ask her.”

“Fine. For the record, this is not ‘asking nicely.’ What do you want?”

Draco waited. The waves shattered against the cliffside, and at their heights, the roar softened to a murmur. It could have been voices, at that distance. Someone could have screamed from the bottom, and it would reach them as a whisper. They were fathoms above what a normal voice could reach. Knotscliff was like a small Olympus, tucked high on its dark little crag.

“To make the right choice,” he said.

Theo stared at him. He rolled the snitch over his palm, pressed the wings flat, and pocketed it. When he smiled, it was without happiness.

“Dad’s out,” he said. “What say we go have a brandy and talk it over like grownups?”

Draco nodded. Theo clicked his tongue. The gates pried open. Draco had to step back from their path to move forward and through, to where Theo waited for him.

He extended his hand. Theo took it with a pleasant expression of surprise. The band of Draco’s signet pressed cool between their fingers. The gates screamed when they closed, iron grinding against iron. The bolt moved like a peal of lightless thunder.

END OF VOLUME TWO

-Obligatory needle drop, for the end of the volume, because I can't help myself.

-It just wouldn't be Book 5 if it didn't fight back and demand copious gut-deep content edits in the last possible stretch. Goodbye, my darling. You were consistent to the bitter end.

-More specifically, Chapter 82 had to be killed completely and rewritten no less than three times. I think Narcissa did not appreciate my attempt to describe her personal life.

-I pushed myself to the absolute limit to get this one out on time (kind of? technically?) because I really wanted to deliver on schedule. I'm going to take a bit of a writerly break and try to refill the juices. More information to come on the Book 6 update schedule on my Tumblr, when the time arives.

-This would not exist, ever, in any iteration, without all of the wonderful people who are kind to me, and are patient with me, and forgive my mistakes. I'm just a human plugging along trying to make something kinda halfway maybe good, and if I manage part of that, I'm grateful.

-And hey: Thanks. Love you. See you soon.